



Slowing the flow in the Oudolf Landscape at RHS Garden Wisley

CASE STUDY

The Glasshouse Borders at RHS Garden Wisley are justifiably famous and yet have been reimagined into the Oudolf Landscape. Gravel paths thread between banks of perennial planting to slow both people and rainwater through the landscape, with drainage provided by ACO RainDrain B 125 channels.



Slowing the journey of people and rainwater in the Oudolf Landscape at RHS Garden Wisley

THE PROJECT

The Oudolf Landscape at RHS Garden Wisley

THE BRIEF

Drainage of downward-sloping gravel paths with utility vehicle and heavy foot traffic

THE SOLUTION

Installation of ACO RainDrain®B 125 channels with cast iron Intercept gratings and sumps at outlets

RHS Garden Wisley turned to the original designer who created the Glasshouse Borders more than twenty years ago – Piet Oudolf, inviting him to revisit his vision for the site. His new design changes how both people and water move through the landscape. The single avenue and focus on the Glasshouse have been replaced by a meandering journey through the planting, while keeping the Glasshouse in view from different angles. Visitors are carried along serpentine wider paths, yet narrower side routes beckon to take them on detours that loop back. These winding trails move through different planting styles as block planting gives way to matrix planting. The longer journey gives visitors more time to appreciate the 36,000 plants en route – selected to benefit wildlife as much as to delight viewers.

Greater opportunities to appreciate

How do you ‘improve’ one of Britain’s iconic horticultural vistas within a flagship garden? The Glasshouse Borders at the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) Garden Wisley in Surrey flanked a wide grass avenue down to the imposing Glasshouse at the bottom of the slope (see photo below). The borders were crammed with diagonal strips of planting, which in summer produced successive waves of changing colour and shape to delight visitors as they strolled down the slope to the Glasshouse. How could this much-loved area of RHS Garden Wisley be ‘improved’?

Greater opportunities to infiltrate

The journey of rainwater through the garden has similarly been slowed with beneficial results. The snaking paths are constructed from self-binding gravel, which allows rainwater to infiltrate into the ground where it falls. This benefits the surrounding planting during Britain’s increasingly dry summers. However, climate change also delivers periods of intense rainfall alongside drought. Consequently, the RHS Curatorial Team were concerned that a heavy downpour could erode the paths and soil in the surrounding beds, particularly as a path turned the corner on the downward slope.



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The original Glasshouse Borders, designed by Piet Oudolf more than twenty years ago.



Narrower side routes invite visitors on detours to slow their journey.



ACO channel drains across the path capture runoff and direct it into soakaways constructed under the planting.



Sump units, installed at each outlet, capture silt and protect soakaway from clogging up.

On these curves, ACO channel drains have been installed diagonally across the path, to capture the runoff and direct it into soakaways constructed under the planting. A sump unit was installed at each outlet (see picture above) to capture silt and so protect the soakaway from clogging up. The RHS Curatorial Team saw this as imperative because a silted-up soakaway would necessitate its excavation and therefore large-scale disruption to the planting above. Instead, periodic cleaning of the sump unit will ensure the soakaway's proper functioning for many years, enabling rainwater off the path to infiltrate into the surrounding soil.

While most of the traffic is pedestrian, the wider paths are also traversed by utility vehicles pulling a trailer. These small-scale pickup trucks are used by the Garden's horticultural staff as they move around the large 240-acre site. Therefore, the RHS Curatorial Team chose ACO's polymer concrete RainDrain channels with a cast iron Intercept gratings. Both channel and grating have been certified to Load Class B 125, which enables them to withstand the force exerted by a private car. Consequently, the RainDrain channels are strong enough to support the utility vehicles, alongside RHS Garden Wisley's one million visitors each year.

RHS Garden Wisley's Project Manager told me: "ACO drains were selected for use on the Piet Oudolf Landscape as they provide a robust solution for capturing runoff in periods of intense rainfall, that is simultaneously simple, effective and provides an aesthetically suitable grating in keeping with the landscape."

Blakedown Landscapes, who installed the ACO drains, shared with me: "The ACO drainage system supplied for the Oudolf Landscape at RHS Garden Wisley was simple to install and seamlessly integrated into the overall design.

Each drain was strategically connected to soakaways within the planting beds, ensuring efficient stormwater management and preventing waterlogging. The chosen style matched the existing drainage solutions across the wider garden, offering a consistent and aesthetically pleasing result. The system has performed exceptionally well, safeguarding the integrity of the landscape while being easy to maintain going forward."

Piet Oudolf's new design slows the journey of both people and rainwater through his new border at RHS Garden Wisley, to benefit visitors, wildlife and the environment.

For more about ACO House & Garden, please visit www.aco.co.uk/house-and-garden



ACO RainDrain with cast iron Intercept grating



ACO Water Management Contacts:

Sales: customersupport@aco.co.uk

Technical: technical@aco.co.uk

Tel: 01462 816666

www.aco.co.uk

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