



Clockwise from left: spring blossom and cow parsley in the cider apple orchard; the kitchen garden and one of the flower borders

This gardening life

The author Tamsin Westhorpe tells Ciar Byrne about her new book and her lifelong love of hands-on horticulture



Tamsin taking a tea break

On a warm September day in 2021 the gardener and writer Tamsin Westhorpe had a rare day off from working in her Herefordshire garden. She decided to spend her free time giving the overgrown chokeberry trees in the back garden their annual haircut, but did what no gardener should ever do: she headed up a ladder with no one to hold it steady. When she leant in to prune a central branch the ladder slipped from under her, and she found herself lying flat on her back in the middle of a flowerbed.

Realising her injuries were serious, she managed to hobble back inside the house to call an ambulance. On arriving at hospital she discovered she had broken her spine. Luckily the fracture wasn't too serious, but it would require 12 weeks of bedrest to heal.

For someone who hates staying still this was torture. It was only when the publisher of her first book, *Diary of a Modern Country*

Gardener, came round to see how she was doing that Westhorpe suggested writing a second book.

'In the first one I put a little bit of comedy in, then got nervous and removed some of it – but that was the thing people contacted me about. I also learned that people like to be taken back to their childhoods. My publisher said: "Have you got any more stories like this?" I said: "Oh yes, plenty". So that was it.'

The result is *Grasping the Nettle*, a collection of bite-sized amusing anecdotes about Westhorpe's long career in horticulture. Her tales range from her days as a student on work experience with Bournemouth Parks Department to her later life as a magazine editor and working at Stockton Bury Gardens with her sister and uncles.

Westhorpe's parents were not keen gardeners. Her mother's great passion was rearing poultry – she always had chickens in the back of the car and the house was full of incubators. But she did instil in her daughter a love for the outdoors and plants.

The young Westhorpe took snails to school in a sandwich box and made perfume with crushed rose petals. While other girls were playing with



their Barbie dolls and My Little Ponies she asked for a greenhouse for her tenth birthday.

Aged 16, after dropping out of art college, she got a job at a relative's plant nursery and enrolled on a course in interior landscaping at a nearby horticultural college. She thought caring for houseplants and tending them in shops and offices would be an easy option, but the opposite proved to be the case.

'Interior landscaping gave me a real insight into how people treat gardeners,' she says. 'It was physically hard work but you felt you had to be invisible and creep around very important people in their swivel chairs. It's a difficult job because you can't install houseplants in the wrong place when a client's paying for them. There's far more to it than meets the eye. We were like elves – just appearing by magic.'

When she joined the parks department in Bournemouth it was still an unusual role for a young woman. She was careful not to tread on any steel-capped toes by drinking out of someone else's chipped mug at tea break, or to sit in their battered armchairs in the shed.

Part of her reason for writing her new book is to encourage young people, especially girls and women, to consider a career in horticulture.

'I think it's greatly improved, certainly from a female perspective. Women are dominant now in the industry, which is fantastic. There are women running shows and building gardens and landscaping. I think there is still a perception that you can't be that clever if you're doing horticulture, especially if you're doing a practical >

PICTURES: STOCKTON BURY GARDENS/TAM SIN WESTHORPE

course, but I've met students whose knowledge is quite incredible, far more than I ever had. I'm very hopeful for the future of horticulture.'

Now 50, Westhorpe has tried her hand at many different aspects of horticulture, including running a gardening shop. Although it's a career she finds hugely rewarding, it's not always well paid. 'People always say to me: "My goodness, Tamsin, you've tried everything", but it's been a case of needing to earn money. It's a challenge if you want to be a hands-on gardener.'

One of the skills she picked up when working for the parks department was lawn-keeping. This is a real art form, particularly when it comes to bowling greens, as they need to be kept literally pitch perfect.

'People underestimate how much time greenkeepers spend perfecting sports pitches. If I'm walking through a park and there are people trampling all over the cricket pitch it drives me mad. A lot of people now think we should be lifting our lawns and replacing them with wildflower meadows, but I'm not one of them. I think a lawn cools an environment and provides a place for children to run around. I'm totally anti artificial turf. If I see it I want to cry.'

Westhorpe says that creating a wildflower meadow is not as simple as leaving your lawn unmown. 'If people leave their grass alone for too long it's going to be a hell of a job when they try and cut it. They get themselves stuck because they can't get a mower through it. My passion for lawns is about what they give to children: running around barefoot on the grass is just heavenly.'

When her old gardening tutor became editor of the now defunct magazine *The Gardener*, he asked Westhorpe if she wanted to be the office junior. This was her entry to the world of magazines. It was not all plain sailing, as that magazine closed and for a while she had to go back to selling interior landscaping over the telephone. However, she eventually worked her way up to become the editor of *The English Garden*.

