

# GLORIOUS COLOUR

In April, mass plantings of bold tulips add a burst of bright colour to the tranquil garden of Europe's first eco-mosque

WORDS ALYS FOWLER PHOTOGRAPHS JASON INGRAM

## IN BRIEF

**What** A public garden surrounding an environmentally friendly mosque.

**Where** Cambridge.

**Size** 312 square metres.

**Soil** Imported soil for the garden, very free draining.

**Climate** Low rainfall.

**Hardiness zone** USDA 9.

Enclosed by evergreen yew hedges, the garden of the Cambridge Central Mosque is a place of quiet reflection, designed using traditional Islamic principles that reflect the sense of lightness seen in the mosque itself. This vast, airy structure, Europe's first eco-mosque, is held aloft on elegant, tree-like columns.



We wanted to create an enriched carpet of plants with real jewel colours, such that you might find in the art of Persian empires

First cultivated in Turkey at the height of the Ottoman Empire, tulips are common in Islamic gardens. Here they bring rich colour to coincide with Ramadan in April and May. Later in the season, roses, which also have potent Islamic symbolism, will be grown over the bespoke structures.



1



2



3

**1 Tulipa 'Ballerina'** A scented, lily-flowered tulip with golden-orange tepals edged with a blush of pink. Flowers April to May. 60cm. RHS H6, USDA 3a-8b<sup>†</sup>.

**2 Tulipa 'Purple Dream'** Another lily-flowered type with reflexed flowers in a rich purple with a white eye. Flowers April to May. 55cm. RHS H6, USDA 3a-8b.

**3 Tulipa 'Pieter de Leur'** A rich-red, lily-flowered type with a deeper shading along the mid-rib of the tepal. It is slightly reflexed when fully open. Flowers April to May. 55cm. RHS H6, USDA 3a-8b.

**4 Tulipa 'Peppermintstick'** This small hybrid tulip is bi-coloured with a white background with cherry red lines on the outer tepals. Flowers April to May. 15-30cm. AGM\*. RHS H6, USDA 3a-8b.

**5 Tulipa 'Request'** A triumph tulip with hues of blood orange, pink and bronze. Flowers April to May. 45cm. RHS H6, USDA 3a-8b.

\*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society. <sup>†</sup>Hardiness ratings given where available.



4



5

Cambridge's new Central Mosque is something special. Designed by Mark Barfield Associates to be an environmentally friendly place of worship, its interior is a deft use of lightness, the central pillars rising like geometric trees to hold the building afloat. The outer garden does more than merely add to this outlook, it entices you in.

Beginning on the street, where jasmine twines over the fence, this is a garden that leads you gently away from the busy road, through a community garden to its quieter, more contemplative quadrants. Evergreen yew hedges give a sense of enclosure, while crab apples add seasonal interest and food and shelter for wildlife. At its centre is a fountain, an important feature of Islamic gardens, surrounded by a *chahar-bagh*, a four-fold garden layout found in many Persian gardens, which is based on the four gardens of Paradise mentioned in the Qur'an. These quadrilateral gardens are divided by flowing water or walkways to represent the four rivers that flow from Paradise.

The gardens were designed by Islamic-garden specialist Emma Clark, working with landscape designers Adam Hunt and Lulu

Urquhart, who make up Urquhart & Hunt. "We have worked with Emma for some years," says Adam. "Emma specialises in the theory, spirituality and symbolism behind Islamic garden design. Together we worked to create a geometry that would honour the Islamic tradition but would translate into a northern European climate. Traditionally, Islamic gardens would often have trees mentioned in the Qur'an – olives, pomegranates, figs and dates. Obviously these plants would not thrive in our more northerly climate so instead of pomegranates, for instance, we have the delicate, pink blossom of crab apples."

