

A YEAR
IN THE GARDEN

GREEN PEACE

Justine Picardie reflects on how horticulture has taught her forbearance and acceptance, offering her a grounding calm in these difficult times

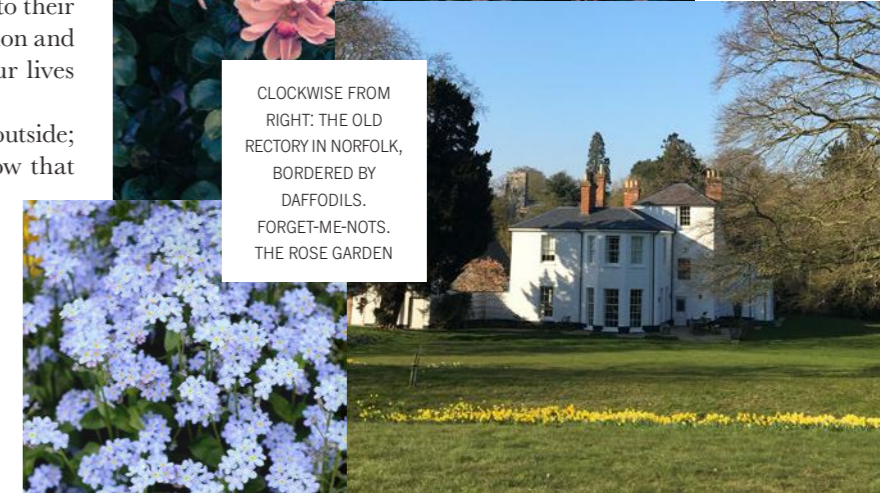
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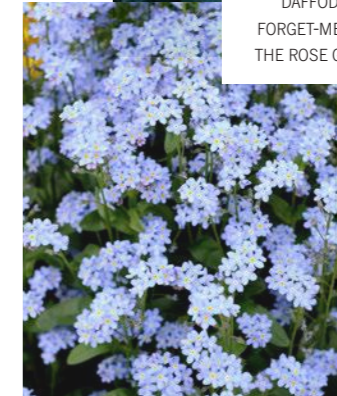
I have enjoyed gardening for as long as I can remember – a legacy from my green-fingered mother – but at this moment, it feels more important than ever before. I'm writing this on an enchantingly beautiful morning in the Norfolk countryside, when the trees are coming into leaf, and the wildflower meadow we planted last autumn is filled with promise. Yet my activities in the garden have a sense of urgency, rather than languorous pleasure, for as I dig and weed and plant and prune, I'm thinking of my two beloved sons, who are suffering from the coronavirus in London. They're grown men – both over six foot tall – but my maternal instinct (like that of a good gardener) is to be with them, tending to their needs, rather than enduring the enforced isolation and social distancing that have become part of our lives in these strange times.

The daylight hours are easier, when I can be outside; for never has it seemed clearer to me than now that gardening is an act of hope in the future. Yesterday, I sowed thousands of Flanders poppy seeds, and imagined how cheering their scarlet petals would be in midsummer. But even as I was looking ahead to this bright prospect, I remained keenly aware of the symbolism of these poppies, as a mark of remembrance for the soldiers who lost their lives during World War I. Our house is an old rectory, with a view across the glebe meadow to the church, where the names of the soldiers from the parish who died in two world wars are engraved on a memorial. So I cannot help but think of the mothers who saw their sons leave this village for the battlefields, and wonder whether they continued to nurture their gardens in this Norfolk village, even when their thoughts were elsewhere.

That sense of continuity is a comfort, too; the rectory dates back to the 17th century, and there is a pair of immense copper beech-trees in the garden that are several hundred years old. I'm looking at them now from my study window, and the sea of daffodils



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: THE OLD RECTORY IN NORFOLK, BORDERED BY DAFFODILS. FORGET-ME-NOTS. THE ROSE GARDEN



that surround them that are rippling in a gentle breeze. Last week, I planted another

copper beech sapling, to replace a tree that had come down in the violent storms in January. As I did so, it was in the knowledge that I would not live to see it grow to the size of its vast companions in the copse; but with any luck, future generations will derive pleasure from its grace in years to come.

Elsewhere in the garden, when I dig down into the earth, I discover fragments from the past: pieces of china, broken terracotta, flints that might have been part of a collapsed wall. More recent history is evident, too: a small, semi-submerged bomb shelter from World War II (this part of East Anglia is close to the coastline, and perhaps the former inhabitants felt threatened by a German invasion, or vulnerable because of nearby



airbases). Now the shelter is covered in emerald-green moss, and our resident pheasant sits atop it in the early morning, surveying his domain and squawking at his territorial rivals.

This, then, is the landscape that surrounds us, where the lines between past, present and future seem a little less distinct than before. Gardening requires willpower: it involves shaping the earth into forms that please us, ruthlessly removing weeds, pruning away dead wood. But it also teaches patience and acceptance. Gales and floods take their toll; within the past two days, a hard overnight frost has wrought havoc on the magnolia-tree. I mourn the damage to its petals, some of them now turning brown, yet I know that this tree is sturdy, its roots running deep into the ground, and perhaps next year the weather will be kinder.

