

## Over the garden wall

Eighteen months ago, members of the Worcestershire Group were asked to volunteer for a unique garden photo project. Within a fortnight, 10 of the group's 90-strong membership came forward – and a major assignment was under way.

After an initial visit in late March or April 2014, up to four more trips were made to each garden over the following nine months. Group Speaker-secretary **Mick Dunstan** travelled more than 1,500 miles, took almost 8,000 photographs and recorded video interviews with all the participants to capture ten very different garden spaces. The project culminated in two separate presentations to the Group this year, its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

In the first of two features – there's more next spring – here's how the project worked, the people he met, what he found, and a few of the pictures...

### Introducing the county

There are around 675 square miles in Worcestershire, which makes it a little bigger than New Delhi and a bit smaller than Tokyo.

The soil, for the most part, is famously clay. Many members are familiar with soil that resembles concrete at times and potters' material at others. Grassy areas often develop inch-wide cracks during the summer.

Rainfall is erratic. A project volunteer has kept weather records for around 10 years. In 2014 the heaviest monthly rainfall was 164mm in January – almost 6½ inches – followed by 156mm in August. Records since 2005 of the average monthly rainfall in Alcester show July is the wettest month with 81mm, followed by May with 79mm, quite a surprise.

The wettest year in the last decade was 2012, with 1040mm of rain – almost 41 inches. The year before, the annual total was less than half that at just 517mm. The wettest day of the last 10 years

was 20 July 2007, with 84mm of rain – a record we hope will never be broken!

Project volunteers had had their gardens for an average of 18 years, a somewhat misleading figure covering a range from just 15 months up to nearly 55 years. Garden size varied too – from the smallest which is less than 210m<sup>2</sup> up to two acres.

The volunteers also had a wide range of horticultural knowledge and experience. One has a degree in horticulture and

a career in the industry behind her, while others had joined the Society in the hope of finding out more about this thing they call gardening.

For all their differences, the gardeners had one thing in common: they all had a great story to tell. It will sound a simple thing to say but we really do have some lovely members with lovely gardens. It's been a genuine pleasure to share opinions and experience how the gardens change across the year.



*Iris 'Thornbird'*

© Mick Dunstan



Elspeth in her current, smallest garden filled with interesting plants.

**Elspeth Napier** lives in Shipston-on-Stour, Warwickshire, with a small front garden and a back garden about twice the size.

**Career in horticulture:**

Elspeth was the first editor of the RHS magazine *The Garden* from the mid-70s until 1989, and she received an honourable mention in the magazine's celebratory 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue in June this year. The launch of the new-look publication – with colour photography, an improved layout, and a broader range of subjects – heralded a new era for the society, says current editor Chris Young. Elspeth is a holder of the Veitch Memorial Medal, awarded for an outstanding contribution to the advancement and improvement of the science and practice of horticulture. She helps to run the NGS in Warwickshire.

**Training:**

Elspeth did a degree in horticulture at Wye College in Kent (now closed) on the same course as Christopher

Lloyd, of Great Dixter fame. She said “I got to know him quite a bit. When I was working at the RHS he wrote articles for me. I went to Great Dixter quite a few times but I wasn't one of his inner circle.” After Wye she worked for a short time at a nursery in Switzerland, but when it was found that she did not have a work permit she had to leave. “Christopher heard about it and came over with his brother. He took us out around alpine meadows for a couple of days. That was really lovely and so kind of him. He was a kind man.”

**Gardens:**

Elspeth has had three gardens in the last 50 years. The first, of four acres, was in Kent and meant almost every weekend was spent mowing and keeping ahead of nature. Her second garden of about quarter of an acre had no grass. Her current garden, which she has had for around five years, is no more than 210m<sup>2</sup>, also has no grass,



One of Elspeth's unusual plants, *Salix nakamura* var. *yezoalpina*.

and is filled with interesting plants. She likes the garden to be different every year and gets rid of plants that are not working.

When she arrived the garden had a patio, a pond and a bit of grass, all of which were removed. “As I've got older, my gardens have got smaller. You can pay more attention to the plants. I can see if they are feeling good or not. I like that. I'm also using annuals more than I did, to help to fill gaps where the bulbs have been. But what I have found is that the clay makes it much harder work. Three or four inches down, it's clay that you could throw a pot with! The rainfall is about the same as Kent – about 63cm a year – and I'd expected more. Kent is dry but it's quite dry here too. What I still really like about gardening is finding out what conditions the plant likes. I like going to gardens where the plants are all happy and I want to make my garden like that.”



