

Abbotswood House, Buxted

IN by Winston Graham
MY
GARDEN

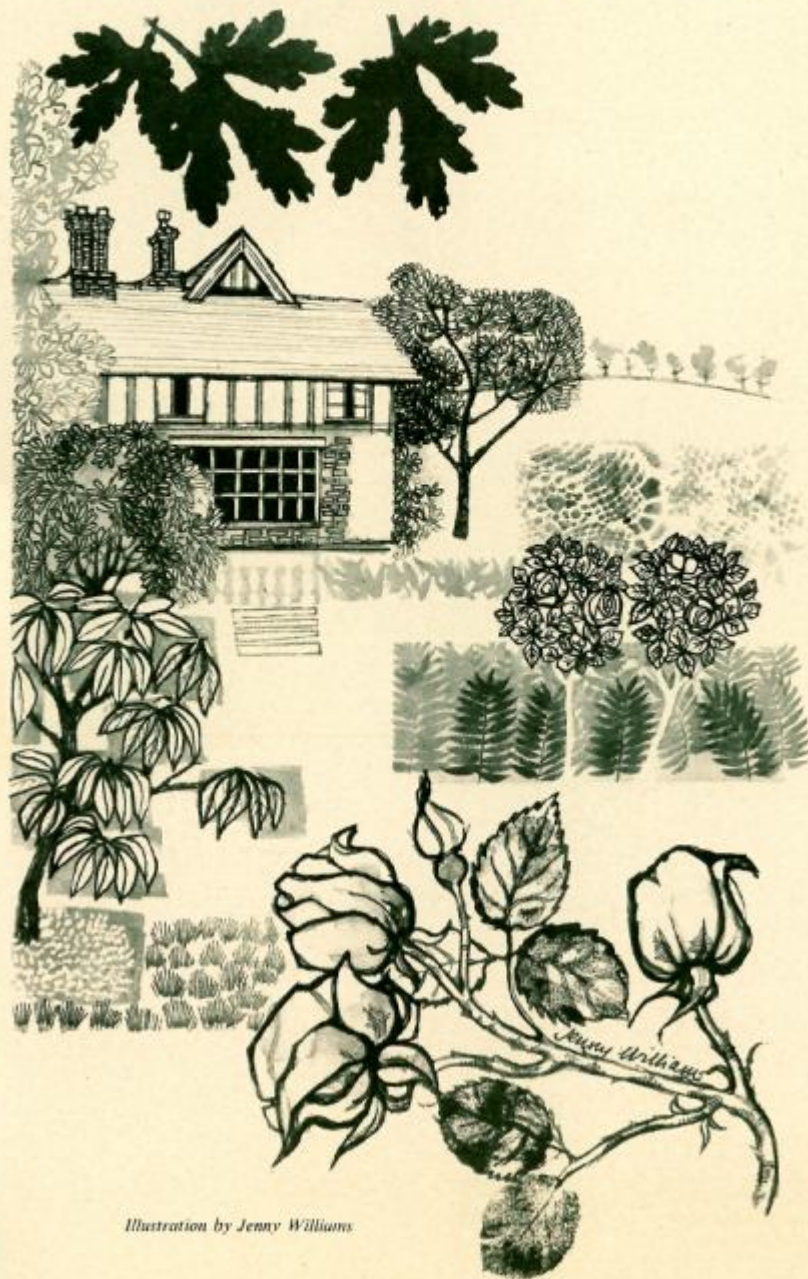


Illustration by Jenny Williams

IN THE autumn of 1961 I bought an old house—largely Edwardian on a smaller Georgian basis—with five acres of garden. The house was in great disrepair and the garden was just discernible among rank weed and overgrown bushes.

It consisted, we discovered by gum-booted exploration, of a meadow of about two acres, a sometime grass tennis court, two orchards of apple and pear trees, three copses of mixed wood, a few flower beds and lawns round the house, a fine chestnut avenue leading to the stables, and, distant, a riot of hazel, bramble, sycamore and bracken falling away to a tiny trickle of water which once had been quite a sizable stream.

Our major preoccupation in the first years was the repair and reconstruction of the house; but ever mindful of the time lag in garden building, we set to work at the earliest moment possible on this enterprise as well.

