

# ‘Gardening is like a good love affair’

Leading designer Jinny Blom tells Ciar Byrne why she believes nature and creativity can be happy bedfellows

A debate is raging in the gardening world about the relative merits of rewilding, and in her new book, *What Makes a Garden: A Considered Approach to Garden Design*, Jinny Blom steps right into the argument. ‘Gardens seem to be having an identity crisis,’ she writes in her foreword. ‘Evocations of an imaginary lost wilderness peppered with wildlife are at the fore in contemporary garden culture, while gardens with perspective and order seem to have been, for now at least, consigned to history.’

One of the country’s leading garden designers, who has run her own practice since 2000, Blom is unafraid to state that she believes gardens and the natural world are very different things. But hers is a nuanced approach. She sees the concept of ‘allowing’ nature full freedom to be rather an arrogant one, and says that, at its best, gardening should meet nature half way ‘with sensitivity, desire, nurturing and respect – like a good love affair’.

In this follow-up to her hugely successful 2017 book *The Thoughtful Gardener*, she spans history, literature, art, and philosophy to describe the peculiar alchemy of her craft.

Although she insists that she is not trying to be contentious, she admits the foreword to her book was even more bombastic before she rewrote it, and that she can’t help feeling some of the things being done in the name of rewilding are ‘an urbanite’s view of gardening’.

‘A lot of it doesn’t make sense to me,’ she says. ‘People doing things which shouldn’t be done. I know of somebody who stripped two feet of beautiful Somerset topsoil off to plant wildflowers. To me, that’s such an idiotic thing to do: both expensive and irreversible.’

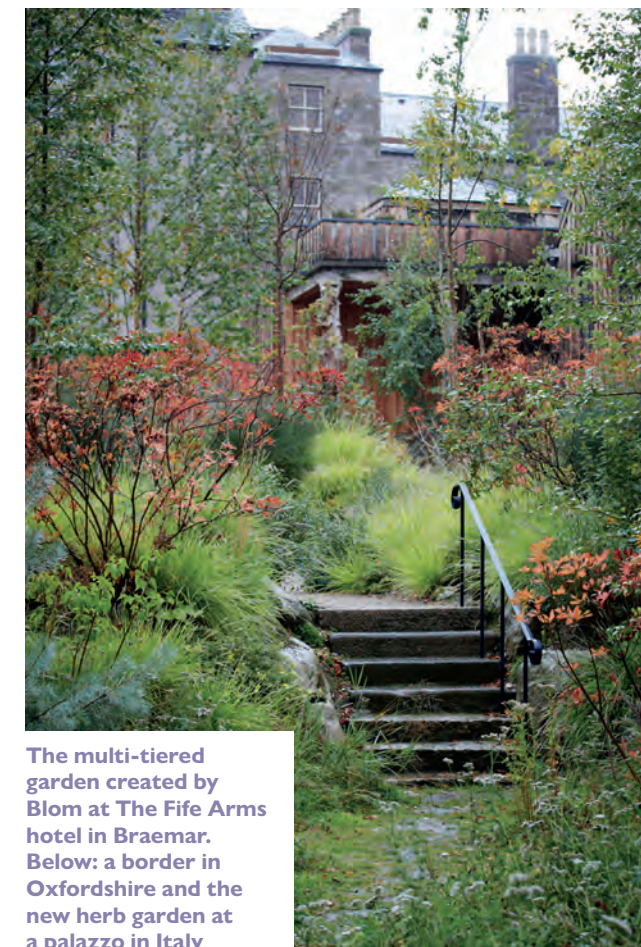
Her intention, however, is not to be negative, but to celebrate gardening and all the many and varied elements that go into this most human of activities. While she has made the gardens featured in the book, it is not about her own process, which she has already covered in the previous volume. Nor is it a style manual, as she believes gardens are highly personal places.

‘They are introverted and personal. Your garden will be different from my garden, but we’ll gain similar pleasures from them. It’s not a style guide, you can do what you like as far as I’m concerned.’ ➤

PICTURES: BRITT WILLOUGHBY DYER



Above: the flower borders of a Cotswold garden that were revived by Jinny Blom. Salvias, nepetas and sedums in the same garden



The multi-tiered garden created by Blom at The Fife Arms hotel in Braemar. Below: a border in Oxfordshire and the new herb garden at a palazzo in Italy





Rather it is a multi-layered collection of thoughts garnered from decades of making gardens, often for clients who value their privacy. Much of her work is covered by non-disclosure agreements, making this glimpse into her world even more fascinating.

When we talk on Zoom she is wearing a hi-vis vest on site at one of her latest projects, helping to build a new home in 75 acres of beech woodland. While this might seem like the very heart of nature, she explains how they are adapting it in the same way that people have been doing since the Middle Ages.

‘I see that as part of gardening – we’re modulating it. In medieval times they used to do that for hunting. They would cut back all the trees so you could ride through on horseback without clouting your head. We’ve always been tinkering with nature.’

