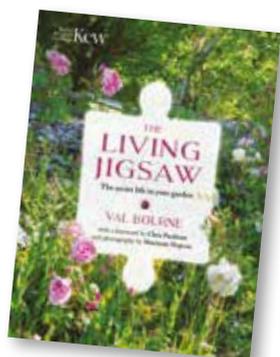


Book Review

The Living Jigsaw

Val Bourne

256 pages,
cover price £25



In *The Natural Gardener* (2004) Val Bourne wrote about her Oxfordshire garden, developed over 18 years using only the natural, fully organic methods she'd learned at an early age from her grandmother.

In 2005, Val and her 'Best Beloved' moved 20 miles to Spring Cottage in Cold Aston, Gloucestershire, and faced a very different gardening challenge: one-third of an acre devoid of garden plants, but with several buried bedsteads and full of weeds. The soil was deep and fertile, rainfall was higher, and part of the garden, fed by an underground spring, was always damp – unlike her previous dry, stony garden. It was also relatively exposed and cold.

Twelve years on this beautifully designed and sumptuously illustrated book confirms the philosophy of natural gardening as a balanced ecological whole: so-called pests are regulated by natural predators, and a diversity of wildlife preserved that could not exist in a system managed by the use of pesticides.

Val describes her 'Damascene Moment', which came after fielding questions from two young sisters who had spotted blackfly on an achillea and wanted to know what they were and why ants were going up and down the stem. There follows an entertaining account of ladybirds, from *2-punctata* to *22-punctata* in five species; tantric ladybird sex (with picture); the reproductive potential of aphids and their predation by ladybird adults and larvae; the attraction to ants of honeydew produced by the blackfly, and the observed insertion of an egg into a blackfly by a parasitic wasp – which, we

learn, can detect ladybird footprints, and so avoid laying an egg in an aphid that might be eaten. She realised that her garden functioned so well because of the ecological interactions between co-existing creatures, all needing each other for survival and living in relative equilibrium.

Continuity of interest with changing seasons is achieved by appropriate plantings in spring, summer and autumn borders. The choice of plants for each border is well explained, with a scattering of 'Golden Rules' prominently placed. Lists of plants for particular situations are given throughout, and summarized in a 'Top 100'. The garden layout is described, but I felt the need of a plan to understand better the relative positions and orientations of the different areas.

The importance of a wild element in the garden is stressed, with three chapters devoted to the main players: 'The Dreaded Gastropod' (slugs and snails); 'The Flying Squad' (flying insects and birds); and 'The Ground Force' (the hedgehog, beetles, mice and voles), all well researched and extremely informative. I fancy myself as a naturalist, but I found much to learn here – for example that shield bugs are so named, not after their shape, but because the female shields her eggs with her body until they hatch.

While this book abounds with examples of species diversity in a naturally managed garden, such a garden is itself far from natural, populated as it is by highly bred cultivars, often of exotic origins, and in designed combinations. I would also ask whether there is anything good to say about persistent weeds, rabbits or muntjac deer in a garden. There are limits, simply because a garden is a garden and not a wilderness. But there is reciprocity here, and the oft-exemplified garden in Leicester, owned and studied by Jennifer Owen, showed that a suburban garden could be an extraordinarily rich habitat for wildlife.

In conclusion, this book is a joy, as is Spring Cottage Garden and its living jigsaw. Val Bourne's delight in it comes across strongly, and I'm sure her book will inspire and remind us that as gardeners we can both encourage and enjoy the biodiversity of nature without feeling we have to conquer it.

"At last, a gardening book that completely 'gets it.'" (Chris Packham, Foreword). **Timothy Riggs**