In the first place I came to the conclusion that landscape gardeners were not for me. On one's own one makes more mistakes and achieves less but the achievement, such as it is, has a personal flavour which can't be obtained the other way.

The meadow had been let to the local farmer but this tenancy ended with the sale and, since it is what one looks out on from most of the windows, I thought it proper to take this over and bring it into the garden. The meadow had been resown with grass the year before but, while the grass was knee deep, the weed known as Fat Hen topped it everywhere by a foot or more and threatened to become the permanent crop over the whole two acres.

I was entirely new both to this sort of problem and to the district but a knowledgeable and friendly hand is never far to seek in Sussex, and I was told that a hormone spray could be used which would cause the weed to overgrow its strength and eventually die. With the autumn already lowering there was no time to waste, so before the ink was dry on the contract I got a man on a tractor to drive about the field puffing out an innocuous looking fine spray; then I went away for a holiday to try to recover from the shock of buying the place.

When I returned the Fat Hen was still there but showed a tendency to droop slightly at its tips as if discouraged; and to my slight unbelief by the spring of '62 nothing was left of the weed but the thick withered stalks, and not a trace of it has shown since anywhere.

GRASS SEED was sown to join the overgrown lawns to the meadow. But this was too much of a temptation for the moles from the surrounding fields, who came and junketed in the lovely soft earth and produced as many pyramids as a Boy Scout jamboree.

Mole traps were laid but did not deter them. Consultation brought an interview with a Mole Man. For eight pounds a year

he said he would not only drive the moles out but keep them out: and he has been as good as his word. I am not sure how. Sometimes he sets traps. Sometimes I see him limping round very early in the morning with a gun. Sometimes I think he talks to the moles and they know their master.

It is one thing to have a meadow of one's own, another to keep it in order. We have one full time gardener but he is occupied with the lawns, the flower beds, the kitchen garden. The solution was to buy a twenty-six-inch self-propelled rotary cutter with a seat attachment. With this I can vibrate round the meadow in about four hours, and in two years thus treated the meadow has become lawn.

WHEN we took possession of the house the rhododendrons had grown so enormous across the wide drive that they had to be slashed back to make way for the furniture vans. Although fairly certain of the identity of the rhododendrons, I *had* to wait until the first spring to be sure. Many turned out to be ponticums, as feared, and I employed a gang of men to cut back and then root out these giant shrubs.

The sloping bank where the ponticums had grown looked horrible: a thin layer of dry soil over yellowish white clay, and ambition failing me, I had many of the sturdier, if rather ordinary, rhododendrons planted in their place, such as Pink Pearl, Madame de Bruin, Goldsworth Yellow. I experimented with *R. griersonianum* and this has flourished and produced its delightful geranium red flowers in profusion each year.

The others too have flourished exceedingly so, thus encouraged, I am gradually moving them to less prominent positions and replacing them with choicer varieties, such as Naomi, Fabia, Mrs. A. T. de la Mare, and Rex.

In the spring of '62, choosing the most sheltered position in the garden, I planted two specimen rhododendrons, a five foot *R. loderi* and an eight foot *R. falconeri*, this last one with the giant brown kid glove underleaves. *R. loderi* has prospered and in '64 produced over a hundred and twenty pale pink flowers. *R. falconeri* exists but is producing ever smaller leaves, which means that it is trying to adapt itself to a position that is too windy in spite of the apparent shelter. So a situation has now been found for it in the recently cleared woodland down by the stream.

I have also put in a number of tree magnolias: *M. mollicomata*, the fine Himalayan type with pink flowers a foot in breadth; *M. tripetala*, the Umbrella Magnolia from America; *M. veitchii*, a rare blush pink, and the more ordinary but equally beautiful *M. soulageana nigra*.

Against the walls of the house we have planted choice clematis and camellias together and these already make a fine show. In Cornwall I grew a Climbing Peace rose which was covered every year

in the most enormous roses; but wishing to plant a new one here, I found that the best rose growers had ceased to stock it. Some said it grew rampant and never flowered, others that it took five years to flower and people would not wait that long. Eventually I found one plant at a small nurseryman and put it in. By its third year it was fifteen feet high and smothered in fine flowers.