The book is divided into three sections. ‘Humanity’ covers our drive to civilise, balanced with our quest for a lost paradise, as well as the way in which gardens appeal to the five senses. ‘Alchemy’ talks about the *prima materia*, the raw materials that go into our outdoor spaces, followed by the *anima mundi*, the living world. Finally, ‘Time’ reveals the effects of the seasons and changing light.

There is also a long section on soil science, which Blom believes is an under-researched but vital area of knowledge. ‘You can’t talk about compost without talking about soil science,’ she insists.

How we garden is part of what defines us, she argues, in the same way that we all like different books, films or music. ‘I’m sort of anti-fashion, and I think gardens are a place of total personal freedom if nothing else,’ she says.

In her previous career Blom was a psychologist, and she believes the drive to garden comes from our reptilian brain. ‘I’ve worked with people in extremis, people who were so ill they would just sit in an armchair chain-smoking and looking blankly at the ceiling. Then you’d get them outside and all sorts of creative urges would start coming out. It feels incredibly deep in humans: even at a point when you’ve got literally nothing else it’s still there and can find an expression, and I find that extraordinary.’

But she believes therapeutic gardening needs to be handled carefully, precisely because it is such a personal experience. ‘Gardens are introverted, so the idea you can go and inflict therapeutic gardens on everybody, right, left and centre, is completely antipathetic to the world I come from. To do therapeutic work you have to spend such a long time entering into the relationship and making everything safe and secure.’

She tells a story about one of her patients, who came from a smallholding in Jamaica. When she helped him to move into communal accommodation he upset the caretaker by digging up the lawn to grow tomatoes. ‘He stripped it bare, cultivated it and he sold tomatoes to the Indian guy in the corner shop,’ she recalls.

Blom’s references range from Dolly Parton, whom she admires for her instantly recognisable style, to Jean Cocteau, whose paintings of sailors she sees reflected in the shape of the plants at Villefranche in the south of France.

As a garden designer, it is her job is to work out what her clients want when they don’t know themselves. She spends a lot of time figuring out what is going to make them feel good once she has left. ‘If you ask a decorator or a gardener



Flower borders at an estate in Oxfordshire. Below and right: a new wildflower meadow in the Cotswolds and an old mulberry tree in an Italian garden. Bottom: part of Blom’s garden at The Fife Arms hotel



*‘I’m invited in to the most private part of people’s lives. It’s a privileged position’*

to help you with something it’s because you have a desire for something but can’t do it yourself. I’m invited in to the most private part of people’s lives. It’s a very privileged position to be in and I take it very seriously.’

One of her clients, who had no interest in gardening before Blom helped her and her husband to make a six-acre garden from scratch, is now besotted with growing and regularly calls her to tell her about her latest project.

Blom loved working as a psychologist until a dramatic event in her own life gave her pause to think about what she wanted to do. Despite having no training or previous experience she was offered a couple of days’ work experience a week with a garden designer.

‘I was an adult with a career, a mortgage and a very serious job but I said yes. I worked out my notice one week and started gardening on the Monday – and it just took off,’ she says.

Her motto was: ‘turn up on time and panic in your own time’. After a lot of hard work, research, reading and thinking, she soon found herself in demand.

‘I’m from a Quaker family, and they always stressed that you should think before you act – in quite a menacing way,’ she says. ‘My great aunts were all about six foot two and went to Girton [the once female-only Cambridge University College]. They were quite terrifying. I’m also a musician, and you can’t be a virtuoso until you’ve learned the rules. I thought: “Right, I’ll just

learn my craft”. It takes a long time: I’ve been doing this since 1996, and I’ve had my own practice since 2000. Moving the earth around is a big responsibility, so I think it’s important to do it with respect.’

One of the main themes of her work is creating gardens that are in tune with the buildings and landscapes around them. In the book there is a garden surrounding a granite hotel in Scotland, and another around an old palazzo in Tuscany. The uniting factor is that both are in-keeping with the materials and spirit of the place.

She tells of the client who wanted to be able to make love to her husband in their garden without worrying about people seeing them, and another who wanted to be able to walk naked to their Japanese bath house without disturbing anyone else. What is it about nakedness in the garden?

‘It’s quite common, funnily enough, and I think there’s also an intellectual nakedness you might want to have in a garden. You want that level of freedom to not be interrupted and to not feel the constraints that we have around us in shared public spaces,’ she says.

A former drama student, Blom says making a garden is a bit like putting on a play. ‘You start with nothing, then the first thing you do is print the poster that says when it’s going to happen. You’ve got a roomful of maniacs who know nothing and a date, and something has to change between here and there. ‘It’s the same every time I get a new job: a whole new cast of characters, a whole new place. I find it so stimulating.’ ■

◆ *What Makes a Garden: A Considered Approach to Garden Design* by Jinny Blom is published by Frances Lincoln in hardback on 19 October, price £35

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