Val and John enjoy their garden, and now they enjoy gardening too!



Globe artichokes, *Cynara scolymus*, are good in both the veg patch and the ornamental garden.

**Val and John Turner** live in Cheltenham. Their garden is just over 30m wide and long.

#### **Background:**

Val said “We’re novice gardeners. We have been here for about three years now. We had a garden at our previous house where we lived for 30 years. That was heavy clay, it was on a hill and we had no time to look after it. I suppose you’d call us slash and burn gardeners there, just trying to keep everything under control.”

#### **House move**

John said “Here, we have a garden ready made for us by the previous owner and it’s flat. Now we’re trying to come to grips with having all these flowers and vegetable areas. It was the garden that sold the house to us. I saw the garden and thought ‘Wow, I really love it!’ Two rooms look out over the garden through big windows, which we love. We’re getting more interested – which is why we joined the

Hardy Plant group – but we have so much to learn. We’ve started changing things.”

#### **After three years**

Val said “We’ve got to the point where I’m actually enjoying deciding what to take out of the garden – what I don’t like. We haven’t quite got to what we do like yet! The more I find out, the more I realise the thought that’s gone into the garden we inherited. I’m a bit loath to take too much out. There’s a lot more reading to be done, and then there’s finding out what we really want – our own personal taste.”

#### **Where gardening fits in**

Val is into aspects of crafting in a big way and John’s a big music fan. “But we do like being in the garden, sitting in the garden, drinking wine in the garden. But actual gardening, it’s not our top priority. We’ve become interested in seeing other gardens – Westonbirt in its

winter colours we liked a lot. We’ve been overwhelmed by the amount of information in the Hardy Plant Society and how much knowledge individual members have. It feels a bit like we have gone from Step Zero to Step Eight out of 10 all in one go.”

#### **Changes in the garden**

Val said “The big change this year has been the replacement of the greenhouse, which we are quite excited about. In turn, that led to relaying of the patio area and it feels much more open. We lost a herb garden but now have a nice, large area that we intend to use for pots of flowers and that sort of thing. It’s a nice sitting area. We learned last year that it was quite easy to grow tomatoes, chillies and peppers. We surprised ourselves. We’re looking forward to doing more of that. I’d like to start some perennials off as well.”



Hilda and John have loved their garden since 1961.

**Hilda and John Watts** are among the most senior members of the Group, and their Alcester garden has been more than 50 years in the making. At the back it's 35m long by 15m wide, and there's a small front garden too.

#### Garden history

Hilda and John moved in – as first residents of the street – in 1961. Initially, the garden was half veg and half ornamental, but in 1988 two mature trees – a *Parrotia persica* and a snake bark maple – were taken out. Hilda said “The garden has changed a lot. We joined Hardy Plants in Worcestershire just after it started in 1995, and since then we've become more adventurous. We're in the West Midlands Group as well. At one time, I went through what we call my fuchsia phase but we don't talk about that much now. John propagates a lot.” John said “For us, gardening is part and parcel of our everyday life.

We see it as essential to have a society like the Hardy Plant Society. There's so much to gain from it.”

#### Plant register

The Watts have kept a register going back to the 1990s of plants they have bought (but not all those grown from seed and cuttings). In alphabetical order, their list starts with an abelia bought in 1995, and *Abeliophyllum distichum* bought from the Malvern Flower Show in 1990. The final entry is a *Zauschneria californica* 'Dublin', bought from Red House in 2003. Among the 905 plants are 40 clematis, five kniphofias and two libertias. John explained “It's not a comprehensive list but it's 90 per cent accurate. We think all these plants fit in well – it doesn't appear to be overcrowded...”

#### Weather records

Ten years ago Hilda began recording rainfall and other weather data. “I use a very simple device on a



*Justicia carnea*, the Brazilian Plume Shrub, which John grew from seed.

post in the garden, and the readings have been very interesting. On the wettest day of all (July 20, 2007) there were floods on the Avon here – the rain was so heavy I had to empty the rain gauge twice. The coldest day I've recorded was December 18, 2010, when it was  $-16.7^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

#### Favourite gardens

“We really liked Holebird in Cumbria – which is run by amateurs – and there are several gardens of Worcestershire members that we like a lot but I won't say which!”

#### The future?

John said “I'm already sowing seeds for next year. The bulbs have been planted as well. At the back end of the year I'll prune the clematis. I can't manage quite as much as I used to and Hilda does a lot in the garden, including the shredding. But you have to look at it as though you'll go on forever.”



