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ALEXA
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THIS
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GIRL

GREEN
BEAUTY

IS IT REALLY
GOOD
FOR YOU?

THE JOY OF
GARDENING
BY JEANETTE
WINTERSON

Fashion
get
natural



Earthly PLEASURES

Novelist **JEANETTE WINTERSON** describes how, for her, gardening is like storytelling – an organic narrative that can feed the soul as well as the body. And, in celebration of the ‘creative chaos’ of the garden, *Bazaar* brings together the country’s most inspiring green-fingered tribe at Petersham Nurseries in Surrey. Portraits by **IAIN MCKELL**



My mother divided her vegetables into godly and ungodly. Godly included Jerusalem artichokes, because they sounded holy, and salad stuffs, because they were known to induce sleep and act as a laxative – bodily necessities in keeping with spiritual health. Beetroot, she felt, helped us to think of the blood of Jesus, while cauliflower, in its resemblance to the human brain, caused us to meditate on the marvels of higher creation.

Leeks were phallic – not good. Swedes and turnips were for the beasts of the field, potatoes encouraged indolence and cabbage caused flatulence. Such was my introduction to gardening.

Our allotment in the 1960s in the north of England was essential to our diet, because we were poor, but there were rambling roses in the hedges that kept the wind out, and a small bed set aside for cut flowers. In the grim hard working-class mill towns, allotments like ours fed the soul as well as the body, and although my mother was eccentric, she believed in the soul, and taught me that there was such a thing. ‘Man shall not live by bread alone’ was written up over the oven. But then, ‘He shall melt thy bowels like wax’ was pasted in the outside loo – a warning against too much salad, I suppose.

I learned to garden the way I learned to write – out of necessity. We needed vegetables and flowers, and I needed to tell myself a long story about life – I am still telling it – a kind of beanstalk that grows and grows, and I can climb up it, both to escape the impossibility of life at the bottom, and to find another world where giants and castles and harp-playing hens are still to be found.

Gardening, like storytelling, is a continuing narrative. One thing leads to another. Like stories, there is always something going on in the garden long after the gardener has gone to bed. The thing grows, unfolds, changes, develops a maddening life of its own. For me, as a writer, I go to sleep with an idea in my head, and it takes hold during the night. In the morning, the tulips that refused to look at me the night before have opened into the sun.

I think we need such continuing narratives. In the post-modern world of fragments and dislocation, uncertainty, insecurity, the powerlessness of politics, and where money exists one day and disappears the next, there are three things that seem to me to be the permanent stuff of life: Love. Art. Gardening. Each is about relationship; our relationship to one another, and to the mythic narrative of our lives, and to our one and only real home: planet Earth.

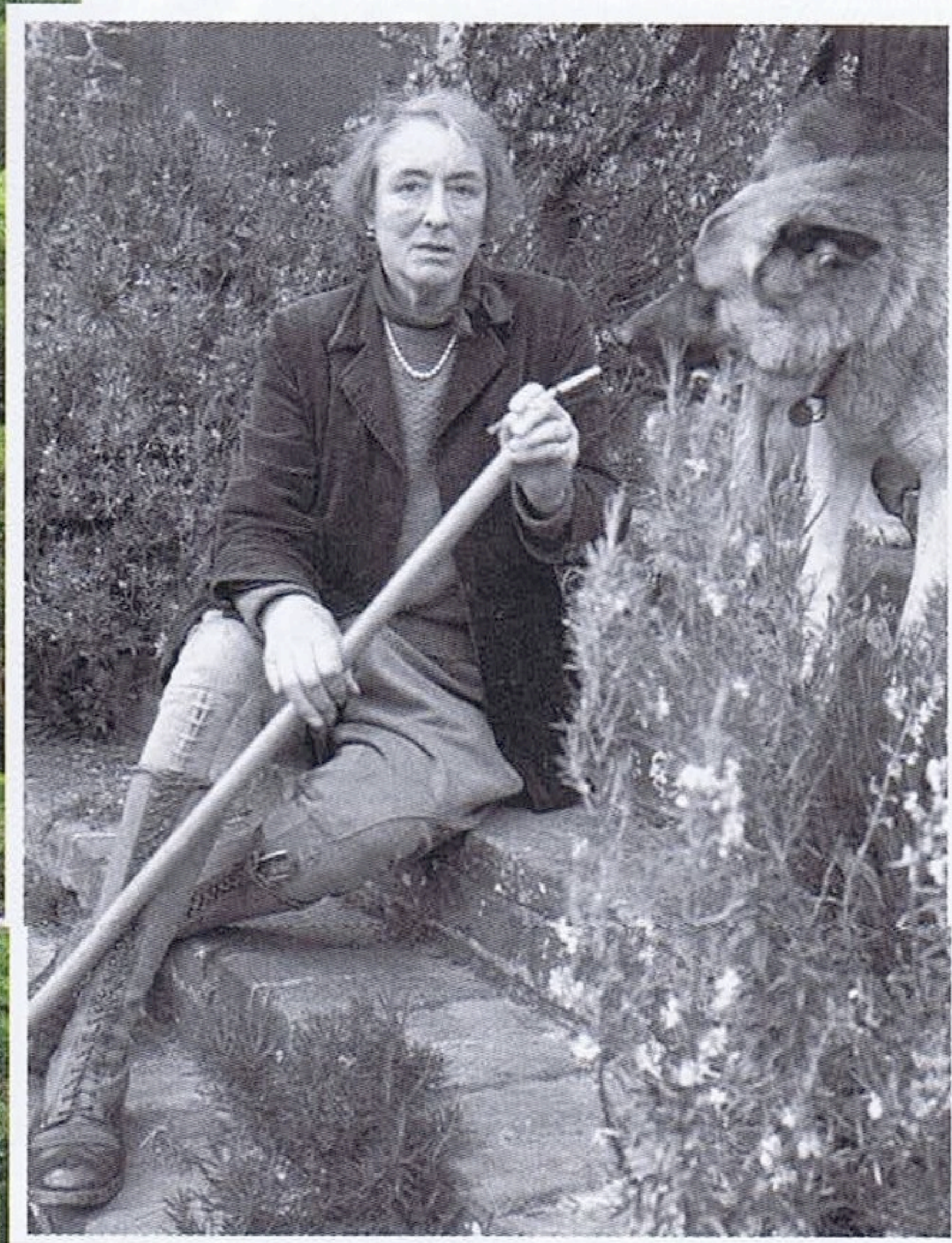
You might be farming, you might be planting trees, you might be watering a window box in west London, you might have an allotment, you might be the next Gertrude Jekyll; whatever you grow, grand or matchbox, holds you in relationship to the earth. Gardening is as broad as it is long. It is many things; wild, tame, manicured, manic. It doesn’t matter how you do it or why you do it, it always comes back to the simple basic of

