



"Why don't you write about your own garden?" I am asked. The answer is, as Vita wrote about Sissinghurst in 1953, "It is easy to write an article about somebody else's garden, but it is awkward (in the country phrase) to write about one's own. One hesitates to extol the successes, yet to lay emphasis on the mistakes and failures would be to assume an apologetic humility which might well irritate the reader into exclaiming "Then why write the article at all?"

Ten years ago to the day, I surveyed my new patch with some dismay: 150 feet of sodden, heavy clay containing three apple trees – one un-pruned old warrior heading for the stars, one barren and cankered ruin and a young Worcester Pearmain apparently growing sideways. Add in a gnarled pear tree on its last legs and a Japanese cherry riddled with rot. To the east stood a formidable line of forest trees (oak, Canadian maple, nut & rowan) so little light fell on my borders and grass. To the west, a vast oak spread its branches to meet the maple overhead, dwarfing the only respectable tree in my garden – a sulky greengage that (understandably) fruits only every other year.

By good luck, I found the solution in my annual visit to the Chelsea Flower Show. The Romantic Garden Nursery had created a dream-like vision of sculptured clipped box and yew, swagged in ivy and high-lighted with variegated Eleagnus and Euonymus. Most importantly, the shrubs were tough as old boots and didn't object to shade.

From ancient writings it has been established that Topiary has been practised for at least 2,000 years. In Roman Britain, clipped box was used in the villas of rich men, often spelling the master's name or as edging for complex patterns. Knot gardens became popular in Tudor and Jacobean times. Hampton Court Palace was famous for its complex porticoes, temples, vases, urns and animals shaped from box, rosemary and juniper. Knot gardens and mazes became fashionable and by the 18th Century many other evergreens such as holly, yew, bay, and laurel were used. Topiary has undergone something of a revival in the 21st Century; it is easily maintained, only requiring an

The winter garden

annual chop (traditionally on Derby Day but anytime in summer will do) and provides an evergreen structure which is particularly welcome on dark, winter days.

My first set-back was the prohibitive cost of the 350 feet of box plants I would need, so a compromise was reached. For the next few years I went mad, filling every available plant-pot with 6" cuttings of Buxus sempervirens, planted out when they slowly reached a respectable height to edge a rectangular bed near the house and encircle the greengage tree. The herb garden was surrounded by bay cuttings (bought cheaply from Homebase at £1.20 for 12) with a row of variegated hebe lining the grass path. The symmetry was completed by two standard Bay trees planted thirty feet from the house in the centre of the two rectangular beds and next door's overhanging holly got a topiary haircut too.

Armed with a pruning knife and stout gloves, I tackled the overgrown fruit trees and the privet hedges that enclosed the gardens like fat walrus. This is slow heavy work and the garden looked terrible for some weeks after I had taken the hedges back some two or three feet, removing a century's debris from the heart of the hedge. I was grateful for the newly introduced green wheelie bins. It was worth it in the end; come spring, new green buds quickly greened over the scars and vigorous new branches sprang from the apple trees.

By now, my garden had had enough of my amateurish tinkering and decided to take things into her own hands. In spring, the ground beneath the old apple trees becomes a flowery meadow with snowdrops and hellebores followed by miniature daffodils and the chaste beauty of Narcissus poeticus. Starry aconites and wild garlic fight it out through Lamium (used as ground cover for the rest of the year) and the delicate blue and white windflowers wave

tremulously at their grander relations (the Christmas hyacinths now naturalised 'in the wild').

I gave up on the 'lawn' years ago. Now in heavy shade for most of the day and riddled with tree roots, it does its own thing very prettily. Mainly clover and moss, it is starred with crocuses and cowslips in spring. Wild violets grow under the hedges and daisies run amok. I'm not too fond of dandelions but the odd sparky fellow is tolerated and adds to the merry dance. When the apples, pears and greengage blossom, and the blackbird sings at dusk, I think I am in heaven! For the rest of the year, most of the lawn stays uncut until late August; this allows flowers and grasses to self-seed, saves on water and electricity and gives a delightful country feel to the view.

In summer, strident scarlet poppies flame against the acid yellow phlomis; the apricot and pinks of the old bush roses flaunt their bee-humming beauty and the crimson-gold Fuchsia magellanica is threaded with the singing mauve Geranium Ann Folkard.

Today is New Year's Day and in deepest winter I look out across the clipped decorum of box and bay to the bare tracery of black branches against a pewter sky. The garden is tamed and tranquil; the birds – magpies, rooks, blackbirds, blue-tits, coal-tits, woodpigeons and jays – feast

on the standard hollies' scarlet berries and the fat Rosa rugosa hips. An occasional fox wanders lonely through the hedge.