I had some failures in planning new rose beds, which I should have known enough to avoid. I ordered eight of each variety that took my fancy and planted them in long beds of twenty-four to each bed. It never looked right for a moment. Apart from the different colours in each bed, the varieties grew at different heights and flowered at different times. After the first year a drastic reorganisation and reshaping put twelve of the same variety in each of a number of smaller and better proportioned beds.

One plant we inherited was a fine *Magnolia grandiflora* growing eighteen feet up a wall of the house. The previous owner told us that it had been there for twenty years and had never flowered. I sought advice from every expert I knew, and received different replies from each one of them.

Selective thinning out to allow a few shoots to ripen: that was tried the first year. Drastic over-all pruning, cutting hard back to spurs of the old wood: that was tried the second. Root pruning, cutting away all but the tap root: I tried that the next year. The plant is still a mass of magnificent green leaves. Will someone please help?

The tennis court was another problem not easy of solution, being knee deep in grass and weed, lumpy with the charrings of old bonfires, and swept by the overhanging branches of beech, poplar and sweet chestnut. We decided to lay down a hard court. Then it was found, as it nearly always is found, that, over all, grass courts are smaller than hard, so a large cubic yardage of bank had to be dug out by an excavator and carried away. The same machine had to push the entire surface off the court so that the new court could be built on a surface free of soil and weed.

As tree lovers, it hurt us very much to lose seven splendid trees; but now we wish we had cut down fourteen. Not only do leaves fall on the court in the autumn—which we expected—but trees are always dropping something throughout the year, seeds, or twigs or small branches, and more often than not the court has to be lightly brushed before use.

When we came there was no kitchen garden, so we made one about a hundred yards from the house and screened from it by trees. The ground was magnificent and so were our vegetables. The pigeons, the birds, the squirrels and the field mice adored them. We chose a cage of fine mesh wire-netting supported on thin iron posts

sunk in concrete, with wire strands running from post to post to support the top wire-netting.

When it was up we discovered that the iron posts, while perfectly strong had too much whip at the top of their height and bent slightly towards each other.

The second mistake we made was to choose permanent wire netting fixed over the top. This creates constant drip, collects leaves, and in heavy snow! . . . Fortunately we realised our error in time. The solution is to leave the sides permanent and to stretch a light nylon netting across the top during the summer.

In a garden planted sixty years ago it is a constant astonishment to me that the original owners apparently never had a thought in their heads beyond the commonest trees.

Admittedly the old place is extremely beautiful anyway in the spring: a dozen great cherries make the garden for two weeks look like a wedding; and the hundred odd apple trees—preserved for their blossom, which we cut extravagantly, and not for their fruit, which is an unmitigated nuisance—are splendid to look on with a carpet of daffodils at their feet.

But had imagination been used in 1904 the garden today would be splendid all the year round.

PERSONALLY, I am fascinated by weeping trees—they are always more beautiful than their erect counterparts, and they seldom grow as tall, an advantage for someone loving sun and light. In the first autumn, trying to get everything in as soon as possible, I ordered five golden weeping willows. These, let it be said, are *not* small trees, forty-five feet being not uncommon: and in the haste of that time two of the five were put in in places where they might cut off the sun.

However, these trees can be restricted in height to as little as fifteen feet, without spoiling their shape—indeed, the more they are restricted in height, the broader and fuller they will grow. Another interesting thing about the weeping willow is that it will respond with advantage to hard cutting back. If the early mop gets untidy, cut it all away almost to the main stem and it will produce a better head next year.

But since the first autumn I have been more selective and more careful in my planting. We now have two weeping beeches—already twisted and beautiful; a weeping larch—hard to come by but a deciduous conifer worth having; a pagoda tree (*Sophora japonica pendula*)—like a wisteria; a Young's weeping birch; a weeping mountain ash—very graceful but very delicate; a weeping Camperdown elm; and a weeping cotoneaster.

These, I hope, are the only tears that will be shed in a garden which this year has already shown great returns for the work and care lavished on it.

Next month: John Moore



Abbotswood House, Buxted by Beatrice Parsons (1869-1955)