

GARDENER'S WORLD
*The grounds of Gresgarth Hall have been a
40-year labour of love for designer and
chatelaine the Hon Lady Lennox-Boyd*

ARABELLA LENNOX-BOYD
HAS CREATED GLITTERING
GREEN SPACES FOR PRINCES
AND POP STARS ALIKE.
NOW SHE'S LOOKING BACK
AT THE GREATEST HITS
OF A BLOOMING CAREER

BY LOUISA PARKER BOWLES

THE CONSTANT GARDENER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SIMON UPTON



SPLENDOUR IN THE GRASS
*Arabella Lennox-Boyd in the gardens
 at Gresgarth Hall in Lancashire*

Arabella Lennox-Boyd – softly spoken and supremely elegant – has created 800 gardens across the world for the most glittering of personalities, including Sting, the 6th Duke of Westminster, Queen Paola of Belgium, the Rothschilds and half the titled families of Europe. At 83, the Hon Lady Lennox-Boyd has a formidable, almost regal demeanour that makes you feel you should sit up straight in her presence. ‘There is that connection of the plants, which is like a thread that ties you all together,’ she explains, sitting in her light-filled drawing room in Lancashire, wearing a burgundy cashmere jumper, chunky gold hoops in her ears.

There’s hardly a hint of her native Italian accent as she reminisces about growing up ‘on top of a hill’ near Rome. Born in 1938 into the aristocratic Parisi family, Arabella is a planner and a perfectionist who takes little credit for the triumphs of her 50-year adventure as a landscape designer, insisting that ‘nature is stronger and one has to develop a modesty’. It is a joy to hear her speak about her

career, though ‘career’ doesn’t quite seem the right word. ‘Passion’ doesn’t cut it, either. It’s more like listening to someone talk about the love of their life.

She speaks honestly and precisely about the gardens that have defined her, and while she is famously discreet, her eyes sparkle when she talks about her clients, many of whom she has formed ‘very deep relationships with’. What is it about her signature combination of Italian formality, classical symmetry and scale, mixed with English romanticism, that is so beguiling? To understand the aesthetic that has won over the hearts and horticulture of rock stars, royalty and the really rich, one has to understand a bit about the garden designer herself.

Arabella Parisi grew up in Palazzo Parisi, a 15th-century castle set amid the oak and olive trees in the foothills of the Apennines. To this day, she says, the olive tree ‘is the thing that moves me the most’. English is her first language, thanks to a British nanny who was hidden in the Vatican during the Second World War. She first visited England in 1952, aged 14, with a friend she had met at finishing school in Switzerland. She fell in love

immediately with the romantic feel of the countryside. After the end of her first marriage – to Philippe Lacloue de Vallombreuse, son of Nathalie Volpi, Contessa di Misurata – Arabella returned to London in the 1960s, a young divorcee with a daughter, Dominique, in tow. It was a bold move for a Roman girl who would have been expected to stay married, have babies and possibly pursue a career in law. But she is, by her own admission, ‘rebellious’, and the move paid off.

She wasn’t completely alone – she had friends in London from her days as a debutante – but her real introduction to the green-fingered branches of society came via Nancy Lancaster, an American heiress, gardener and the powerful owner of Colefax & Fowler, whom the late David Hicks called ‘the most influential English gardener since Gertrude Jekyll’. The pair became firm friends, and weekend invitations to the very grandest estates with the very grandest of gardens flooded in. Inspired by what she saw, Arabella began experimenting with plants in her own modest patch in St John’s Wood, going on to design small gardens for friends who spotted her raw talent early on. Her

accountant eventually broke the news that she would have to get a job, and proposed that if she did the designs for the gardens, he would do the physical work. In 1969, she began to study landscape architecture at Thames Polytechnic (now the University of Greenwich). Demand for her services grew, and Arabella Lennox-Boyd Landscape & Architectural Design was founded in 1975. ‘That’s when my life began,’ she says – a life that has been shaped by her work.

The early years were spent whizzing between England and Italy (she still designs the gardens at Palazzo Parisi); jet-setting around the world to meet clients in Spain, France and America; sourcing plants in places as far flung as Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan; or seeking inspiration in China and Japan. The six-time gold-medal winner at Chelsea Flower Show continues to serve as a trustee of Chelsea Physic Garden, and has been awarded every major accolade imaginable in her field – though the one she treasures most is the RHS Veitch Memorial Medal for her work in horticulture. It is not surprising, then, that she has inspired a raft of younger gardeners along the way. Miranda

Brooks, who apprenticed with Arabella and went on to become Anna Wintour’s landscape designer as well as a contributing editor at American *Vogue*, has described Arabella’s gardens as ‘orgasmic’.

