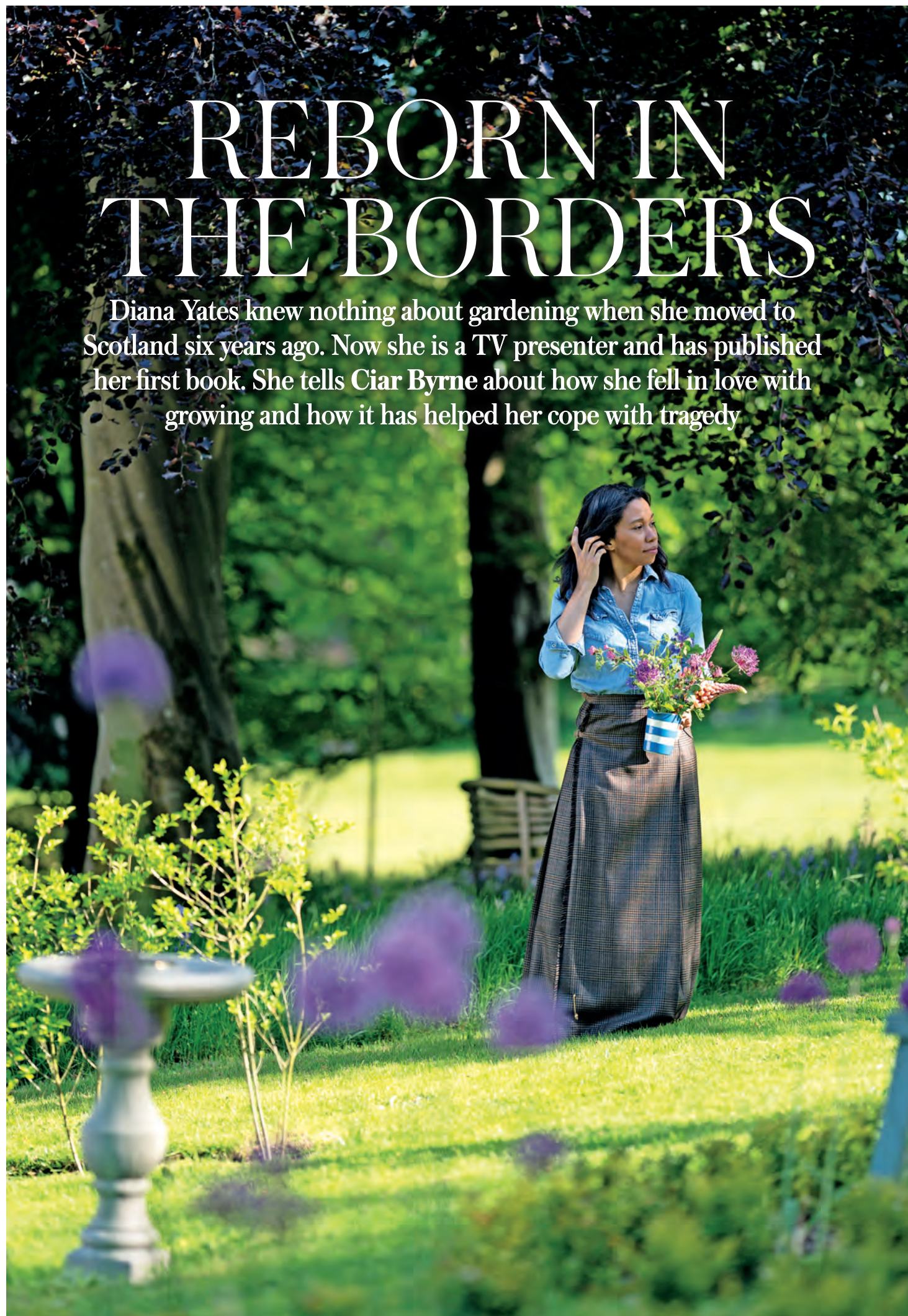


REBORN IN THE BORDERS

Diana Yates knew nothing about gardening when she moved to Scotland six years ago. Now she is a TV presenter and has published her first book. She tells Ciar Byrne about how she fell in love with growing and how it has helped her cope with tragedy



Opposite page: Diana Yates in her garden. Above: dahlias and spring bulbs, which she grows for cut flowers

Six years ago Diana Yates and her family moved to Greenfields, a 240-year-old Scottish manse with two acres of land attached. She and her husband Andrew had lived and worked in South Africa for ten years, but Yates was feeling burnt out and they decided to return to the UK. After two years in Oxfordshire they moved to the Scottish Borders, where they had both grown up, in the hope of restoring their work-life balance.

When they arrived at Greenfields, which is about half-an-hour south of Edinburgh, Yates had no idea who was going to look after the large hillside garden. In fact, she was rather hoping someone else would take it on. Then, one autumn day, they went outside as a family, lit a bonfire and started raking up the leaves – and her perspective changed.

‘It gave me such a feeling of peace after such a manic corporate career. I wanted to feel that again, so I started doing some research and finding out what I could grow in my garden.’

Yates began to educate herself about horticulture by watching television programmes, reading books and scouring social media. She was soon hooked. That led her to start her own Instagram account to track her progress, which now has 13,000 followers.

In the photos and videos she posts the garden, which sits on a hillside about 850 feet above sea level, looks idyllic. In response to all the interest she has now written a book about her gardening journey, *Growing at Greenfields: A Seasonal Guide to Growing, Eating and Creating from a Beautiful Scottish Garden*.

‘It’s a big garden, but there are only certain pockets that are suitable for growing, which is lovely because it keeps a large portion of the garden quite natural,’ says Yates. ‘It’s surrounded by trees, and we inherited quite a lot of mature shrubs and hedging as well – leylandii, yew and the beech hedge around the main kitchen garden. So the main structure was already in place.’