The garden has also been teaching me more than I ever expected: about the joy of self-seeded forget-me-nots that have planted themselves in the new borders, sprinkled merrily between the planned scheme of geraniums, hollyhocks, clematis and roses; and how perennial shrubs that I once dismissed as boring are in fact sources of endless delight. Take the robust duo of *Viburnum tinus* in the border opposite our front door, standing steadfast on either side of a vigorous Cornelian cherry (which I also recommend for its fluffy pale-yellow flowers in February). The viburnums have turned out to be among the most hardworking and undemanding plants in the garden, with glossy evergreen leaves that give shelter for finches in the winter, followed by a long-lasting display of fragrant white blooms emerging from delicate pink-tinged buds. Honey bees from nearby hives are now busy amid the nectar, along with bright comma butterflies, and when the flowers are finished, they will be replaced by berries, providing further food for the birds.

I've learnt another lesson in these days of isolation: one can never be alone in the garden. A bold robin accompanies me throughout my digging, and the plants themselves are inspiring company, the tulips turning their faces to the sun, wild primroses and sweet violet scenting the air around us. Some plants are shy yet rewarding, such as the hellebores whose petals tend to turn downwards, requiring me to stop and take a few moments to look more closely at their beauty.

Time is of the essence in gardening, of course – as in life. We may think we have all the time in the world, but nature does not wait; the seasons turn, the days lengthen, and even after a restless night of anxiety, dawn rises again. Each morning, I go outside, to see how the garden has subtly changed, and whether anything requires my immediate attention. And with every passing day, I grow even more grateful to have it, for



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: THE GARDENS AT TILLYPRONIE IN SCOTLAND. THE WILDFLOWER MEADOW IN FRONT OF THE OLD RECTORY. A COMMA BUTTERFLY AMONG THE VIBURNUM

practical reasons, as well as psychological encouragement. Like everyone else, we are encountering a diminished supply of food, as the local shops struggle to cope with demand. Fortunately, I had already planted a herb garden: sage, tarragon, thyme and mint, all of which are thriving (though the pesky rabbits have eaten all the parsley).

I'm similarly heartened by the blackthorn hedges, with their clouds of white flowers emerging on bare stems before the leaves appear, and the promise of the sloes that will follow later in the year. Last autumn, I made large quantities of quince brandy from the bountiful harvest of a single tree in the garden; though it's

RIGHT: A BASKET OF QUINCES FROM THE GARDEN. BELOW: QUINCE BRANDY IN THE PANTRY. BOTTOM RIGHT: QUEEN MOTHER ROSES AT TILLYPRONIE



GARDENS

few leaves on each spear – wearing thick rubber gloves to protect from the sting, then wash them thoroughly, drop them into a pan of boiling water or stock, and incorporate them as an alternative to spinach in risotto or soup. Once the older nettles have started flowering, however, they are best avoided.)

If gardening is a balancing act between living in the moment, planning for the future and cherishing the past, perhaps this explains why I've also been occupied in re-potting several stalwart pelargoniums that belonged to my parents-in-law and could be close to half a century old. My husband remembers them growing in his childhood home of Hever Castle, and thereafter accompanying the family to Tillypronie. I began to take care of them when I married Philip – it seemed natural to do so, just as it felt right to plant a new rose garden at the estate for him as a wedding present. I hope those roses are still flourishing up there in the Highlands, along with the young trees that we planted for people to enjoy long after we are both gone. It would have been unthinkable to bring the roses and saplings with us to Norfolk; instead, I've planted more of Philip's favourite roses here, including a variety named in honour of the Queen Mother, featuring clusters of delicate pink flowers that should go on blooming well into the autumn.

All in all, it's been an unexpected season in the garden – not quite as I'd planned, yet even more vital than I'd expected. When I'm gardening, I feel less frightened, and grounded, in a good way, as I till and rake the earth, sifting out stones, listening to the birdsong. I'm not offering a silver lining to the dark cloud of this epidemic, but here in the fresh air, I feel that I am discovering a sense of calm that is the best antidote to the contagion of fear. □

not yet ready to drink, I find the sight of the golden fruits in bottles in the pantry very reassuring, and look forward to concocting sloe gin in due course.

All of this has contributed to my plans, which start with extending the blackthorn hedge and interspersing it with native hawthorn and *Rosa rugosa*, the latter for its fragrant flowers and rosehips (a particular favourite of mine, which flourished at Tillypronie, our previous home in Scotland). We already have several productive apple-trees, a tiny rhubarb patch and a mature grapevine in an elderly greenhouse that produces abundant bunches of fruit. Unfortunately, the nearby garden centres are now closed, and it has proved impossible to order vegetable seeds online, which, like loo paper, seem to have disappeared – perhaps as a consequence of the panic-buying that spread as fast as the coronavirus. Instead, I'm experimenting with the young nettles that are springing up in the woodland, given the shortage of broccoli and green vegetables in the nearest supermarket. (You simply pick the freshest tips – the first



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