

FULFILLING A CHILDHOOD DREAM

Cate Scott

When I was about 6 years old, my parents took me to a garden that had a stumpery. Even now, although I have no idea where that garden was, I can distinctly recall my sense of wonder and total fascination with that magical creation.

Since then my own gardens have come and gone, but none of them seemed appropriate for such a feature until I moved to Hornsea; in fact, the garden was the main reason I bought the house. At a little over a quarter of an acre, it has several areas that are very shady. One particular part - a space that links two parts of the garden together - seemed to me to be an ideal place to start building a stumpery.

It is believed that the first stumpery was created in 1856 at Biddulph Grange in Staffordshire, by the then owner James Bateman and the artist and gardener, Edward William Cooke. This type of shade garden was very popular in Victorian Britain and coincided with the fascination for ferns, which at the time were collected from all over the Empire. Traditionally, the stumpery (as the name suggests) consists of tree stumps pleasingly arranged upside-down or on their sides, to show the root structure. In reality, just about anything can be used, including logs, driftwood, large pieces of bark or even floorboards and railway sleepers. Indeed some modern designs have no stumps at all, and may more accurately be described as 'loggeries'.



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The stumpery at RHS Wisley

A stumpery's design may be enhanced by the addition of boulders and stones, together with other decorative objects of your choice. Planting usually focuses on ferns and other shade lovers, including hosta, hellebore, mosses and lichens, providing a rich environment for wildlife. The traditional stumpery will also utilise vertical planting opportunities, with ferns growing in the nooks and crannies of old tree stumps. A modern example can be seen at Highgrove, which is the largest stumpery in the UK.

To start, I clearly needed at least one sizeable stump to anchor the design; not the easiest thing to source, as it turned out. I tried local tree surgeons, but these days most use a stump grinder to remove unwanted tree stumps and very few are pulled from the earth as they used to be. However, thanks to a well-known auction site, a suitably magnificent specimen was eventually found in May last year. It went into position in June, and thereafter planning commenced at a pace.

Logs were found within my own garden, ferns purchased, hostas added, and existing garden plants divided. There is no 'ideal plan' defining what should be included in a stumpery; it's down to your own taste and interests, as with all gardening. You're free to let your imagination run riot. However, I must confess that by early autumn I did not see my dream coming to life too well. The plants were small and had little impact. I decided to leave it to grow as best it could, collect my thoughts and decide what to do next.

As spring 2020 took off and we had a few days of lovely sunshine, suddenly the whole thing sprang to life; it was starting to look really quite something. Even my usually taciturn Garden Help was impressed and declared, "it looks good" - high praise indeed. So I made a few further refinements and by early May the results were rather pleasing.

However, it was a small area - only about 1.5 m² - and of course that simply wasn't enough! I decided that an adjacent bed on a slightly lower level could be developed, so after clearing a few very overgrown shrubs and climbers, this area is becoming the next edition of the stumpery. It is still very much a work in progress. The lockdown has forced me to find more plants and materials online, so Stumpery Phase II is somewhat more varied but it still retains the essence of the original. I haven't incorporated vertical planting, but that's fine with me. I will only consider that if I can find a suitable stump.



Stumpery Phase II is coming along nicely

Will I expand the stumpery further? I have plans in the pipeline. In the meantime I derive great joy from my labour of love. I will continue to search out more unusual ferns and hostas; I've also added four different epimediums this year, and introduced some moss. A few of the logs and boulders have been coated with yoghurt to encourage growth of more moss and lichen. An array of wildlife makes use of the space. I believe I have seen a stag beetle there - and very exciting it was, too.

I realise stumperies are an unusual obsession, and that some gardeners may view such things as a load of nonsense, but to enthusiasts like me they are places of calm, beauty and yes, even a little magic.

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