As she threw herself into her career, love came along, too. In 1974, she married Old Etonian the Hon Sir Mark Lennox-Boyd, a Conservative politician, confidant of Margaret Thatcher and sundial expert. A new chapter began. In 1979, Mark won the parliamentary seat of Morecambe and Lonsdale, and the couple moved into Gresgarth Hall in Lancashire, welcoming their daughter, Patricia, in 1980. ‘A friend of mine told me, “There is this wonderful place in a fantastic valley. The house is a pig of a house, but it’s a beautiful position,”’ laughs Arabella. The house was originally ‘like *Wuthering Heights*’ and had been rented for a long time, its garden largely neglected. It would need to be overhauled. Many would have been daunted at such a project, but it is here, in the once-overgrown and ‘claustrophobic’ garden, that Arabella’s greatest oeuvre can be admired. Today the garden at Gresgarth is enchanting – a worthy tribute to a lifetime of experimentation,

dedication and patience. Again, though, Arabella takes little credit, insisting: ‘I haven’t created that. I think the place is magical. I’ve added colour and I’ve added plants. Most of what you see I designed, but I think the place is pretty fantastic.’

Sitting on squishy sofas in the drawing room of the once-‘gloomy’ house, enveloped by plump cushions and peeking past the weighty Italian-silk curtains to the sun-dappled terraces beyond, it is hard to imagine the garden as anything other than the haven it is today. Spanning roughly 10 acres, it is set in a steep-sided valley cut by Artle Beck, a tributary of the River Lune. Not constrained by the usual precision and planting plans required by clients, Arabella has ensured the garden at Gresgarth has continued to evolve over decades – and the lockdowns of the past year have provided an unusual opportunity for her to enjoy more time in it. ‘I’ve been here for 40 years, but before, Mark was an MP, so it was backwards and forwards. Then I got more and more busy, so this backwards and forwards carried ▷



*The house and gardens at Gresgarth Hall, which looked ‘like *Wuthering Heights*’ when Arabella took up residence*

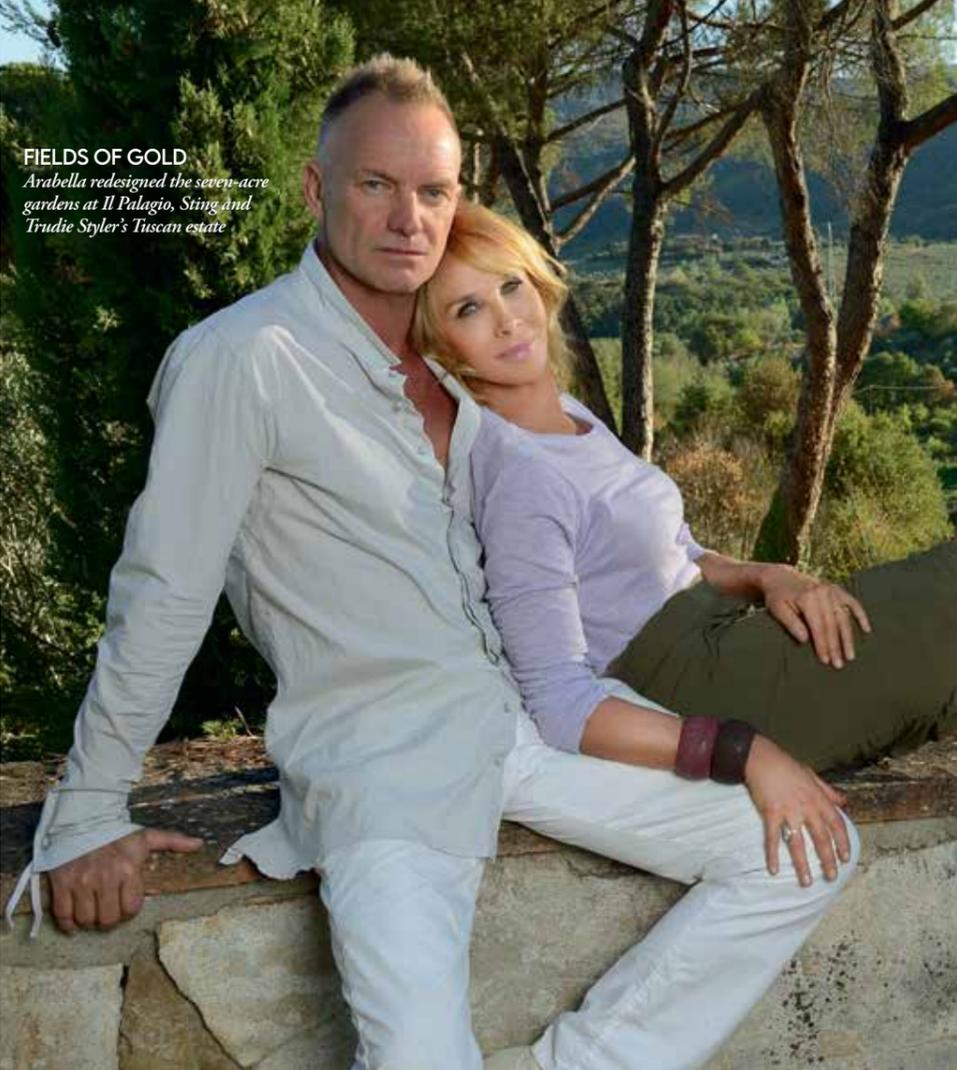
on. I realise now I never saw the development of a flowering tree peony, for example. I realise how much I have missed, how much a garden needs to have a person there.'

