



Fig. 1 The design of the garden was determined by the lie of the land beyond it.

Lessons my garden has taught me

Derry Watkins

Twenty years ago we bought a derelict barn surrounded by derelict fields. Making the garden here has taught me many lessons.

To begin with, making a garden from a field was a terrifying prospect. Where to start? Fortunately, unbeknownst to me, I had a brilliant garden designer at hand. I knew my husband, Peter Clegg, was a brilliant architect, but he had never shown any interest in gardens or gardening. When I became completely paralysed with fear at the prospect of making a garden from scratch, he leapt on the idea with gusto. He drew lots of pretty pictures, then went and got his favourite gardening tool – a digger. He and the digger driver made the garden in situ, throwing the drawings to the wind and designing everything in relation to the shape of the fields and the hills around. As a result,

the garden sits comfortably in the landscape (fig. 1). Once Peter's shapes were finished he handed the garden over to me to plant as I liked. He has no interest in plants, does not really see them, so it's a marriage made in heaven.

I had never had much respect for garden designers,

but filling Peter's shapes with plants has been a revelation. Everything looks purposeful, like it was always meant to be. I had always had beautiful plants, now I had a beautiful garden – which is quite a different thing (fig. 2).

Lesson 1: Never argue with the designer.



Fig. 2 I had always had beautiful plants. Now planting the shapes made a beautiful garden.

The garden grew slowly, with no overall plan. Every year we thought we were more or less done, but every year Peter would think of a new idea for the garden. He

is a man who needs a big, physical project, he likes to come home and build stone walls after a day in the office (fig. 3). Bit by bit, year by year, the garden just kept growing,

until I had more garden to look after than I could manage (fig. 4). Eventually I told Peter that if he wanted to make any more garden he had to look after it. He had never done any weeding, watering or planting, so when he decided to make a vegetable garden I was horrified. Vegetable gardening takes more work (and more consistent work) than any other kind. But I remembered not to argue with the designer, and he made himself a beautiful vegetable garden. To my amazement he looks after it as well. He has fallen in love with his vegetables and tends them devotedly.

Lesson 2: You fall in love with only your own plants.



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Fig. 3 It helped that my husband likes building stone walls.



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Fig. 4 The garden just kept growing, until I had more than I could manage.

My best contribution was deciding to weed-kill the field whilst we were transforming the barn into a house. Not very PC, but I Rounded-Up the field three times that first summer so we started the garden with no perennial weeds. As a result, the garden is very easy to maintain. I bless my forethought every day. Pulling out seedlings is a pleasure compared to digging out bindweed, couch grass and ground elder. **Lesson 3: Start with a clean slate.**

What we had not realised when we bought the barn was that the soil is heavy, sticky, yellow clay. Clay is more of a problem for the gardener than for the plants. The plants which like it love it and grow astonishingly fast. Digging the clay over and adding grit and compost was gruelling and we gradually abandoned it. We got rid of the rocks and

weeds, and then covered it in several inches of compost. Fortunately, thanks to the nursery, I have an infinite quantity of compost. I try to garden in the surface layer and gradually the worms incorporate it. Over 20 years the soil has transformed itself.

Mulch is the answer to most problems in the garden, I think. Mulch improves the soil, reduces the number of weeds, and makes it easier to pull the weeds out. The great thing with weeding is always to stay ahead of the weeds. A little hand weeding is a pleasure; rescuing a garden is a punishment. If you can get on top of the garden early in the year it is much easier to stay on top of it. I am not much of a winter gardener but in March I am a fanatic. Weed-free by the end of March and everything else will be easy sailing. **Lesson 4: Stay ahead of the garden.**

Many of my favourite plants are from Mediterranean climates. I knew they were going to hate the clay no matter how well mulched, so I decided to make a gravel garden. We poured 8 inches of gravel on to unimproved clay. It was an experiment: I did not know if it would work. But the plants have loved it. And I have loved it. The plants look wonderful, and it is pretty much the No-Work Garden. It turns out that the only weeds which can self sow in 8 inches of gravel are ash trees, nothing else. To plant something you just open a hole in the gravel, you never see the soil. No weeding, no watering, no feeding, no work! The best experiment I have ever tried (figs 5 & 6).

Lesson 5: Gravel is good.

Gardening on a steep slope has proved very much a two-edged sword.

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Figs 5 & 6 On heavy clay, the only way to grow Mediterranean plants is in deep gravel.

The design, the sense of mystery, of unfolding, is improved. But pushing wheelbarrows uphill is no fun. We learned to have compost heaps at every level. And we learned that



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dry stone walls don't work very well as retaining walls. The ground is continuously trying to move downhill, and a bit of cement behind an apparently dry stone wall goes a long way to keeping the ground in place.

Lesson 6: Believe in gravity.

We have a few springs in the garden and we decided to make a spring-fed pond by digging out the bog where water accumulated naturally (fig. 7). We lined it with puddling clay and all was well for a few years, then gradually the water began to find other ways in and other ways out. We spend a lot of time stamping around hoping to fix unseen leaks. And even more time raking out blanket weed. 'Spring-fed pond' sounds romantic, but in our case the rain that

falls on the fields of cows above us is an endless source of nitrogen. **Lesson 7: Water will have its way.**

The balance between too much chaos and too much order is a fine one. I don't want a manicured garden, but then neither do I want an overgrown wild patch. I have found that I really enjoy the garden until about the end of June and then, suddenly, it's all too much, too fat, too bountiful, bursting at the seams. I go mad: cutting plants back, digging them out, moving them, and throwing them away (the compost heap is a fine place for a plant you are bored with). Every year the urge to slash and burn comes over me in July. I feel the garden needs room to breathe again (fig. 8).