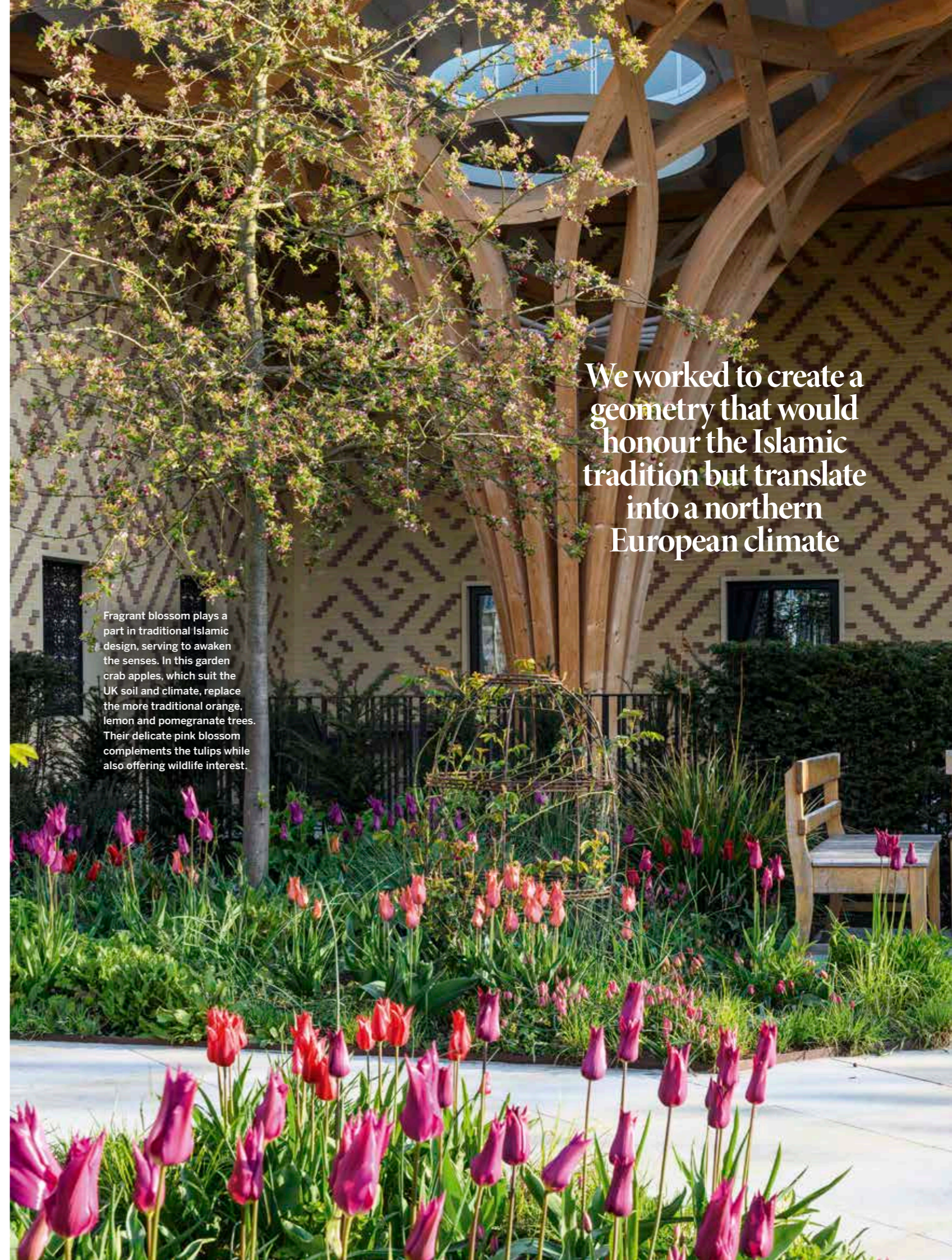
The planting is a suitable palette of plants that come from the Mediterranean, Turkey, and further east to the cradle of Islam. The gardens are maintained by horticulturist Helen Seal and a dedicated group of volunteers. "Certain Mediterranean plants really suit our Cambridge climate with its low rainfall and free-draining soil," says Helen. "And the palette has a lot of silver, green, pinks, reds, purple and blues, with just a smattering of palest yellows and white."

The idea is to create a rich tapestry of bold, bright colour, but nowhere is this more felt perhaps than in spring, when the 4,000 tulips come out to play – last year in time for Ramadan. ▷



**Above** Geometrical patterns, such as these surrounding the garden's fountain, are central to Islamic design and art, and are used extensively throughout the Cambridge Central Mosque both inside and out.

**Left** Water is at the heart of the Islamic garden and Paradise Gardens typically have a fountain at their centre. Here four paths radiate out from a water feature, designed in collaboration with water specialist Andrew Ewing, creating a calming focal point that helps to draw visitors in.



We worked to create a geometry that would honour the Islamic tradition but translate into a northern European climate

Fragrant blossom plays a part in traditional Islamic design, serving to awaken the senses. In this garden crab apples, which suit the UK soil and climate, replace the more traditional orange, lemon and pomegranate trees. Their delicate pink blossom complements the tulips while also offering wildlife interest.

▷ “Tulips were brought in from the wild very early on and thus have a long history in Islamic Garden design,” explains Helen. “The tulips are just the beginning of a long succession of flowers.” But what a beginning that is.

Each bed has roughly 750 tulips, all planted by volunteers. “It’s a feast for the eyes,” says Lulu. “We wanted to create an enriched carpet of plants with real jewel colours, such that you might find in tapestry, rugs, ceramics and art of Persian empires. We took all these influences and historical references to create a layer that starts out quite soft in the front community garden and then, as you move into the four-fold gardens, becomes much hotter and more colourful. Lily-flowered tulips are the most commonly reflected in the Ottoman Empire, so we went mainly for these.”

As this is an eco-mosque, it’s important to the team that this is reflected in the planting and garden, too. One way Helen achieves this is to leave the tulips in the ground rather than lifting them after flowering, to experiment with perennialising them. She also leaves some of the seedheads intact into autumn to add seasonal interest. “We planted the tulips as deep as we could – 20-30cm down – because

the soil here in Cambridge is so light, and thus it’s very necessary, and has helped with them coming back.” Although a few tulips didn’t fare so well, Helen was surprised how well most have come back, especially cultivars ‘Ballerina’, ‘Peppermintstick’ and ‘Purple Dream’.

The construction of the garden was no small feat, in part because of the need to make space for an extensive underground car park for the mosque. All the soil had to be brought in with the beds acting as large containers sitting on top of this vast concrete structure. However, this hot, free-draining, yet rich soil has suited the tulips no end. With its rich palette of deep maroons, red, purples and pinks, this garden truly is a feast for the eyes and offers a rare moment of quietness to anyone who steps into it. □

#### USEFUL INFORMATION

**Address** Cambridge Central Mosque, 309-313 Mill Road, Cambridge CB1 3DF. **Tel** 01223 654020. **Web** cambridgecentralmosque.org  
**Open** The garden is open to the general public daily, 10am-8pm.

Find out more about Urquhart & Hunt’s work at [urquharthunt.com](http://urquharthunt.com)