

The Process is the Purpose

SIXTY YEARS AT SHEPHERD HOUSE, INVERESK

ANN AND CHARLIE FRASER

Ann writes: As I watch from the window the autumn leaves falling at the end of another excellent gardening year I am reminded that this will be our sixtieth year at Shepherd House.

When we first came here, after our wedding in 1957, the garden was right down the list of things to do. Our energies were devoted to doing up the house, transforming it into a family home rather than two unsatisfactory flats. Then came the children and for the next twenty-five years – there are eleven years between the oldest and youngest – time was scarce.

I think my passion for gardening came in 1984 when we decided to knock down the old billiard room (which was the ideal family playroom) in order to build a conservatory, a new structure that gave us a full view of the garden from the house. By that time we had just one child still at home, giving me time enough to take myself off to Edinburgh Art College for a part-time course in drawing and painting. Although always interested in art, I had not as a youngster been encouraged by my rather Victorian parents to go to art school – instead I was sent to Atholl Crescent to learn how to cook.

From 1984 I began to wonder how we might develop the garden to make it more interesting. We started with what we now call the Courtyard Garden, an area immediately outside the new conservatory. Initially we called it the Old Fashioned Garden and consulted a nursery called Plants from the Past, hoping to find examples that might have been grown here in the eighteenth century. That phase lasted fifteen years, until all the plants became overgrown and woody, resulting in a grand make-over and re-naming it the Millennium Garden. But, such is gardening, this too now urgently needs replanting.

We have never had an overall plan or a garden designer. We

consulted books and magazines and did a lot of garden visiting. Each year we had a new project. The pond in 1987, a parterre in the front garden in 1991, the rill and raised pond in 1996, a new garden entrance door in 2000, a book about the garden in 2012 (now sadly out of print), a shell house in 2013 . . . and so it continues. If I could remake the garden I would not change it drastically, for I like its oddities. Nothing is symmetrical, nothing quite lines up and, as at Sissinghurst, there are but a few right angles. The central axis, for example, is not in line as it perhaps should be with the back door, though very few people notice (or are too polite) to comment.

At that time that Rosemary Verey's garden designs were all in vogue and she became one of my mentors. In 1991, an American friend asked if we would consider allowing *American House and Garden* magazine to publish an article on the garden, and of course we readily agreed. To my delight Rosemary Verey was asked to write it and for the next few years we had many enthusiastic American visitors asking if they could visit. In the following year the same article appeared in *British House and Garden*, and so the garden slowly became well known.

Looking back through the many articles today it is interesting to see how many different views have been expressed: 'The garden reveals itself slowly as a good garden should,' said Rosemary Verey; 'Nothing stands still in this vibrant garden,' wrote Julia Watson in *The English Garden*; 'A strong characteristic of this garden is the way it keeps reinventing itself, changing with the seasons,' remarked Antoinette Galbraith in *Scottish Field*; 'Behind the formality [there's] a whiff of romance,' was how Vanessa Beveridge saw it and, lastly, Tim Longville, writing in *Country Life*, queried, 'Is it a formal garden of box parterres and geometrical vistas or a woodland garden of lush abundance? Is a garden to display works of art or show off an array of quirky pieces of topiary? Is it a collection of plants for the botanical artist or a celebration of love (and loving difference) between its two creators?'

In May 2016 I had a successful eightieth birthday exhibition of my watercolour paintings at the Rountree Tryon Gallery in London, with one piece appearing on the cover of *Hortus* 117.

After having taken all twenty of the family for a week's holiday to a château on the Loire in August, I decided to treat myself to some new tall bearded irises, which I love to paint. As they need full sun, we have made a new border in front of the cordoned crab apples, which will, it is hoped, provide some new iris colours for me to paint later this year.

We have been very busy planning how we should celebrate our sixtieth year at Shepherd House. Charlie announced that he wanted a 'wow factor' garden; after much discussion therefore we decided to change what was the Rosemary Verey-inspired potager, with its central arbour of cordoned pears and lines of box balls – both of which will remain – into a lavender garden. This area has been through many changes: when we no longer needed vast amounts of vegetables we made it into a cutting garden, planting annuals and dahlias – causing hugely labour-intensive demands. I have chosen the strongly-scented, compact grey-leaved lavender 'Richard Grey', a few plants of which have been here for many years in the Courtyard Garden. It clips well into mounds, which I hope in a year or two will reward Charlie with some of his hoped-for 'wows'. I have also planted three hundred pink 'Mistress' tulips to help fill the space until the lavender gets going.

