

A GARDEN ROMANCE

AFTER FALLING FOR A RUN-DOWN RECTORY IN THE ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE, THE AUTHOR AND HER HUSBAND BROUGHT THE HOUSE—AND ITS MAGNIFICENT GROUNDS—BACK TO GLORY. BY BELLA POLLEN. PHOTOGRAPHED BY FRANÇOIS HALARD.

NATURE'S BOUNTY

The formal flower beds outside the living room are home to brightly colored phlox and delphinium.

OPPOSITE: The sage-and-thyme lawn at the front of the house is divided by ribbons of box hedge.

Sittings Editor:
Miranda Brooks



The property was in a state of beautiful decay the day we first stumbled across it—overgrown, lush, neglected for oh so many years. Clumps of nettles had taken up residence in flower beds already swaying with foxgloves. The crumbling walls of terraced lawns were carpeted in lichen and moss. And then there were hidden archways, each leading to some new mystery: an ivy-covered well head, a sunken grass court, and perhaps most extraordinary of all, an Edwardian water garden of rills and pools, buried under the scrub of dense woodland. The entire six acres was enclosed inside ragged hedges and protected from the village by sentinels of *leylandii*; a most secret of secret gardens.

When, earlier that morning, my husband, Dave, had casually suggested a picnic in the countryside, I hadn't been in the least suspicious. It was one of those hazy June days that only an English summer can produce, and as we drove through Oxfordshire's honey-colored villages, the lanes became narrower, the cow parsley grew higher, until eventually we found ourselves in the time warp of Westwell, an impeccably preserved hamlet of seventeenth-century stone houses centered on the kind of pond commonly used for witch dipping. Behind the pond was a Norman church and alongside the church, a narrow drive discreetly posted with a FOR SALE sign.

I tried to remain calm. As far back as I can remember, I have resisted the idea of buying a house in the country. My childhood, split between the isolation of Scotland's Outer Hebrides and the glassy spires of New York, has left me with an almost pathological fascination with extremes. I like my landscapes claustrophobically urban or impossibly wild. England's gently rolling hills have always struck me as being, well, a little in-between. However, I also believe that everyone has a place where they fit into their skins, and I have long understood that for Dave, the English countryside is his.

The house itself was lived in by a stoic old lady who had confined herself to the kitchen, with a single blow heater for company. She was a deeply unwilling seller, as evidenced by the locked doors and veiled warnings of "beasties" in the attics. The few rooms we managed to view struck us as faintly depressing, but it didn't matter. The garden had already cast its spell. Dave was entranced. "Let's buy it," he whispered, and within a matter of weeks, that lost world became ours.

What could be more satisfying than taking something tired and broken down and restoring life and spirit to it? I have an eye for color and textiles, but my brain functions less well in the two-dimensional medium of blueprints. And if my husband is Capability Brown where anything green is concerned, I am Rappaccini's Daughter.



RUSTIC CHARM

The house's view of the Church of St. Mary. Below, the converted barn features an oak refectory table by Willie Nickerson and sofas and chairs by Christopher Hodson.



MIXED MEDIA

Jesse and Kiri on a 19th-century Regency sofa recovered with an old Russian flag. Above, monkey wallpaper by Fornasetti decorates the sitting room.



GRAND PLAN

A white bathtub and Moroccan carpet in the main guest bedroom. Right, a Hugo Guinness cowboy print, among other pictures in the master bedroom.



LOUNGE ACT

Pollen's daughter Mabel and son Jesse with his girlfriend, Kiri, in the paneled TV room.



EARTHLY DELIGHTS
The Edwardian water garden was buried under a scrub of dense woodland.

I have only to look upon a flower for it to wither and die. So Dave and I made a deal: He would take care of structure and landscaping; I'd handle interiors.

Our problems started immediately. A classic Georgian rectory, the house was officially registered with the English Heritage commission. Initial plans became irretrievably mired in the red tape of building permissions. More alarmingly, it seemed as if the old lady had kept her doors locked for good reason. Preliminary investigations led to catastrophic findings. The house had rising damp, dry rot, and unspeakable creatures nesting between the floorboards. What on first viewing we'd identified as a charming William Morris flock paper turned out to be fungus growing on the master-bedroom wall. A winter freeze burst the pipes; then a spring thaw flooded the basement. Had a plague of locusts descended to strip every last leaf from the trees, I wouldn't have been in the least surprised, but neither would it have made any difference, because our garden—that beautiful, lyrical, glorious garden—had already been destroyed. In its stead was a muddy six-acre car park of porta-potties, construction vans, and sewage lines. We were heartbroken. It felt as if we had committed an unforgivable act of vandalism. What had begun as a fairy tale soon turned into a Tim Burton-esque nightmare.

