

Growing old with my garden

Jean Gomersall

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Fig. 1

and Snowdonia (fig. 1). To the right is Harlech Castle (fig. 2) – it's thought some of its stone was quarried here, leaving a wonderful cliff face. Looking seawards, a natural rockery falls vertically to the main garden area, with a naturally wet area in a rock basin (fig. 3). The boundaries were marked by hills of brambles and scrub.

My first task was to dig out some ancient blackcurrants in a bed right in the middle of the central lawn, and to turf it over to make a green carpet.

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Fig. 2

In my fifties I moved to a new one acre 'garden'. Apart from about 50 fruit trees there were a few ancient (but still beautiful) rhododendrons and a lovely *Magnolia x soulangeana*. So, with my newly discovered enthusiasm for gardening, I had, almost literally, a field day!

The site was incredible. The house overlooks the golf course to Tremadoc Bay and beyond to the Lleyn Peninsula

The sunniest part is to the right side of the lawn, so I stuck in a stick and marked out the largest herb wheel I could fit in. Alongside went a matching spiral path for my lovely herbaceous plants, with a variegated yucca in the centre (fig. 4). The whole area was enclosed with a curved hedge of *Hebe rakaiensis*.

Next the ponds: out came the conifers planted against the cliff, and in went an industrial-strength pond liner. From the main, large pond came two smaller ones – in the fond hope that at some future date there would be a waterfall at the top, with cascades tumbling down.

Gradually the garden developed – a lovely hosta bed in a shaded corner, by another rock face; the hill of brambles cleared to reveal wonderful rivers of rock, then filled with shrubs (fig. 4); the boggy areas planted.

Recently widowed, I needed to earn some money, so the nursery was started behind the house.

In my sixties the garden was maturing nicely. The

Embothrium was visible above various viburnums; the hebe hedge was a rich green ribbon, white in flower in June; the bay in the middle of the herb wheel had to be disciplined to keep it at 2m. And I had discovered geraniums.

The spiral was turned into a spin – concentric circles around the yucca with over 200 species and cultivars of cranesbills and *Erodium*.

I also had to learn the hard lesson that stone walls and slugs and snails go together. Time's too short for de-slugging hostas, but geraniums and ferns are not susceptible. So, a *Dicksonia antartica* stands proudly where the hostas succumbed, surrounded by epimediums, smaller ferns and *Geranium nodosum* – mainly beautiful 'Whiteleaf'.

The climate here is very mild, suiting *Pittosporum*. *P. 'Garnettii'* shot to 6m in five years. Phormiums also do well. The variegated myrtle has turned into a beautiful small tree, with cinnamon bark and arching branches. Nearby is a mimosa, but the striking *Acacia baileyana 'Purpurea'* has a sheltered position near the house, and although it has lost its top occasionally in strong winds it continues to flower delightfully.

And now my seventies. Gone are the precious plants that needed cossetting. Herbs and geraniums continue to



Fig. 3

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Fig. 4

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Fig. 5

thrive, and are complimented by hundreds of self-sown dieramas. Euphorbias, including honey-scented *mellifera*, do well. The tree fern is magnificent. *Camellia* and *Pieris* are becoming trees. The parrotia is starting to dominate, along with the photinia. The 12-inch stick that was *Eucryphia* x *nymansensis* ‘Nymansay’ is now 10m tall, and spectacular in flower. Still no cascade, but the ponds are beautifully clear and looking good. Half the bog garden has been taken over by *Darmera* (thank goodness the gunnera is safely ensconced round the back of the house); *Persicaria* (syn. *Polygonum*) *campanulata*, lesser knotweed, a beautiful thug but easy to get rid of, and many astilbes, together with aconitum and a superb *Viburnum plicatum*, flourish near the water.

Cornus alternifolia ‘Argentea’, the wedding cake tree, is one of the few deciduous plants which looks almost as good naked as clothed – unlike *Cotinus coggygia* Purpureus Group, which is bearable in winter only because of its magnificent summer foliage. Fuchsias are particularly happy: the amazing yellow foliage of *F. magellanica* ‘Alba Aureovariegata’ first displays when the forsythia is in flower, but continues to dazzle until December.

Nothing in the garden is ever fed; no chemicals are used; plants are grown naturally – where they are happy, they are sturdy and healthy.

In three years time I will be 80, and I must face the necessity of leaving my paradise to be nearer my family. So I am now trying to decide which of my 2000 treasures will be retiring with me – and I’m excited at the prospect of being able to grow many slug-prone beauties. 🐌

Jean Gomersall started Llwyn Nursery in Harlech 22 years ago. She has become a great believer in embracing one’s own habitat. “There are so many beautiful plants that will grow in any situation, it seems perverse to always be at war. That said, Llwyn has a wonderful variety of habitats and an amazing microclimate. The upside of accepting slugs and snails as part of my habitat is a large population of thrushes and blackbirds.

“Remember, when you wander around your own garden, newly acquired treasure in hand, don’t say ‘Where shall I put you?’ say ‘Where would you like to be?’”.