

The rewards of restraint

In the fairytale grounds of Gresgarth Hall in

Lancashire, our columnist finds there are lessons

of benefit to all gardens, big or small

I have just enjoyed a house – and garden – fantasy. I spent a night alone in one of the most admired English gardens to have been made in the past 40 years. In the house, dinner was laid and waiting, complete with a glass of red wine. I ate it quickly and trustingly because, outside, the evening light was perfect. I then walked alone like a true son of Adam into acres of fine planting, none of which I had planted myself. Dusk eventually fell and the stars appeared: I pretended, insolently, to be lord of all I could see. It was a fairytale without a fairytale ending. I have not been punished for my insolence.

Gingerbread was not on the table nor have I, yet, been turned into a pig.

Gresgarth Hall near Lancaster belongs to the celebrated garden-designer Arabella Lennox-Boyd and her husband Mark. It is regularly open to visitors (arabellalennoxboyd.com), especially on the second Sunday of each month. In October, the many fine trees will be looking especially lovely.

My plan was intrusive but, after lockdown, why not? I suggested that, while driving home from the north of England, I would call in on Arabella and try to find her in her potting shed. She replied, saying she would, alas, be away. Instead I could stay the night in solitary splendour. A bed would be waiting and she hoped I would enjoy the garden for as long as I wished.

What an offer. *‘Quand le chat est parti...’*, as a French friend once said to me while she, playing the mouse, pinched cuttings from an absent

gardener's border. This mouse was on best behaviour. Arabella's landscape gardening takes her all over the world. She has made fine gardens in Spain, in Italy, in France, in America and if I was clueless and could afford her, I would call her in. She was not away on business when she offered me this night. She grew up near Rome, on a high hill in a simple house without curtains. She and Mark had gone to Italy to attend to it for the first time in this inhibited year.

When the Lennox-Boys came to Gresgarth in 1978, it was bleak and daunting, “like Wuthering Heights”, Arabella recalls. It is now like a bit of Eden. A fast-flowing little river, the Artle Beck, runs down one side of the main garden. Roses twine round a viewing platform the Lennox-Boys built above it. On the far side magnolias with names like Star Wars have become big trees, accessible by a formal wooden bridge. The bridge looks chic because of a choice that would never have occurred to me. Arabella painted its supporting downposts the shiny shade of scarlet, which others might have inflicted on it all. She painted the rest of it a subtle grey.

At first, she claims, she killed almost every plant she bought. The soil was heavy and often very damp. She was away designing others' gardens but, after two years, learnt a lesson I impress on you all: improve the soil wherever you plant anew. Once she had the hang of it, she set out on a journey which has brought thousands of excellent plants into



(Above) In October, Gresgarth's many fine trees will be looking especially lovely; (below, right) herbaceous borders



Robin Lane Fox
On gardens

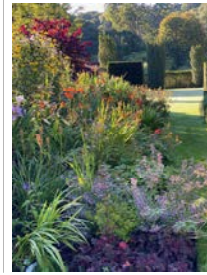
plany. On the far hillside she has planted nearly 7000 shrubs and trees, from *stewartias* to fine *camellias*. Some come from seed she receives through plant collectors and societies. They are a collection but they are not overwhelming. Why?

Though she has a magpie's curiosity, she aims at beauty. She has a keen eye for colour. She has an excellent sense of shape, matching her receding blocks of clipped evergreen yew and other hedging. She also knows when less is more. Her head gardener explained an example to me. An area of plain lawn, hedged by clipped yew, leads from her flowery terraces beside the house to two separate areas of double border, each planted in segregated colours. The plain lawn gives the eye a restful break before the displays of colour begin again. Until recently this lawn was circled with flowering cherries. Arabella then took them out and left only one, realising that they were too much of a good thing.

Like the sorbet which comes after course number four in a grand dinner, the emptied space gives the senses a rest before the show resumes. It takes skill to do less.

This lesson applies especially to bigger gardens, and some of you have them. But gardens as grand as Gresgarth also have lessons for smaller

ones. Rather than take you on my solitary tour, I will pick four of them. In her big walled garden, Arabella grows vegetables in raised beds, filling them with first-class rich soil and ignoring the underlying Lancashire lumpiness. In courtyards and small gardens, veg growers should do likewise. Rich soil is made up about 18in above ground level. The beds can be supported by planks of wood, 2in thick, by former railway sleepers or by Arabella's neat answer – low panels of willow, woven like wattle hurdles to make an edging.



Into the foreground of the main garden, she led a lake fed from the Artle Beck. It curves forwards like a relaxed comma. Below the steps that overlook it, the planting is white-flowered and silvery-leaved. A summer winner is a small-flowered white daisy, listed as *Erigeron* (or *Aster*) annuus. I ran it back to source at Dove Cottage nursery in Halifax, which had first seen it in an informally planted garden in the Netherlands. In a big group at Gresgarth, it flowers from June to autumn and makes a cloud of delicate flower. The better the soil the bigger and taller the plant, but it is very easy to grow.

I much admired her white-flowered hydrangeas, not heavy mopheads but lacecaps and ones with points of flower. She is up with the best here, choosing

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Hydrangea paniculata Vanille Fraise and Pinky Winky and a fine serrated *Miyama-yae-murasaki*. They are best in light shade. In properly prepared soil, they are as good in a city garden. They have cool class in late summer.

In her lilac, purple and pink borders, a star turn in August is a tall phlox called *arendsii* x *Luc's Lilac*. Up to 5ft high in good damp soil, it flowers abundantly but is seldom seen. It is a winner in the back rows of a themed colour planting that does not become too dry. Its companions are lilac pink monardas and veronicas. Lovely, I thought, until the gardener told me Arabella is dissatisfied and intends to replant the very bit I had been admiring. She sees what I do not.

During lockdown, the *chat* was not *parti*: she was out working daily in the garden she cannot leave alone. She says she would not advise others to garden on such a scale, and yet we others covet what we see.

When I returned to my own flowery profusion, a climbing rose pricked my finger. As if in a fairytale, I fell visually asleep again among my mundane plantings and the memory of Gresgarth's beauty passed from my eyes. I will wake up, perhaps when social distancing stops and kissing resumes. I will then try to replay some of what I saw in such privileged isolation.