Another year passed before the Old Rectory was in a fit state for anything approaching design input. It was January, and the Cotswolds landscape looked like Siberia; the house, uninhabited for two years, was a damp, freezing gulag. By then, I was immersed in writing a new book. *Summer of the Bear* was shaping up to be part Cold War mystery, part magical thinking, and wholly torturous to write. I had fallen so deep into the world of fiction that to pull myself out in order to think about dimmer switches seemed an impossible task. It wasn't just the house, either; in our wisdom we'd also managed to acquire the hay barn that backed onto it. The job called for a full-time interior designer, and the writing soon ground to a halt.

I'm ashamed to say I have rarely felt so mean-spirited or resented my husband more than during those terrible first months on site. Dave, juggling spiraling budgets, was no less crabby. Relationships, of course, are not unlike houses; susceptible to prolonged cold spells and liable to fall to pieces should they not be properly maintained. By any standard it was a bleak time for both of us.

Dave rallied first. He began making tentative noises about restoring the garden and employed Justin Spink, a visionary new talent in the usually staid world of English landscape design. Justin had never seen the garden in its original form, but he understood perfectly that its romance had lain in its proximity to death. The challenge would be how to re-create that morbid enchantment with plants that were healthy and thriving. The pair of them took to huddling in muddy corners and speaking in a language I didn't understand: of hydrangea quercifolia, pleached carpinus, and gradations of planting. Dave's obsession with his fritillaries, his war on Japanese knotweed, became every bit as intense as my battle with *Summer of the Bear's* anthropomorphized grizzly, and in due course, he and Justin unveiled an ambitious master plan.

At the front of the house, a sage-and-thyme lawn would be divided by ribbons of box hedge. The staggered walls of the south terraces were to be shored up and planted with white and purple lavender dotted with bluebird hibiscus to add height and to frame the village rooftops. English park railings, designed by my brother's company, Stonebank Ironcraft, would follow



the existing theme of big beech hedges and separate the garden into a series of rooms, each with its own character and charm: Paved terraces for eating and reading were sprinkled with rock roses, and a wildflower meadow included mown paths meandering to a tiny orchard of apple, plum, and cherry trees. Then there was a bramble-ridden wood, stripped and replanted with evergreens to provide bones in winter and to showcase the Edwardian rill with its cascading paths and steps—all to be painstakingly restored by local craftsmen. “Look,” Dave finished, “we’ve even designed a tree house for Mabel out of reclaimed telegraph poles,” and how did I think all this sounded?

I thought it sounded like much more than we could afford. “Why can’t it just be grass?” I asked, petty with writer’s block.

“Because,” he replied, “when you start writing again, I want you to be able to see flowers out of every window.” But I had no faith that I would ever finish that book, no faith that the garden would ever flourish again.

I had, of course, forgotten about the resilience of nature. One day, the gray skies lifted, and under the bags of sand, between the wooden walkways of the builders’ huts, spring bulbs were suddenly everywhere: snowdrops, crocuses, daffodils. It looked as if our garden had every intention of blooming again, whether we took a hand in it or not, and from that day on everything changed. The builders finished one room, and like the old lady, I took up residence there with my manuscript, and finally the words came. One creative impulse unlocked the other. Decorating the house no longer felt like a chore, but a chance to make a home as rich and varied as the garden deserved. A home where our four kids would bring friends, a home we would all love. Bored with white minimalism, I gave in to my inner magpie, choosing strong jewel colors and anything that sparkled. Out went tasteful silver fitments, and

in came bling. Gold taps, copper surfaces, Arts and Crafts-revival window latches. Stained old sofas were re-covered in Russian flags. Instead of painting over paneling, we French polished it until it shone. The idea was to make a bold statement, any statement in each room built around objects or furniture we already had. The master bedroom, with its coved ceiling and austere four-poster, looks like a monastery; my eldest son, Jesse’s, room is draped in a Moroccan tent, while the Fornasetti monkey wallpaper in the living room makes us feel as though we’re reading our Sunday papers in a jungle.

The result is that the Old Rectory is now an eclectic mishmash of eras, styles, furniture, and objects. We threw everything in there that had character: dark-green and tangerine-colored carpets; curtains cut from Syrian embroidery. There’s space for all our random collections of stuff—gold-plated bird skulls, Aubrey Beardsley prints, a few pieces of inherited English mahogany furniture, and even some deliciously vulgar seventies tiles from eBay.

As for the garden, well, Dave was right: I can’t pass a window without looking out on flowers, whether it’s the kaleidoscopic purples and greens of the front herb lawn, the magnolia tree outside our bedroom, or the riot of peonies, delphiniums, and phlox from the library.

That first spring we moved in, it felt as if a love letter was being delivered every day in the form of a different color or bloom. Week after week, a new verse of planting would unfold. Having paid little attention, I had no idea what was coming next. Watching those six muddy acres return to life proved both mysterious and incredibly romantic.

The book is now published, and the house is finished. Each has its secrets and a dusting of magic, both have made wonderful stories, but the garden is pure poetry. □



ALFRESCO

A paperbark maple tree shades an area of the garden used for dining. *OPPOSITE:* The wildflower meadow in front of the barn includes meandering paths that lead to a tiny orchard of apple, plum, and cherry trees.