



Marian Boswall at work in her garden in Kent

TREAD LIGHTLY

A leading landscape architect with a busy practice serving well-heeled clients, Marian Boswall confesses she is ‘a hippy at heart’, so when she was asked to write a book about sustainable gardening she jumped at the chance.

‘I think a lot of affluent people are hippies at heart,’ she says. ‘And that’s all coming out now as lots more people are thinking how they’d really like to live, rather than how they think other people want them to live.’

Boswall has teamed up with award-winning photographer Jason Ingram to create a timely book that combines her philosophy of treading lightly on the earth with practical projects and advice for aspiring eco-conscious gardeners.

As a specialist in historic garden landscapes, who has lectured in historic garden conservation at Greenwich University for several

Ciar Byrne talks to designer Marian Boswall about the joys of sustainable gardening

years, an environmentally friendly approach comes naturally to Boswall.

‘The lovely thing about sustainable gardening is that’s how we’ve been working anyway. If you’re working in a historic garden you always re-use what’s there and try to understand what’s gone before. That’s the beginning of sustainability,’ she says.

When Boswall and her team visit a client’s garden for the first time they take off their shoes and ‘listen to the land’. Then they back this up with research into what the garden used to be like.

‘I have a wonderful team, they are happy for me to meditate, to think

about what the land would be like if we weren’t there and about what’s gone before. We always start quite rigorously with research into the history, the topology, the geology, the soils, and the flora and fauna that are already there. We see if there is a local biodiversity action plan and what the target species are.’

There is something quite spiritual about Boswall’s approach to designing landscapes and gardens. She describes how, in January 2020, she went to Guatemala to see her godmother, who is an archaeologist.

‘I just had this epiphany sitting on top of one of those amazing temples at dawn on New Year’s Day. I imagined that the whole of civilisation disappeared because of deforestation, disease and drought, and I thought: “This could happen again.”’

Shortly after coming back to the UK, by then in the grip of covid-19 anxiety, she gave an online TEDx talk

ON THIS EARTH

about how we need to look after ourselves. ‘People tell us to save the planet, but it’s also ourselves we need to worry about,’ she says.

On the positive side, she is delighted that people have taken up gardening in their droves during the pandemic, and that her 12-strong practice has ‘never been busier’. A devotee of Instagram, she loves the way people use the platform to share images of the natural world.

‘I love Instagram for the positive stuff. If there is a beautiful sunrise I know that when I switch on Instagram I’ll see 70 beautiful sunrises – how exciting is that? That is the important news of the day – it doesn’t matter how many masks we’re wearing or vaccinations we’re getting, really it’s the fact that the sun keeps coming up and being beautiful.’

Sustainability is in her genes, born as she was to parents of the ‘make do and mend’ generation.

‘My parents were war babies,’ says Boswall. ‘We would never buy biscuits in my family – my mother would always have made them. We have piles of ironed Christmas wrapping, and I love hand-me-downs and second-hand shops.’

When she moved to Kent 25 years ago the lady she bought her house from told her she’d never used any poisons in the garden, and as a result it was teeming with wildlife.

‘I just thought: “That’s lovely. I’m going to carry on with that”. When the first gardener came along to help me and said, “I’m going to spray the driveway”, I said, “No you’re not, that’s not how we roll”. You have to explain to people it might be a bit more work, but it’s so worth it.’

If she could suggest three simple changes people could make to be more sustainable in their gardens, the first would be: ‘Don’t poison anything’. She qualifies this by adding that it

depends how far you want to go. While it is easy to avoid products actually labelled as poisons, some people might think slug pellets are OK because they are often described as ‘bio-friendly’. ‘They are probably not bio-friendly if a badger eats them,’ she points out.

Her second piece of advice is to stop using any peat. ‘That’s a big deal,’ she says. ‘Our soil is our best asset. It’s the biggest carbon sink. It’s a bit like picking a scab off your skin and expecting it to be fine. It’s not going to be fine. There are some really good alternatives to peat out there.’

Boswall is a passionate advocate for making your own compost, even if it’s just a food waste bin in your kitchen or a wormery on your balcony.

‘You become so aware of what you throw away that it changes your whole mindset. If you’ve got too much food going into your wormery every day, you’re buying too much, and if it >

PICTURES: JASON INGRAM; KATE SPICER



The beautiful layered borders in Boswall's garden and a 'pond in a pot'

doesn't break down quickly enough, then it's interesting to know what the balance of what you're eating is.'

Her third sustainability principle is: 'No plastic'. When buying plants for clients Boswall tries to source recyclable pots or to buy young plants loose from nurseries. She and her team also 'plant small', choosing 9cm pots where possible. This reduces the amount of fossil fuels used in transportation and means the plants do the bulk of their growing in situ, which can lead to healthier specimens.

She also believes consumers should vote with their feet by asking garden centres whether they can recycle pots or return them after use.

In her own garden she follows the principles of forest gardening, beginning with a layer of ground cover, followed by emergent plants and then shrubs and trees.

'You get these lovely layers and you create an ecosystem where everything supports everything else. You get this wonderful whole little biome. I also use companion planting and I plant according to the phases of the Moon – I believe in "biodynamic" planting, and it has great results.

'I am also happily messy. I leave areas for wildlife and don't tidy up too quickly. I'm happy to prune and make things look smart, but I leave lots of seed-heads and things for the wildlife. In my garden I've got slow worms, the occasional adder, voles, mice, all the way up to owls. Sometimes people say, "I don't want any rodents", and I say, "If you don't want rodents you can't have owls". They do kind of go together.'



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Boswall grew up gardening with her granny, who passed no judgement on any mistakes she made, even when she was set to work weeding the cobbles around the old gatehouse of the home where she lived as a child.

'My father really didn't like grape hyacinths, and we used to spend ages getting them out from between the flint cobbles. I remember my mother used to be quite cross because I would take too much earth out with each one, but Granny never cared. She was just so kind. For me, being in a garden is that feeling of being surrounded by love and being with someone who really wants to be with you.'

Then her family moved to Italy, where they could pick tangerines and lemons fresh from the trees. After studying French and Italian at university, she moved to London and became a management consultant, but after having two children and moving to Kent, she retrained in landscape architecture. She now runs the Sustainable Landscape Foundation, with fellow designer Arit Anderson, to recognise best practice in the industry.

In her own work life, she now wants to concentrate mainly on regenerative projects.

'It's wonderful that sustainability is at the top of everyone's minds at the moment, but what we don't want to do is make it a great whipping stick. No one should feel "Oh, I flew abroad on holiday, therefore I can't be a sustainable gardener". Everyone can do a little bit of something.' ■

◆ *Sustainable Garden: Projects, Insight and Advice for the Eco-conscious Gardener* by Marian Boswall, with photographs by Jason Ingram, is published by Frances Lincoln on 15 March, price £18