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A woman's touch

Narborough Hall, Narborough, Norfolk

Leslie Geddes-Brown finds an agreeable blend of romance, politics and homegrown food in a recently reinvigorated Norfolk garden

Photographs by Clive Nichols

DR JOANNE MERRISON sees working her 80-acre grounds as 'an act of resistance against sterility, destruction, conflict. For me, gardening is supporting the good side of life. There will always be people who ask "What's the point? Why go to all that effort?". My gardening takes a stand against that'.

This is gardening as politics. Dr Merrison went to the University of Sussex, where she was 'a great protestor for nuclear disarmament and women's rights'. So, although Narborough's gardens are beautiful, there is a subtext to them.

When she moved there, only eight years ago, 'there was no garden and no flowers,

Above Cranesbill geraniums, nepeta and Iris sibirica are gathered into a harmony of colours and textures. Left Topiaries and climbers lend protective cover to the Hall

just a lawn and car park. The walled garden had been closed for 20 years, and was sprayed every year with Roundup. There was just a fruit cage left, so we started to replant with local varieties'. The apple trees have particular meaning: 'We bought them on big rootstocks so that, when they grow, they will cradle a child.'

The walled garden takes up just under an acre, and its enormous fruit cage, now rescued from neglect, is full of produce. The remnant of an old box hedge is recovering from severe pruning, and new box hedges have been planted around other beds. The old greenhouse still has its heated platform, like a huge *bain marie*, and that indefinable smell of soil and fertility characteristic of venerable glasshouses.

According to *The Apple Source Book* (by Common Ground's Sue Clifford and Angela King with Philippa Davenport),

Norfolk is fortunate among English counties in having many local apple varieties—only slightly fewer than Kent or Somerset. Bob Lever, the head gardener, tells me the apple trees in the Narborough walled garden include Captain Palmer, originally grown from a seedling found in 1900 at Gissing (no one seems to know who the captain was, but it's thought he fought in the First World War); Lynn's Pippin from Wisbech; Red Ellison, a sport of Ellison's Orange, found in 1948 at Walpole St Peter; and St Magdalen, found growing at Wigenhall St Mary, near Downham Market in 1890.

In the same area, there are sloes, nuts and rosehips forming a bower, lemon verbena, an asparagus bed and, in the greenhouse, rows of lemongrass used to flavour custard. Indeed, Dr Merrison feeds the visitors who come to Narborough's cafe with whatever is growing in the garden.



Above and facing page The luxuriant borders are ever so slightly subversive, being planted with herbs, wildflowers and fruits as well as the more usual lupins and poppies. *Right* *Berberis thunbergii* *Atropurpurea* is joined by Russell lupins in deep red tones

Today (late September), there is red-onion tart with goat's cheese, roast beetroot and pumpkins in balsamic vinegar with sage, green beans in bowls with butter and salt, potato salad with dill, late raspberries with chocolate cake, pear crumble and baked apples. She passes me a handful of said raspberries (Autumn Bliss, she thinks) direct from the canes—and delicious they are, too.

Dr Merrison cooks, and runs the cafe, declaring: 'Why make a garden if not to share it? It's like writing a book and never publishing it. A garden is part of society and should be, as it's owned by everybody.' A Romantic view, perhaps, but she has a PhD in Coleridge and did a post-doctoral thesis at Girton College, Cambridge, so she has impeccable Romantic credentials.

But she also comes from good farming stock. Her Lincolnshire family was made up of small farmers, and her father was a herdsman, so she knows her soil, which, at Narborough, is chalk, with peat towards the back (it's free-draining at the front). The River Nar runs through the land, and is an SSSI, where there are water voles and brown trout in the perfectly clear water.