THE PLANT HUNTER Tom Hart Dyke

*Hart Dyke’s back story may read like an adventure novel – grew up in a castle, held captive for a terrifying nine months in 2000 after being kidnapped on an orchid-hunting trip in Panama – but the biggest thrills for him are always the plants themselves. His most recent jaw-dropping horticultural encounter was with the *Puya raimondii*, which bears the world’s tallest flower spike (30 feet), last December in the Bolivian Andes: ‘Sooo bizarre!’ He is forever accumulating new specimens for the World Garden at his Kent home, Lullingstone Castle, which features species from all over the planet. DREAM DISCOVERY: ‘I’d love to find a new species of orchid to name after my inspirational granny.’*

THE CONVERT Laetitia Maklouf

*A packet of sweet-pea seeds in the bottom of a Christmas stocking five years ago started it all for Maklouf. ‘I knew nothing about sowing seeds, and planted them far too deep in a mug of exhausted city soil,’ she says. ‘They grew in spite of me, and I was totally hooked.’ She stopped temping, enrolled on a course at Chelsea Physic Garden, and eventually translated her bubbling enthusiasm and chic ideas into a book, *The Virgin Gardener* (£20, Bloomsbury). ‘Managing to grow anything at all is a constant surprise to me,’ she says, laughing. FAVOURITE BLOOM: ‘Sweet violet: tiny and delicate-looking, until they blow you away with their unbelievable scent.’*



Clockwise from left: the garden designed by Vita Sackville-West at Sissinghurst Castle Garden in Kent. 'Vita Sackville-West at Mereworth Castle, 1958' by Cecil Beaton. Great Dixter Gardens, East Sussex. Tom Hart Dyke and Laetitia Maklouf



THE WOODSMAN Alistair Yeomans

As director of forestry at the Sylva Foundation, Yeomans is setting up an online directory of our woods (www.myforest.org.uk), connecting their owners to local sawmills to reduce 'wood miles' and encourage diversity of flora and fauna. 'Walking through woodland that is managed in a manner close to nature provides a genuine feeling of what sustainability really means,' he says.

WHY WORK IN WOODLAND? *'For the sense of wonder, that hundreds of years of an oak's future life can exist in a single acorn, and that oak, when grown, can support about 500 other species.'*

THE BEEKEEPER Alison Benjamin

*Benjamin is the keeper of four urban and suburban hives spread across various back gardens in Greater London, each producing about 40lbs of honey a season (available from Urbanbees.co.uk). She was spurred on to learn the ropes four years ago by her concerns about the declining honeybee – she has since co-written two books, *A World Without Bees* (£7.99, Guardian Books) and *Keeping Bees and Making Honey* (£14.99, David & Charles). **BEST MOMENT:** 'Seeing my bees coming home on a summer's afternoon with pollen on their legs.'*

relationship. And that's a good thing, because when I look at the state of the world now, every single problem in it – war or economic meltdown – happens out of a breakdown of relationship. So when you sow those string beans this month, or plant out your sweet peas, it's a little bit of world that is positive, a little bit of life that isn't in breakdown.