Her style is woven throughout – the formal terraces and garden rooms around the house link to wilder areas beyond, including an arboretum with rare species of trees and shrubs, many of which are hardly ever seen in the UK. There's a pretty gazebo, added after a friend asked where the Lennox-Boys watched birds from and, when they looked blank, suggested a spot by the river. 'It's interesting how ideas come when you talk to friends,' muses Arabella. The lake, surrounded by tall grasses, is crucial to the design, bouncing light and adding visual drama. Beautiful herbaceous borders brim with colourful flowers – roses and hostas appear often – and pebble mosaics by Maggy Howarth are peppered throughout.

The potting shed is the nerve centre of the whole operation. It's where she first nurtures the seeds she collects – tree peonies from Italy, an oak seedling found in Japan, and rare species of magnolia, camellia and cornus. The arboretum has been planted with over 7,000 trees and shrubs, with more propagated every year.

Arabella shows little sign of slowing down, and is evolving with the times. 'I get bored very easily with plants. I'm always looking around. Funnily enough, Instagram is incredibly interesting. It's really very good.' She keeps in close contact with her 'planty friends', noting: 'I have a lot of really, really good friends in the plant world. If you're in the plant world, you always know about things.' She has just completed her fourth book, *Gardens in My Life*, a visual tour of 16 of her greatest gardens, chosen in part because they are the ones 'I've enjoyed doing and have meant something to me', alongside snippets of her wisdom gleaned over five decades. It's a book that will no doubt adorn the coffee tables in the grand houses she was first inspired by when she arrived in London. And it's a testament to an extraordinarily creative and blooming life. □

Gardens in My Life is published on 29 April (Head of Zeus, £40)



FIELDS OF GOLD
Arabella redesigned the seven-acre gardens at Il Palagio, Sting and Trudie Styler's Tuscan estate



Sunrise over the parterre at Il Palagio

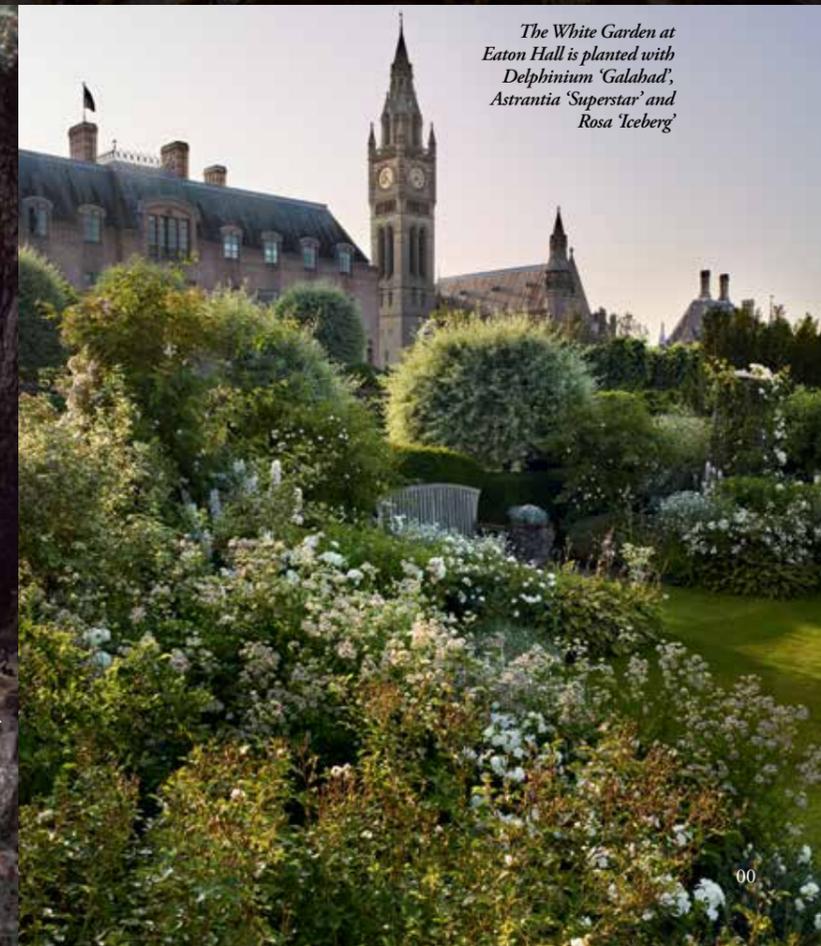


THE APENNINE WAY
In the gardens of Palazzo Parisi, Paeonia rockii and roses are planted among Lavandula angustifolia 'Verde', Caryopteris x clandonensis 'Kew Blue' and Ampelodesmos mauritanica

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OLD EATONIAN
Arabella advised the late Duke of Westminster on the design of the garden at Eaton Hall, in Cheshire, for more than 30 years



The White Garden at Eaton Hall is planted with Delphinium 'Galabad', Astrantia 'Superstar' and Rosa 'Iceberg'