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Judy and David, and the garden in mid-May, as it comes back to life.

### Judy and David Pollitt

David was secretary of the Worcestershire group for six years and is currently newsletter editor. He and Judy organise the biennial garden-tour holiday for the Group; the latest – their seventh – was to North Yorkshire earlier this year.

#### Their garden

They've lived in the village of Cowsden since 1992 and have around two-thirds of an acre of garden where they deal with a range of distractions including shrews, moles, mice, squirrels and rabbits. "So far" said David "the only thing we haven't got is deer!" In recent months, they've installed what they hope will be a rabbit-proof fence.

#### What it means to them

When they arrived there was just a perimeter hedge, rough-mown grass, one Pershore plum tree and a few daffodils. Now there's an orchard, a veg garden, woodland and shade area, a pond, island beds and iris beds. The garden has views across to the picturesque area known

locally as the Worcestershire Lenches and to the Cotswolds. Judy said "David's out there most days – me not so much now because of my bad back. I do a lot of the greenhouse work." David says the garden's meant more since retirement. "But there was never a master plan. It's just evolved. It does mean a lot now."

#### Iris

Judy, who ran an antiques business specialising in needlework tools and thimbles and had a stall in Portobello Road for 18 years, is a member of the British Iris Society and has a huge, unknown number of the plants in the garden. "I'm very fond of irises and I do have lots, but I've not added to them significantly for a few years. Every now and again, though, I see something and I have to have it. I've also grown Siberian irises from seed for a bit of fun – but it takes quite a while to reach blooming. Irises are very glamorous plants and they're only here for a short while; you can have them all year –

but we're not that mad. We supply iris plants to nearby National Trust's Hanbury Hall for their annual plant sale, which raises money for the garden there, and to a few other places."

#### David's best bit of the garden

"Sometimes, there's a bit of planting, not deliberately done, that catches your eye. Sometimes, those things just work. There's a cotinus at the bottom of the garden with *Helenium* 'Sahin's Early Flowerer' in front, *Helianthus* 'Lemon Queen' to the left, and next to it some dark, extremely tall Michaelmas daisies. The juxtaposition is just perfect!" One of his more exotic plants is a fine *Dracunculus vulgaris*, which at times smells of rotting flesh.

#### The future?

They have no plans to move from Cowsden. David began making a new damp garden last year. "In life, you have to push yourself a bit, otherwise you curl up your toes," he says. "I'm not ready for that yet."



Pippa and Tony replanted the garden when they moved in 14 years ago.

**Pippa and Tony Hilton's** garden in the village of Elmley Castle is around 40m deep by 17m at its widest. They've been there since 2001 – having moved from another, bigger garden just down the road, and previously one in Sutton Coldfield. When they arrived they built a wall along one side of the garden and replanted the rest, retaining little of the original. At the back is a work area – a greenhouse and compost beds alongside a chicken run where araucanas lay blue eggs often sold fresh from the front door. The garden has been open for charity.

#### Tony's role

"Tony's totally in charge of the lawns and the edges. He's not allowed to touch the borders. He's happy with that" said Pippa. His only complaint is when she wants

bigger borders!

#### Priorities

Colour's one of the most important things for Pippa, who's an artist. "I think if you paint, you look at this in greater depth and detail. You are seeing shapes and tones. So, for instance, I couldn't put anything orange in here – except perhaps in the front border if I want something a little startling." In the spring, part of her patch combines 'Spring Green' tulips with a variegated cornus to provide a perfect match of green and cream. "It doesn't always work so well but you have happy accidents. Because I have a lot of things that seed themselves around, it can work beautifully. If it doesn't, I heave it out."

#### The soil

Pippa says "It's great soil. It was a pig farm and



The combination of 'Spring Green' Tulips and *Cornus* delights artist Pippa's eye.

it's free-draining deep loam that does dry out in the dry season but it's beautiful and easy to dig. We're terribly lucky."

#### The detail

Pippa has lots of roses. "My greatest love is old roses," she says. "And I prefer the shady side of the garden – there's more depth of colour there than on the south-facing side. The garden is everything to me. First thing in the morning I'll walk up there – sometimes in my pyjamas – to let the hens out. I will listen and look and sniff. There's always something new happening and I couldn't be without it. I do a certain amount every day. I'll just tweak something or I might put three hours or so aside to do something particular. It takes a lot of my time – but it's enjoyable time." 🌸