What I love about gardening is that it cannot be virtual. I have to get out there and get my hands dirty. My hands are callused from a life of gardening, and not always quite clean. There was a terrible moment when I was queuing to get my OBE from Prince Charles, all tricked out in Armani and high heels (me, not the Prince), and I suddenly saw that I still had dirt under my thumb nails from squashing crocus bulbs into the ground the day before.

I always start wearing gloves in the garden, then end up ripping them off because I want the feel of the soil. There are people who use soil thermometers to tell them when the magic six degrees of warmth necessary for growth has been reached, but I know it through my fingers. It seems to me that to be in relation to the soil is at once vigorous and robust, peasant-like in its obviousness, and also strangely metaphysical. It embodies so much of what we are – the food we eat, the land we walk upon, our final end, the dust to dust that turns us all, inevitably, back to the soil that sustains us whilst we are alive.

All gardeners think about time, and time in the garden is not like time anywhere else – it is seasonal, rhythmic, neither fast nor slow, and not the sort of crazy time that has become the rule of most people's lives. If I plant a hedge, it will take five years to see the results, and 12 for it to become fully established. Yet my sweet peas and morning glory and evening primrose, even my old-fashioned roses with their proud stripes, renew themselves every day, and in season the battle with the courgettes is such that to miss one for a week is to be loomed at through the sharp green foliage by a full-sized submarine.

My favourite gardening joke is this: What's the difference between a good gardener and a bad gardener? Answer: About two weeks.

Timing is everything in the garden. That nothing can be hurried and nothing can be left is a pressure for the new gardener, who tends to bring the rules of the office into the yard. People often give up on gardening because they feel defeated by a time-cycle at

odds with everything else that they do. But in reality it is our clock-driven lives that are at odds with the true time of the natural world. Gardening becomes relaxing and meditative not because it isn't back-breakingly hard work, but because it returns us to a freer mental and emotional state. It is therapy for the heart.

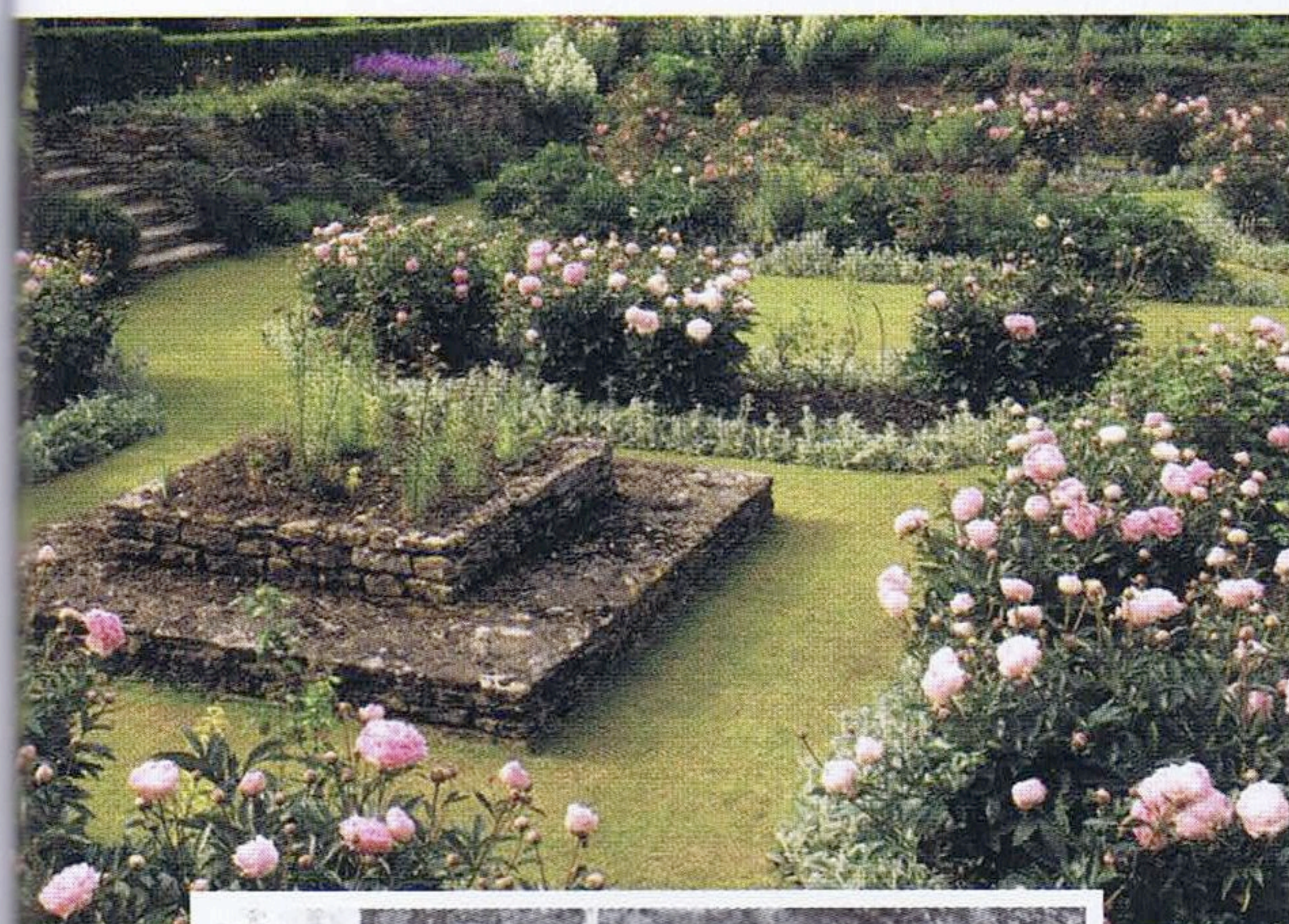
Nevertheless, there are times in the summer months when I have to crawl up the steps into the kitchen on my hands and knees because I am so exhausted. Yet, eating my five a day veg from my own garden for most of the year is really wonderful, and a satisfaction unlike any other. When I lived in London, I used to turn every available space into somewhere for salad and beans. At my poorest, I have lined a cardboard box with a bin bag and grown salad and herbs in that.