There's a lake, too, which in the past

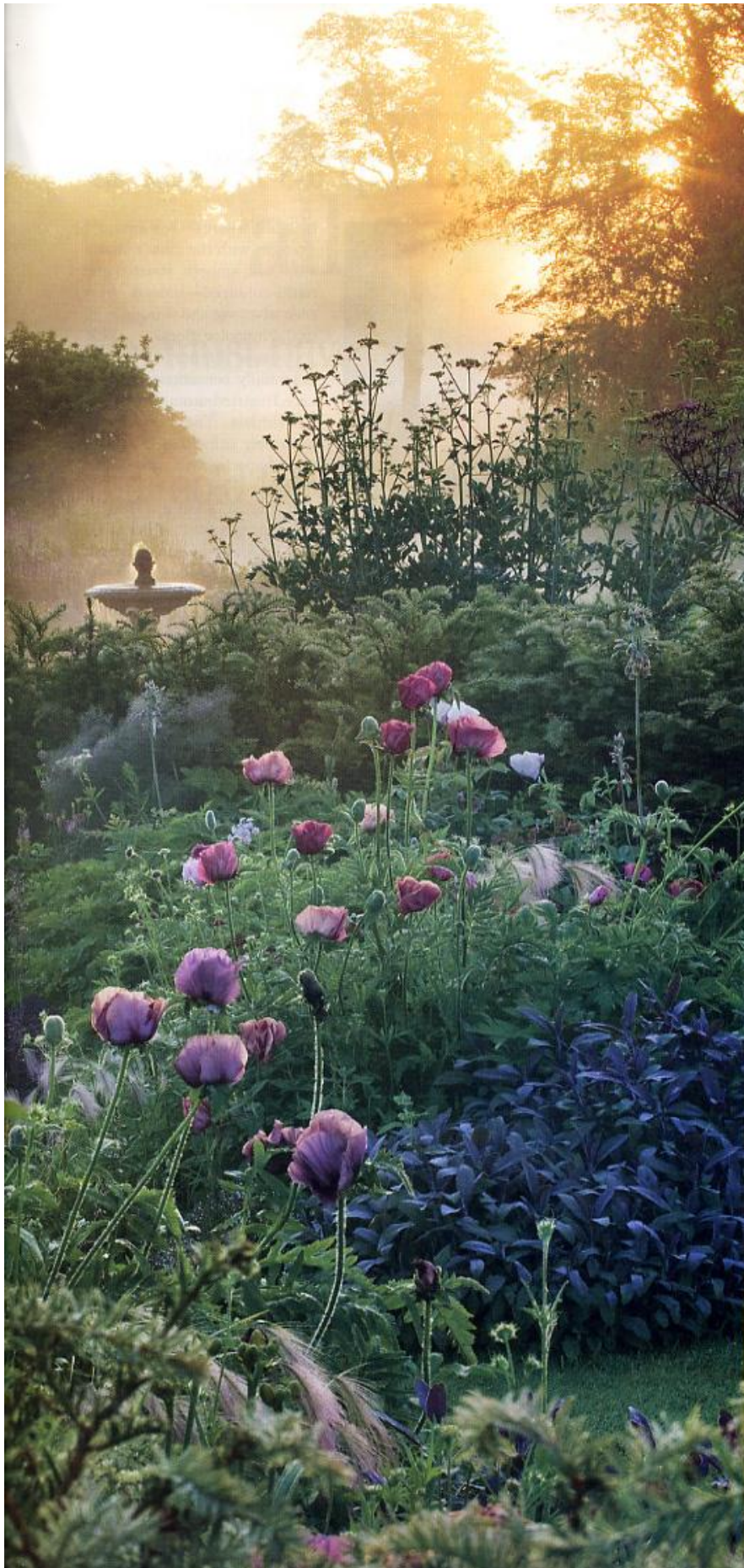
may have been a moat or part of one. It looks impressively large, with a small island linked by a bridge, but there's an element of false perspective here, as it's easier to walk round than it looks. When the sun is sinking, a golden glow is cast over the water. Alongside it is a wooden hut, created by the owners to appreciate the view—and to encourage insects so its top is thatched with Norfolk reeds and the open windows have hazel twigs inserted to look like diamond panes, as there is no glass.

The formal gardens by the house have a hint of subversion about them. On the house's front, the plants have been chosen to complement the old, buff brick. The house dates from about 1587 with later portions (and different bricks) and there's an 18th-century addition. There's a wisteria; roses include Mermaid (the youngest of Dr Merrison's three children is named after this) and vigorous Paul's Himalayan Musk, along with redcurrants and wild blackberries because, as she points out: 'In visual terms, fruits are beautiful in a garden.' What was once the parking area is rapidly becoming a wild garden, of flowers self-sown in the gravel 'so I can sit with all the bumblebees and insects'. The luxuri-



ant herbaceous borders have the same hint of subversion, being planted with herbs, wild flowers and fruits among the more usual lupins and poppies, yet the colour schemes are tightly controlled in the purple, pink and soft blue spectrum.

'The cottage garden is more my tradition,' she says, looking at the imposing façade of the hall. 'Any land is deemed valuable. My family was all farmers—we had milk straight from the cows. In



our village, nothing had changed since Victorian times, it was static. My grandad poached. My grandma cooked—we had game and eels, we raised our own chickens.' But she did study Romanticism. 'My inspiration is the garden at Ninfa in Italy. It's tremendously evocative. It's not totally cultivated. It's like the Secret Garden—it has obviously been created by someone who loved it. Part of my plan here is to let people discover this garden—the cedars, the bulbs still flowering. I like to think that if this garden fell into neglect someone would lift up the dead leaves and see the bulbs coming up.'

‘She has impeccable Romantic credentials, but she also comes from good farming stock’

There is a strong element of wildness here. Even the formal beds are allowed to self-sow with wonderful colour effects, misty blues and purples, feathery grasses to catch the early morning light. A fountain is carefully placed so the sun's rays catch the falling water and light up the sides of two flanking curved boxes in pots. And in the nearly white garden, some of Dr Merrison's favourite plants are ox-eye daisies and cow parsley. Elsewhere, purple sage is teamed with blowsy plum poppies and backed by hedges of dark yew, which have grown astonishingly in eight years. 'I'll swag them later, so you can glimpse the views.'

The whole area—she can't decide how many of the 80 acres qualify as garden and the boundaries are constantly being pushed out—is worked with the help of three gardeners. Each comes for two days a week, which is ideal, as they have different areas of expertise.

Visitors may find willow-weaving workshops, exhibitions and walks for children. There's an early henge beside a huge box wood, where you walk in crackling leaves under the trees' branches. Then there's the food made with ingredients that could not be more local and fresh. Dr Merrison adds that women only own 1% of the world's resources. 'What would it be like if we owned 99%?' she muses.

And it's back to politics in the garden. *Narborough Hall, Narborough, Norfolk (01760 338827; www.narboroughhallgardens.com). Expected opening times in 2012: Easter Sunday, April 8, and Easter Monday, April 9; then Wednesdays and Sundays until September 30 (but closed Sunday, August 26). National Gardens Scheme dates: June 6, 10 and 13*