

LET'S HEAR IT FROM ARABELLA LENNOX-BOYD



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ARABELLA LENNOX-BOYD BEGAN HER CAREER IN 1969. OVER THE PAST 52 YEARS, THE INDUSTRY HAS CHANGED SIGNIFICANTLY. WE SPEAK TO HER ABOUT HOW, AS SHE TOUCHES UPON SOME OF HER CAREER HIGHLIGHTS.

In 1969, Arabella Lennox-Boyd began her journey as a landscape architect at Thames Polytechnic (now the University of Greenwich). It's a career that has seen her design over 800 gardens, win six Chelsea Flower Show Gold medals, be awarded the RHS Veitch Memorial Medal for her outstanding work in horticulture and write four books.

Arabella began her remarkable career working on smaller gardens, but even today there is no project too small. "Small London gardens can be the most challenging of all. They have to look good all year, providing interest, beauty, scent and attracting wildlife. It's a lot to work out in a very small space."

It's safe to say that no small space is more work than a Chelsea Flower Show Garden. Arabella has designed seven of them throughout her career, the first in 1979 and the most recent in 2008. Her very first garden was a garden for bees with a formal style and back then, Chelsea was a very different affair. "You didn't think too much about medals in those days. There was no pressure," explains Arabella. "It was more about having a good idea, a message, and showing what can be achieved with plants. The brief nowadays is quite stringent. Designers have to be careful to follow the brief and create what they said they would. It's a good way of judging a garden, but it can be restraining."

"There's so much information out there about plant combinations now, you don't necessarily need Chelsea to learn about that. But these gardens can send messages. The year before last The Forestry Commission created The Resilience Garden which explored the challenges facing our forests in the future. I really liked that." ▶

1 Lake edge with *Prunus 'Tai-haku'*, *Cercidiphyllum japonicum f. pendulum* and *Iris pseudacorus variegata*

2 Arabella among a large clump of *Rodgersia aesculifolia*
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Back when Arabella first started designing Chelsea gardens, it was a cheaper affair, and, though this is changing, the sometimes unsustainable nature of Chelsea doesn't sit right with her, "What I don't find attractive about Chelsea is the cost of everything – it's distasteful. Especially as the supplies used often go to waste. Things have changed, thankfully, but 12 or 15 years ago I was often refused when asked if I could sell on or even buy parts of my gardens."

This passion for sustainability and the environment seems to have been with Arabella from the beginning. When she was just starting out as a landscape architect, Arabella worked on what was perhaps the first ever rewilding project.

Of course, back in the mid-1970's the term 'rewilding' wasn't in use, but its principles certainly were. In Italy, a farming estate south of Rome was given back to nature and transformed into a bird park in collaboration with World Wildlife Fund (WWF). Due to her connection with the owner of the property attached to the major rewilding site, Arabella was asked to undertake the landscaping and did so with pleasure: "It was an enormous thing for someone starting their career."

These days, Arabella has curated gardens all over the world; she's crafted a Tuscan paradise bursting full of colour and texture for Sting and Trudie Styler, developed the first large landscape for the Maggie's Cancer Caring Charity in Dundee, built a contemporary roof garden in Hong Kong, and fashioned a garden for Queen Paola of Belgium, but, when asked what her career highlight has been, Arabella doesn't hesitate: "The projects where I feel I've given the client something that's going to take away their worries and preoccupations."

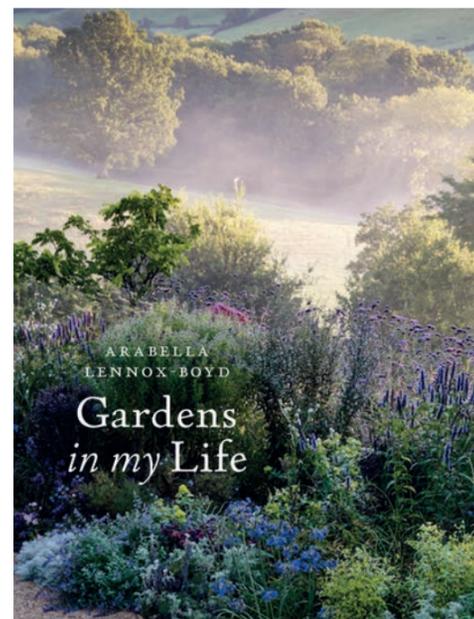
And, when speaking of her favourite project, she tells us: "the ones where I have felt the client has become involved, where the relationship carries on through the garden and a shared love of nature and design."

In her most recent book, *Gardens in My Life*, Arabella reflects on some of the gardens which have had a profound impact on her. We learn of the inspirations which led to the final design, while learning from Arabella's wealth of planting knowledge. "Writing the book was

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perfect for COVID-19 because I had plenty of time to write it," explains Arabella. "It was really fun and really hard work, but I hugely enjoyed the challenge."