Just as there are two basic kinds of writers, there are two basic kinds of gardeners: the ones who are all about conscious control of the material, and the ones who believe in a certain amount of creative chaos. I was fortunate to have my garden in the Cotswolds designed by Susan Ashton, one of Britain's most exciting garden designers, and the sister of theatre director Deborah Warner. Sue understands and encourages creative chaos, and like her sister understands that the process of making should be organic and flowing, not a place to impose a theory or a system.

When I said that I wanted to come straight out of my back door and into my vegetable garden, she didn't flinch, but directed me towards formal and beautiful cage and greenhouse structures, around which to organise my crammed and often highly personal plantingschemes. She put in a pond that looks as natural as a dew-pond, and advised me to order thousands – yes, thousands – of native woodland bulbs and plants. When the stack of boxes arrived, I felt like one of those fairy-tale unfortunates who must spin all the straw into gold by morning, or be carried off by a goblin. I rang her and said, 'I cannot plant all these bulbs!' 'It will be worth it in the spring,' she said, and I thought of Vita Sackville-West, on her knees at Sissinghurst, her weather-beaten face looking up from miniature mountains of impossibly tiny bulbs.

She is a patron saint of gardening, not just because what she did was so marvellous, but because she did so much of it herself. And in the end, the pleasure of life, or so it seems to me, lies not in what you can get other people to do for you, or what you can wriggle out of – that's the office culture – but what you can do yourself.

Tell me what is better than your own garden in early summer; its colours, scents, harmonies? It is worth it again and again. □



Above, from top: the Gertrude Jekyll-designed sunken garden at the Manor House at Upton Grey, Hampshire. Jekyll in about 1901

PORTAIT STYLED BY CARMEN BORGONOVO. ALICE WEARS DRESS, £2,380, BOTTEGA VENETA. GLOVES, £68, VIRGINIA WELLES. £75, IISE JACOBSEN. SOCKS, £160, HER OWN. RICHARD WEARS SHIRT, £59.95, BARBOUR. JACKET, £485, HOLLAND & HOLLAND. CHINOS, £35, GAP. WELLES, AS BEFORE. JOY WEARS SHIRT, £160, TROUSERS, £275, BOTH HOLLAND & HOLLAND. SHAWL, £850, VIRGINIA. FEDORA, £172, JAMES LOCK & CO. WELLES, £43, SUPERGA. ALISTAIR WEARS SHIRT, £53.83, FARROW'S. BREEKES, £125, WAISTCOAT, £695, BOTH PURDY WELLES. £60, HUNTER. ALUMINUM WARE, £1,095, CARBON. £405, BOTH BURBERRY. PROSUM. BROOCH, £68, VIRGINIA. HAT, £150, JAMES LOCK & CO. WELLES, £235, JIMMY CHOO FOR HUNTER. SEE STOCKISTS FOR DETAILS. HAIR AND MAKE-UP AS PREVIOUS PAGE. ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS: DEREK ST ROMAINE/THE GARDEN COLLECTION, GAP PHOTOS/JOHN GLOVER, ENGLISH HERITAGE/HIP/TOFOTO