There is a gardening connection in her family. In 1970 her uncle, Raymond Treasure, inherited a farm at Stockton Bury near Leominster that had been in the family for generations.



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With his partner, Gordon Fenn, he created a four-acre garden at the heart of the farm. As a child, Westhorpe would spend summer holidays with her grandmother there, learning to pickle walnuts and shell peas while sitting on the doorstep.

The design was inspired by the garden at Burford House, near Tenbury Wells, that was created by John Treasure, Raymond's cousin. The late great gardening writer Christopher Lloyd, a friend of Treasure and Fenn, also offered his advice.

Stockton Bury Gardens has now been open to the public for 30 years, and while Raymond and Gordon still

live on the farm, Tamsin and her sister now help them with the garden.

Highlights include a huge monkey puzzle tree on the main lawn, the original Victorian kitchen garden and outbuildings including a dovecote and a medieval barn, which now serves as the café.

'The garden is packed with unusual plants,' says Westhorpe. 'My uncles are great collectors. I wouldn't say it's a "designer garden", it's more of a collection of great plants that enjoy our Herefordshire soil.'

Although the gardens are only open from April to September, winter is the busiest time on the farm, with the cider apple harvest to bring in as well as pruning, potting on, painting, cleaning and tending the plants in the nursery and the garden.

'I'm at my happiest when I'm on my own in the garden with the radio,' says Westhorpe. 'I get a great sense of satisfaction when I can see where I've been. I think that's what I love about gardening: you can see what



you've done. You can say: "Gosh, that's what I achieved today".'

In recent years, as well as becoming an RHS judge, Westhorpe has given more than 100 talks to gardening clubs up and down the country, and has travelled as far as Japan to impart her horticultural knowledge.

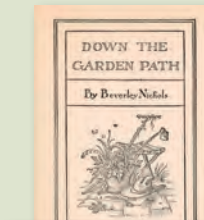
In the future, she has an idea for yet another string to add to her bow. 'I would love to do some theatre, maybe a one-woman gardening show with a comical spin but with practical advice as well. That's a dream that I'm working on. When I do my talks at clubs people say it's so lovely that I'm relaxed about gardening. There's a lot of pressure these days from experts who say you must do this, you must do that. That's not my style, and I would love to encourage people to do it their own way and make it fun.' ■

♦ *Grasping the Nettle: Tales from a Modern Country Gardener* by Tamsin Westhorpe is published by Orphans Publishing, price £14.99. For more information about Stockton Bury Gardens visit stocktonbury.co.uk



GARDENING TALES TO WARM UP A WINTER EVENING

As Tamsin Westhorpe's *Grasping the Nettle* shows, gardening books don't have to be full of pictures to conjure up the joy of kneeling in the borders. Here are some classics that can be read in the comfort of your armchair.



Down the Garden Path

by Beverley Nichols

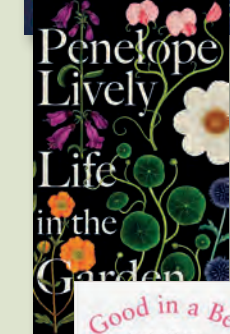
The English writer and playwright's book about the trials of maintaining the garden of his Tudor cottage in Cambridgeshire in the 1930s has remained one of the best-loved gardening books of all time.



Rhapsody in Green

by Charlotte Mendelson

When she was writing this book, the novelist and gardening columnist for *The New Yorker* only had a tiny back garden in north London, but she filled every inch of it with vegetables. Here she writes lovingly about her growing journey.



Life in the Garden

Best known for her novels, Lively interweaves her memories of the gardens she's lived in and tended with insights into artists who have been inspired by gardens, including Virginia Woolf, Claude Monet and P.G. Wodehouse.



Good in a Bed: Garden Writings

by Ursula Buchan

In this compilation of her columns for *The Spectator*, Buchan – the granddaughter of the author of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* – writes with gentle humour about the gardening landscape of the 1980s and 1990s.



Dear Friend and Gardener: Letters on Life and Gardening

by Christopher Lloyd and Beth Chatto

Two of the best-known gardeners of the 20th century were also the greatest of friends, and their correspondence is both touching and packed with wisdom.



Rhubarb Rhubarb: a Correspondence between a Hopeless Gardener and a Hopeful Cook

Garden designer Thompson and her cook friend Patterson decided to help demystify one another's talents in a series of letters. Their exchange of simple gardening tips for easy recipes are collected in this lovely little book.

PICTURES: STOCKTON BURY GARDENS/TAM SIN WESTHORPE