The gardens featured in the book include Palazzo Parisi in Italy, Dauenburg in Germany and Le Bristol in France. These are just a selection of the plethora of international projects Arabella has in her repertoire and each is a testament to how she is able to adapt her style to suit varying tastes and climates. She does this first and foremost by speaking to the local botanic garden: "You can make assumptions about a country and its plants, but it's never the reality," explains Arabella. "Talking to the local horticulturalists is so important to



GARDENS IN MY LIFE BY ARABELLA LENNOX-BOYD IS PUBLISHED BY HEAD OF ZEUS, OUT NOW IN HARDBACK. RRP: £40



learn about a country's microclimate and which plants thrive best."

It's Arabella's country home in north Lancashire, Gresgarth Hall, which truly showcases her lifetime's work. "Gresgarth Hall is a constant revolution. There's always something I want to add to it, which is inevitable – I think my husband thinks I've gone too far! Nature is very powerful, so we're constantly fighting against weeds and the river breaking its banks and trees falling. It's a constant evolution; a constant interest and joy."

Nestled in a valley, the site is 12 acres of terraces, a lake, a wild garden, kitchen garden, herbaceous borders and a serpentine walk. Predominant pinks, purples and silver-whites

come from plants such as roses and clematis. A recently planted arboretum is home to a collection of *Cassia fistula*, a family of plants which Arabella particularly enjoys working with.

Though Arabella loves travelling, music, and cooking, her work, and in particular, plants, are her biggest hobby. Choosing a favourite plant to work with is impossible, though, as it changes throughout the year. In the spring, Arabella loves cherry trees and hellebores, as the months pass peonies seize her attention, and then roses.

Come August, Arabella is dreaming of an Italian garden with no flowers. Soon, green turns to orange, yellow and red as autumn colours take over and Arabella can appreciate the form of plants, "a garden in winter is a beautiful thing,

with topiary hedges and well-trained plants," Arabella tells us, "the naked shape of a plant is fascinating. I'm always very careful of how I prune trees and try and give them a shape – I observe what the tree is telling me."

This is a technique which extends to Arabella's garden design, where every project is unique to place: "I'm not interested in somebody saying that 'this must be an Arabella Lennox-Boyd garden' at all." ▶

3 Herbaceous border with clipped *Prunus lusitanica*, *Monarda* 'Thundercloud', *Phlox* 'Franz Schubert' rising through *Achillea* 'Summerwine' and *Agapanthus* 'Midnight'

4 The back of Gresgarth Hall with topiary yew buttresses, tumbling roses and *Salix lanata*



"I want people to feel that I have followed the natural landscape and that they feel they are where they are, not in an installation."

Arabella takes careful consideration of who the garden is for, where it's located and how she can incorporate nature naturally, by taking in the views and opening up the landscape. Going with the landscape also means not changing soil types to suit certain planting palettes but changing the planting to suit the soil.

This process has served Arabella well for 52 years. But, as you can imagine, those years have seen its fair share of changes to the industry. Back in Arabella's early days, planting a full-grown tree or hedge would have been completely out of the question, "In one of the first gardens I did, I planted hedges which were just over 30cm tall, now they plant them at 2m." This may have been in part due to the absence of JCBs, which were just beginning to be rolled out.

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Landscape contractors also weren't around – only on large city projects – with the job falling to local gardeners instead. "The industry has moved on leaps and bounds," explains Arabella, "design is so much better, you have access to a larger variety of plants, wonderful supplies, and skilled contractors."

Perhaps one of the most significant of all these changes came last year, as the public, more than they ever had before, began to wake up to the wonders of outdoor spaces. Arabella didn't stop working during the pandemic, with the luxury of working outside in client's gardens. Throughout this time, she found her clients engaged with the projects on a whole new level, with many taking up a newfound interest in growing their own food: "A lot of my clients have realised what being in the countryside means and what it can give you. I'm finding more of them are interested in vegetable patches, fruit trees for the birds, and nature in general."

Arabella has even been able to appreciate her own garden more too, finding the extra time she's been able to spend there invaluable for learning and hopes that with the discovery of Zoom and Teams, she can do more of the same from now on.

Arabella may have a huge career behind her, but she is nowhere near done yet. "I'll always love my work" Arabella tells us, "It's a fantastic career that I have, and I have been incredibly lucky because it has so many different aspects. It's brought me so much happiness and interest."



- 5 Front of Gresgarth Hall with *Cordalaria richardii* rising out of *Rodgersia aesculifolia*, species roses and *Cercidiphyllum japonicum*
- 6 Four *Magnolia x loebneri* 'Merrill' are planted around a central cobbled rondel

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