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Foreword

The realm of garden writing has been explored many times before, but not as it is presented in this book. By researching the daily musings of gardeners though their letters, diaries and articles, I wanted to bring this rich and colourful world to life in a new way. I set myself the challenge of finding inspiring extracts for a whole calendar year. What I discovered proved something of a revelation. I discovered hundreds of evocative horticultural glimpses, many imbued with a thrilling sense of immediacy.

Brought together in this book, these excerpts capture the essence of the gardening year: its seasonal changes, from the radiance of spring to the pared-back beauty of winter, and its evolving yet reassuringly perennial tasks and rewards. And they do a lot more. They reveal a varied cast of horticultural characters and viewpoints – some down-to-earth, others lyrical or philosophical. Some offer grand perspectives – of gardens, of designs, of gardening as a practice. Others focus on a particular plant or flower and show how just a few blooms can bring joy. We move from historic gardens to allotments, from blowsy borders to a simple posy on a writer's desk. And all the while we experience new ways of connecting with gardens, meet new gardening friends, gain practical knowledge and discover something about our own horticultural preferences.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of researching this book has been the thrill of coming into close contact with my horticultural and literary heroes. There's nothing quite like knowing when and where something was written to give it a sense of aliveness. On 26 May 1946, I found George Orwell, half-naked, digging his newly acquired rock-filled, 'dry as a bone' garden on the Isle of Jura. His diary entries of his time on the island speak of a passion for growing flowers and vegetables and of his determination to make them thrive in the most inauspicious of plots.

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The fact that he was writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* at the time makes his gardening records all more captivating.

On 25 September 1845, Emily Dickinson is picking the last flowers of summer before Jack Frost gets them and contemplating whether to send a few to her correspondent. Dickinson's love of gardening was integral to her life and output. In fact, in her lifetime she was better known as a botanist than as a poet. Like her now-famous poems, the extracts from her letters display a succinct yet potent prose. The pressed flowers she sent in her letters as tokens of love and friendship are similar markers of her quiet expressiveness.

In Grasmere, on 16 May 1800, Dorothy Wordsworth transplants radishes after breakfast and we almost feel the Lake District breeze on our skin. In other diary entries, her brother William is at work with her in the garden. Elsewhere, she describes daffodils with such poetic directness and sensibility that we understand why William wrote of her that 'she gave me eyes'.

You will meet many more people: Samuel Pepys as he 'takes a turn' in his garden, where he buries his precious Parmesan cheese after the Fire of London; Goethe as he marvels at the gardens of Italy and their abundance of citrus fruits; Claude Monet as he worries about the cockchafers attacking his plants; Katherine Mansfield as she sits quietly in a Parisian garden admiring the spring blossom.

I love these snapshots of lives. I felt transported into different worlds, even if just for an instant. In letters and diaries, writers are often more candid and prone to displaying charming idiosyncrasies. I saw Vita Sackville-West as I had never seen her before, writing to her husband Harold Nicolson, amused at the thought that a journalist might want

to write an article on their garden, Sissinghurst. 'It is funny, isn't it,' she muses, 'that our dear garden should be taking its place among the better known gardens of England?' Letters and diaries let us into confidences, into private admissions, into a new world of intimacy and connection. 'I do so love the garden,' Harold confesses to Vita. 'It is a sort of still backcloth to my rattley ruttley rottley (these words are meant to convey the impression of an elderly Ford lorry bumping along a pavé road. I am a master of language) life.' There's a satisfying sense of fellow feeling when Virginia Woolf realizes that a day of weeding provokes in her 'a queer sort of enthusiasm which made me say this is happiness'. And when the poet Rilke talks of 'garden-peace', I know exactly what he means – I am sure other gardeners will too.

This anthology doesn't just celebrate well-known writers and gardeners. There are authors within these pages whom I had barely read before starting my research. Some I had never heard of. May Sarton was one instance of love at first reading. Her diaries are full of gardening detail and joy at the simple yet dazzling beauty of the natural world – one just has to open one's eyes. Who cannot relate when she describes her amaryllis in full bloom as a 'victory over winter'? Emily Lawless left me equally smitten. Her writing may be too delicate and Victorian, overly reliant on metaphor, for your liking, but give it a try. Slow down your reading and enter into the spirit of her times. And if you like Lawless, you will probably enjoy Eleanor Vere Boyle, an artist-writer whose floral descriptions are as exquisite as her Pre-Raphaelite paintings. As she awakes on 9 March 1883, her gaze 'comes upon the prettiest sight imaginable': crocuses 'thrown lightly, as it were, upon the frosted turf in garlands of amethyst and amber.'

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Finally, there are those writers who will, poignantly, remain forever secret: contributors to magazines whose wise words are like receiving advice from a faraway gardening friend, like a mysterious pen-pal from history.

Whether tinged with emotion or filled with character and humour, strikingly evocative, thought-provoking or thoroughly practical, these daily thoughts remind us that gardeners and garden-lovers are all connected by a timeless, invisible green thread. Whatever your gardening situation or inclinations, I hope this book will bring you – depending on the day – a sense of connection, a feeling of solace, snippets of garden history, useful advice, inspiration and more. And that, after you have been drawn into other people's garden musings, you will return refreshed to your own plot.

With this thought in mind, I check the book's entry for today. Lanning Roper's invocation to not be 'too tidy' and to let things 'get out of hand' is music to my ears. Rain followed by a spell of hot weather has turned the garden into a verdant tangle. The lawn – if indeed it were a lawn – is longer and weedier than it 'should' be. Bindweed and nettles are rampant. Dandelions waft their seeds with every breeze. Cracks in paving and walls are already home to tenacious seedlings. But among all this 'mess' is another, more appealing swell: box and privet topiary smothered in soft new growth; unfurling ferns a vision of lime freshness; fledgling seeds rising from their earthy nests; frothy, heaven-scented lilac; dahlias sprouting out of dormancy; and forget-me-not popping up wherever it takes its fancy. There are even hints of summer: a rose here, and there, clouds of catmint forming.

What will our gardens look like a month from now, I wonder. And so I turn to the June entries, and find a splendidly, vibrantly, reassuringly mingled picture – like a midsummer border.

Drawing inspiration from the final words of Virginia Woolf's short story, 'Kew Gardens': 'The words of myriad gardeners have flashed their colours onto these pages.' I hope you enjoy all the different colours.

Claire Masset, Oxfordshire, 7 May 2025

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