



## Felix Dennis

**The publisher's chocolate-box garden borders a self-planted 1,900-acre wood, open to the public, in the heart of Shakespeare country**

When Felix Dennis (poet, self-made publishing mogul and philanthropist), 64, decided to buy a country cottage 26 years ago, he drew a 100-mile circle around Charing Cross, finally settling on a hamlet near Stratford upon Avon. The Old Manor, a 17th-century thatched cottage with traditional hanging baskets and serried begonias 'that only my neighbours get to see', could grace any chocolate box. More bedding plants are neatly arrayed close to the house in parks-and-gardens style. Although hackneyed, the jaunty pink and red pelargoniums popping up through silver cinerarias flatter the traditional cottage and hark back to Dennis's 1950s suburban childhood in Thames Ditton, Surrey.

For 20 years or more Dennis has opened his garden for the National Gardens Scheme. Thousands of visitors come back year after year. The immaculate lawn, zoned and striped, is widely admired. 'We've tried big mowers, but we've gone back to smaller cylinder ones that deliver fine lines,' Dennis says. And the small box-lined herb garden at the front of the house gives him particular pleasure. 'I helped to make it and planted some of the herbs.' This is a favourite place to enjoy a glass of fine white wine amid the aromatic pungency of lavender, feverfew and fennel.

When Dennis first moved to the Old Manor there was a tennis court 'which must have cost a small ransom'. He ripped it out years ago after getting 'bored with all that stuff' and replaced it with a sunken stream garden. High yew hedges, with a castellated top, surround this

damp area containing bulrushes, loosestrife (*Lysimachia punctata*) and bog primulas. The bulrush motif, crafted into the wide metal gates at the entrance to the garden, is repeated on the simple bridge over the small stream. Two veteran apple trees survive from the old garden, overlooking a newly planted orchard containing local heritage varieties. And from the garden, mown grass paths and a ha-ha connect with the fields beyond.

'I love whimsy in gardens and I always wanted a maze,' he says. So his first major project was

Dennis's favourite plant is the rowan. 'According to myth it's the only tree left that still understands human speech'