After their busy city lives Diana and Andrew went through a period of readjustment. In Johannesburg they would drive their three children everywhere door-to-door, but now they simply packed them onto the school bus.

‘When you’ve lived a city life for so long you get used to all the amenities,’ she says. ‘It probably took us about a year to chill out and settle into a slower pace of life. There were moments when I thought I wouldn’t be able to do it, that I needed to be in the buzz of things. But after that first year, once I got into gardening, my focus shifted and I just sank into it.’

In 2020 Yates and her husband were made redundant, just as the world went into lockdown. Together with their children they started to grow their own food. She showed her ten-year-old son Joseph, who was her regular gardening companion, how to sow carrot seeds. Suddenly, in May that year, Joseph died in a freak accident and the family’s lives were changed forever.

In *Growing at Greenfields* she writes: ‘The longer >



story is that life will never be the same again... The shorter story is that the garden saved us that summer.' It was during a quiet moment with Andrew, sitting in the kitchen garden and trying to make sense of the terrible thing that had happened, that she noticed the carrot seeds sown by Joseph had germinated.

Yates confesses she is an introvert and often used to say no to opportunities, but after her son passed away that changed. 'Joseph was a very extrovert little boy and a very outdoorsy boy – he always said yes to everything. He was gung-ho at life. I promised him at his funeral that I would do the same.'

The Yateses threw themselves into gardening. Andrew is the hard landscaper, shifting stones and boulders to make a plant theatre that features an ever-changing pot display, which this year includes ornamental cabbages. They have also restored the existing kitchen garden and added a potager, a plot where there is a mixture of edibles and ornamentals.

Yates fits in gardening around her curtains and cushions business. She is also a presenter on Beechgrove, the long-running BBC Scotland TV show she used to watch when she was learning about gardening. The job came about after the programme introduced a new segment called the Beechgrowers, featuring home-made films by viewers.

'We were going through a really difficult spell during the lockdowns and were looking for any way to keep our minds busy while we were in isolation,' says Yates. 'Andrew and I thought: "Why not?" He was the cameraman, and filmed short segments about bits of our garden. It all spiralled from there. They asked me to come back for more episodes, and now I'm doing more of a main presenter role. It's a lovely thing to be part of.'

It is a great testament to Yates that after everything she has been through her book is incredibly uplifting, with practical and inspirational guides to making your own raised beds, preparing a kitchen garden and planting bulbs. It is packed with health-giving recipes to make with home-grown produce, such as caper linguine and butternut and prosciutto salad.

She says it is important for her to know that she is feeding her family with vegetables they have grown themselves – which is also great for the planet as it cuts down on food miles. 'I think it's about fifty steps from the kitchen garden to the kitchen. My hope was to be able to sustain our family of five when we started growing. I love growing just basic crops like garlic, onions, potatoes, carrots and leeks: things I know will store well. It's so rewarding to go out to our cold store in the autumn and winter and being able to pick up a pumpkin or a squash and make soup. That for me will never grow old.'

This year she is trying a new crop: strawberry spinach. It is related to common varieties, so you can eat the leaves, but after flowering it produces berries which are a little like strawberries.

After a couple of years in the garden Yates started

Left, from top: a bee visiting an echinacea, obelisks and Diana with some cut flowers. Opposite page: the kitchen garden and Diana gathering tulips



growing flowers alongside the vegetables, with a particular interest in varieties that could be cut and brought into the house. She grows perennials and annuals, especially bulbs, which naturalise well in their garden. 'We have drifts of snowdrops, crocus, daffodils and cow parsley. Those alone can take us through the first five months of the year, and they make lovely arrangements for the house or as gifts – and I haven't planted anything!'

Yates has now turned her hand to making a winter cut-flower garden, growing plants that work well in wreaths and other festive arrangements such as hypericum, skimmias, holly and laurel.

July in the garden will find her looking ahead and preparing for Christmas dinner, planting out brussels sprouts and other winter crops such as leeks and cauliflowers. She will also be planning for the so-called 'hungry gap' next year, the period in April, May and June when winter vegetables have finished but most of the current year's crops are not ready to harvest. She will bridge the gap with purple sprouting broccoli, early new potatoes, garlic and spring onions.

In the flower borders the dahlias will be just getting going. Diana's top tips for keeping slugs away from them and her hostas is to place a bird feeder nearby. 'I have zero per cent damage to my hostas because we have encouraged birds like song thrushes, which love slugs and snails.



You can literally see them hopping about the pots taking care of everything,' she says.

The garden is constantly evolving. Diana and Andrew are now working on a 'moon garden', with white flowers including phlox and delphiniums as well as the snowball bush *Viburnum opulus*. They are also making a large pond, a South African *boma* – an enclosed area for cooking and

entertaining – and a secret garden room tucked away against the old garden walls.

'The garden has been everything for me,' says Yates. 'It's been my gym but also my therapy. It's seen me through some massively tough times and some major life changes. On the worst days it was the thing that pulled me outside, either to water the plants or to open the greenhouse. Once I was out there I would get into something else, and before I realised, it was lunchtime.'

I might still be in my pyjamas – it was literally the thing that got me out of bed. I think it's that meditative, repetitive work that you're doing that allows you to clear the mind and put the world to rights at the same time. It's the best form of therapy that I've experienced, and something that I rely on greatly.' ■

♦ Growing at Greenfields: a Seasonal Guide to Growing, Eating and Creating from a Beautiful Scottish Garden by Diana Yates is published by Pavilion, price £25. Episodes of Beechgrove can be found on BBC iPlayer

PICTURES: Z/E