Fig. 7 The high-maintenance pond.



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Fig. 8 July froth.

Peter's shapes are very definite, many edged with box or stone retaining walls. His solid structures balance the frothy excesses of my planting. If the lawn is mowed and edged, it instantly lifts the garden to another level. I hate mowing, edging and strimming – basically anything that requires a machine. Fortunately these are the most delegatable jobs. Having those crisp edges allows me to indulge in a bit of chaos (figs 9, 10 & 11).

Unconsciously you can relax and enjoy, knowing that you are in a safe pair of hands.

Lesson 8: Tidy but not too tidy.

I am flower mad and inclined to go overboard with too many plants and, in particular, with too many kinds of plants. I am gradually learning that 'less is more', fewer ingredients make a more digestible dish. But on the other hand 'more is also more', in that larger numbers of the same plant and repetition of the same plant are visually more effective. Since I want to grow every beautiful plant in the world this is a hard lesson for me to learn.

Lesson 9: Less is more.

Self-sowing plants lead me in the right direction. They give me repetition and large numbers with no effort on my part. Great drifts of *Lunaria annua* 'Corfu Blue' (fig. 12), *Geranium pyrenaicum* 'Bill Wallis' (fig. 13), *Papaver rupifragum*, *Tragopogon crocifolius* (fig. 14), *Linaria purpurea* 'Canon Went' and *Eryngium giganteum* tie the garden together as spontaneously

they appear. All I have to do is remove the ones I don't want. The self-seeders account for a lot of the floral profusion I have in my garden. And they teach me to follow the plants' natural inclination as they self-sow only where they want to be. Giving plants what they want is, of course, key to having happy plants.

Lesson 10: Go with the flow.

With my heavy soil and high rainfall, plants easily overgrow themselves so they

need some help. In April I try to stake any plant I think is in danger of flopping. Once herbaceous perennials have begun to lean it is far too late. People are afraid of staking, they think it is a lot of work, or it will make the garden look stiff. But done in April, it takes less than a minute per plant to push three legs into the ground and attach a ring with a criss-cross lattice just above the leaves.

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Figs 9, 10 & 11 Crisp edges allow me to indulge in a bit of chaos.

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Fig. 12 *Lunaria annua* 'Corfu Blue'.



Fig. 13 *Geranium pyrenaicum* 'Bill Wallis'.



Fig. 14 *Tragopogon crocifolius*.



Fig. 15 Tall plants benefit from hazel stakes.

The lattice will hold the centre of the plant so the stems don't all lean against the edge of the ring. The whole thing will disappear in a week or two as the plant grows. When I have enough time I weave hazel structures for bigger plants to grow through (fig. 15). These look good even before the plants have covered them but they each take a good half hour of concentration.

Lesson 11: A stake in time saves nine.

An alternative to staking (or sometimes in addition to it with over-vigorous plants like *Perovskia*) is the Chelsea Chop. Tracy ("Scissorhands") Disabato Aust taught me to attack my herbaceous perennials viciously in May – at Chelsea time. I cut one third to a half off most of them to reduce the need for staking and to encourage a slightly later blooming. Sometimes I cut the whole plant, sometimes every other stem, sometimes I cut all the outside stems and leave the centre to bloom first. As the centre finishes I cut it out and the outer edges begin to bloom, hiding the middle. With some plants like *Campanula lactiflora* the centre will then rebloom as the outer edge is fading.

One long border is edged with *Nepeta x faassenii* (fig. 16), and I find that if I cut the back half off just before it blooms, no-one notices. By the time the front half is looking scruffy the back half has started to bloom and I can cut the front hard without making it look scalped.

Lesson 12: Be cruel to be kind.

My favourite part of gardening is putting the plants

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Fig. 16 The *Nepeta faassenii* border looks good for much longer with two or three Chelsea-style chops.

together. I learned my planting design not in real gardens but by making exhibits for RHS shows – Hampton Court, Gardeners World Live, Chelsea. So I don't know how to plan plant combinations, I just put them together, change my mind, move them round till it feels right. I have the incredible luxury of lots of real plants in flower to play with. I don't have to order the right number of plants, I just go and see what's in the nursery. The ones that are happy stay, the others move on or are thrown out. Once I don't like something in the garden it has to go. I am ruthless! I like

plants which are easy to get rid of. Deep-rooted seedlings and plants which come back from every bit of root make for hard work. Likewise those which hate root disturbance. My plants need to be mobile.

I am a hands-on, knees-down gardener. The jobs I like – hand weeding, dead heading, staking, cutting back and thinning – involve being up close and personal with the plants. I find peace on my hands and knees, looking for tiny new seedlings, admiring young growth pushing out of the soil, following wandering weed roots. Making each plant

as happy as possible makes me happy.

Lesson 13: the biggest lesson of all – Enjoy your garden. If you don't enjoy the process as much as the product, do something about it! Hire someone to do the jobs you don't like. Or give away half your garden. Or cover half your garden in Mypex. Reduce the load to what you can enjoy. If gardening is a chore, don't do it. Concentrate on the bits of gardening and the kinds of plants which give you the most pleasure. The garden is there for you, not you for the garden. 🌸

Derry Watkins, a passionate gardener from the age of twenty, succumbed to the lure of running a nursery at forty, and started gardening at Hill Farm Barn at fifty. Now seventy and no end in sight. **Lesson 14: Its never too late.**

Editor's note: you can visit Derry's garden & nursery from April through October. Special Plants, Greenways, lane, Cold Ashton, Chippenham, Wilts SN14 8LA www.specialplants.net