But even in winter, the garden is colourful. The orange and gold stems of Cornus alba varieties glow in the distance and the twisted stems of Corylus avellana are hung with pale gold catkins. Fat pink buds are swelling on the Cammelias and the earliest snowdrops shelter under the snowy white blossoms of Viburnum tinus; the double form (Flore pleno) spears through the grassy black unpronounceable Ophiopogon planiscapus 'Nigrescans'.

Scent is important to winter-flowering shrubs. A small sprig of the creamy-white flowers of Lonicera fragrantissima will perfume a room very sweetly. Sarcococca hookeriana, another evergreen with inconspicuous white flowers, will have your visitors searching for the source of its ravishing scent. Don't forget the richly fragrant Daphnes (odora and bholua) and witch hazels (Hamamelis x intermedia 'Diane' is a good variety).

In this rather literary garden, Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers, lichen covered and entwined with ivy, stand silently in the desolate borders Annihilating all that's made To a green thought in a green shade waiting for Spring.

ANNE CRAWLEY



New family Treasure Hunt round the Suburb

The Horticultural Society's new Treasure Hunt at 2pm on Sunday 18 May, will be a fun afternoon out for all the family. There will be prizes for the best results and tea and cakes at the end to revive you. Start and finish at 86 Willifield Way. Details from Michael Franklin (8458 5846; hgs@hortsoc.co.uk) and posters nearer the time. Feeling gloomy in the winter grey? Keep an eye on the centenary flowerbed on Willifield Green, where a lovely spring surprise will soon peep through the grass.

Alternatively, you could join the Horticultural Society's outing to Wisley on Sunday 17 February to see snowdrops and other early spring flowers as well as the spectacular new glasshouse.

Come to the Spring Flower Show on Saturday 15 March – it's not too late to plant bulbs or look for foliage from your garden to exhibit yourself.

For our quarterly newsletter, which gives fuller information about all society activities, contact Sonia Mathias on 8455 7334.

Letters to the Editor

48 Erskine Hill, NW11 6HG

Sir

It was very interesting to see the photographic exhibition on the progress of the Suburb Character Appraisal on 13 December before Mervyn Miller's fascinating talk on The Most Nearly Perfect Garden Suburb? at Henrietta Barnett School.

After question time a member of the audience asked whether it might be possible for these photographs, and some of the archival material Dr Miller used, to be on permanent display somewhere on the Suburb. This would remind residents of the Suburb's architectural origins and progression over the last 100 years.

Letchworth Garden City does have a small museum. Would it

not be possible to end the very successful centenary celebrations by starting an appeal to find the funds to expand Fellowship House in an architecturally sympathetic way (perhaps by going back to just a few of the old club house's origins before it was bombed) and creating a little museum of our own as an extension to the Gallery?

This would not only celebrate our past and look to the future, but could also create more meeting space and solve the problems of some of the Suburb societies which own very interesting Suburb artefacts but at present have nowhere safe to display them.

Yours

Marjorie Harris

No droughts, no floods

In the last three months of 2007 the rainfall seems to have become less exciting and unusual. Normally, October is the wettest month of the year but this year the rain came in November. There were 3½ inches in that month and about 2 inches in October and December, so no droughts and no floods here. The annual total of nearly 32 inches is not that much above the average of just under 30 inches. It is, however, the distribution of the

rain throughout the year and the comparison with other places in the country that provide the interest. We can certainly be thankful that we did not have the flooding Glasgow experienced in January. February, with over twice the normal rainfall, was wet but an average March and then a very dry April may have allowed us to think that the dry summers we have been promised with global warming would result. Of course,

it didn't happen and the three months of May to July were, at 11½ inches, the wettest since these records began. However, our June was not the wettest on record as it was over the country as a whole. At slightly under 4 inches, seven years have been wetter here, with June 1997 having the highest figure, at over 5½ inches. July, too, was wetter in four previous years. It seemed, from a report in The Guardian, that, countrywide,

August to December was the driest such five month period since 1947. In North London, however, there have been five drier periods since 1980. Admittedly, these were when the rain gauge was at Mill Hill in the 80's and early 90's. Maybe it's wetter there or maybe this just shows vividly that our weather is local and there really is a difference in places that seem very close.

DIANA IWI






landscaping
design
patios
planting
drives

020 8209 0194

maintenance
turfing
watering systems
fencing
lighting

www.berrysgardens.com

Caring for the Suburb for 20 years