To celebrate our Diamond Wedding anniversary in September this year we have commissioned a piece of sculpture, mirror-polished stainless steel in the shape of a diamond to be positioned in a far corner of the garden.

Our garden has been a collaboration. Charlie, at the age of eighty-eight now spends all his waking hours on the golf course or in the garden, frequently not coming in until after dark. I still love to get out there, usually working two or three mornings every week. But – and this is important – I spend a lot of time walking round the garden in all weathers just to enjoy it, to see what is flowering, to get inspiration for painting and to identify areas that need attention. Now I am fortunate to have Pauline helping out two mornings a week I am relieved of many of the time-consuming garden jobs that I used to do, freeing me up to address other commitments and giving me more time for painting without any

feelings of guilt about doing less than my share.

The Shepherd House garden has become such an important part of our lives and has grown and changed alongside the growing-up of children and, now, grandchildren. It is filled with memories of people as well as plants. To this day we can recall who gave us which plant – instant reminders of people who may no longer be with us.

Charlie and I *mostly* agree about the important aspects of the garden but sometimes disagree about the method. Take pruning: he is inclined to be more severe than I would sometimes have wished, wielding saw and secateurs while reciting his motto, ‘Always prune in a rage’.

When we are gone I hope that some other gardener will get as much fun and satisfaction from the garden as we do. We have not gardened for posterity, we have gardened for ourselves and we hope that those who come after us will do their own creative thing. It has been a shared journey, a combined passion and, together with the family, key to our long and happy marriage.

Charlie writes: When Ann, then my fiancée, and I viewed Shepherd House for the first time in the spring of 1957 it was a mess, badly divided into two flats with a garden that was a wilderness. A boy, when asked what he was shooting with an air gun, replied ‘rats’. As we left I said, ‘well, that was a waste of time’. ‘Not so’ said Ann, ‘I think we could make something of it, that’s the home for us.’ And so it has been ever since.

With an interesting curly gable the house, dating from 1690 is, like the whole village of Inveresk, built on the site of a large Roman camp. High walls surround the one-acre garden, consisting then merely of a mature sycamore and several ancient apple trees. In time our four sons required a large lawn for football and cricket. I grew vegetables in tidy rows and in another part of the garden, a neighbour, an agronomist by profession, grew vegetables irritatingly twice the size of mine.

Situated south-east of Edinburgh, rainfall is low, there is little frost and almost no snow. The soil is deep, easily worked and neutral. Maps at the National Library of Scotland showed that a

central path had led from the house to the far end of the garden, triggering and influencing our first attempt at design. Gradually the shape of the whole branched off this central axis. The design and the planting were entirely Ann's, with ideas and inspiration gleaned from other peoples' gardens. A yew hedge was copied from Crathes, and a visit to the Alhambra led to the building of two ponds and a connecting rill running the length of the garden.

For more than forty years we have opened under Scotland's Gardens Scheme and each year several overseas groups visit us. With an honesty box at the gate we are open at snowdrop time – a sharing of Ann's collection of seventy-two cultivars – for tulips and during the summer up to mid-July. We enjoy visitors and learn from them. A few years ago I had a pleasant conversation with a handsome Australian girl. Going into the kitchen to make sure the ladies who helped with teas were managing, one of them said 'do you realise that that was the film star Nicole Kidman you were talking to'. I was dispatched to bring her in for tea, but doing so I met someone of my own age who seemingly had been a contemporary of mine at the University of Edinburgh. He had studied physics and I asked what this had led to. He had never left Edinburgh, being part of the department that sought the Higgs Boson.

Ann and I believe that gardening is a genetic disease, for our respective parents and earlier generations had fine gardens. Sixty years of gardening at Shepherd House have given us the greatest pleasure. Years ago we read that 'the process is the purpose' and so it is.