
Opening Extract from...

The Morville Year

Written by Katherine Swift

Published by Bloomsbury Publishing PLC

THE MORVILLE YEAR

Katherine Swift

BLOOMSBURY
LONDON • BERLIN • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

for Mirabel Osler

Introduction

From the December of 2001 to the July of 2005 I wrote a weekly column about gardening for the Saturday edition of *The Times* newspaper. For a dozen or so years before that, I had been keeping a diary about the making of the garden at Morville in Shropshire, where I had come to live in 1988. The columns seem to have taken the place of the diaries (certainly I wrote no more diaries after 2001), and are thus a record of what I was doing and thinking each week in my own garden, together with the books I might have been reading, occasional trips I might have made to see plays or exhibitions in London and elsewhere, and forays into other people's gardens, all of which provided stimulus and ideas for the garden I was making at home.

The idea behind the garden was to try (by means of a series of gardens-within-a-garden) to tell the history of the house and its setting and, incidentally, of English gardening as it unfolded over a period of a thousand years or so. When I began the research that would underpin the garden, I found that every plant had a story – who first grew it or collected it from the wild, gave it a name or painted its picture, wrote a poem about it or used it to cure some ailment? Every one came trailing clouds of glory. Many of these preoccupations are reflected in the columns: there is much here

about the plant-hunters and the histories of individual flowers, from a handful of the old 'florists' flowers' (tulips, auriculas, pinks, anemones, gold-laced polyanthus, hyacinths) to fruit trees (pears, plums, apples, quinces), herbs medicinal and culinary, old vegetables like cardoons, cottage garden flowers like peonies and (especially) old roses – which between them formed the backbone of the garden – as well as a lot about lilies and agapanthus (which I fell for in a big way). In the columns, I go to see Raphael's *Madonna of the Pinks* and admire William Nicholson's painting of dandelions. I take up bee-keeping and buy a motorbike. There is a long-running debate with myself about wildness and self-seeding in the garden, and the extent to which, even within a formal garden, one can step back and let Nature take a hand; 'Losing Control' is one of several such gleeful episodes.

By 2001 the broad outline of the garden and much of the planting was in place, but there was plenty of tinkering going on as I continued to collect plants, to arrange and rearrange them, and to see what would 'do' and what would not in my red Shropshire soil. The columns thus record my own deliberations and discoveries at the time they were being made, the gathering of information and the weighing of pros and cons as – largely by trial and often by error – I made my own decisions about plants and planting, pruning and maintenance, the siting of a garden seat or the choice of a colour scheme. But whatever the weekly subject, one constant theme was the weather, the turning of the seasons: that sense of being out of doors, vigilant for those tiny signs (and sudden reversals) – first dewfall of autumn, perhaps, or threat of late frost in spring – that signal big changes in the life of the garden and its occupants. In the world of the columns, those inhabitants included not only me and my plants, but peacock butterflies and hawk moths, blackbirds and robins, foxes

and rabbits, bumble-bees and – to the dismay of some readers and the delight of others – my tribe of cats. (The account of Grace making an elegant beeline for a blackbird's nest ('It Must Be Spring') provoked howls of outrage – the single biggest post-bag the column ever received; my neighbour Bridget's cat Blackberry, on the other hand – a devilishly successful hunter of rabbits – acquired his own fan club.)

The idea of 'close looking', the attentive chronicling of plants and flowers in the garden at all stages of their growth, in all weathers, not simply when in flower, runs through the columns, a constant exhortation to the reader (but above all to myself) to 'look: really *look*; tomorrow may be too late' ('*Carpe Diem*'). I see now that this close looking, and the linked theme of *carpe diem* ('seize the day'), is the mainspring not only of many of the columns – 'Just Looking' is another example – but of all my writing, generating not simply the urge to record but the need for precision, the search for exactly the right word. I am conscious that this often led (and leads) to strings of adjectives (a journalistic solecism) and often, when plainer words failed, to simile and metaphor (a frequent target for *The Times* sub-editors). But I am unapologetic. The aim was always to capture, as precisely as possible, the fleeting nature of a particular day, a particular cast of the weather, a particular plant: a moment in my life.

The writing of the columns also ran concurrently with the writing of *The Morville Hours*, a project begun in 1993 and worked at intermittently for the next fifteen years until it finally saw publication in 2008. That book told the story of how I came to Morville and began to make the garden, interwoven with the stories of the many other people (present day as well as long past) who had lived at Morville and whose lives ran parallel with mine. Some of the themes of *The Morville Hour*s are also thus reflected in the

columns (a fascination with the peculiarities of calendars and other methods of measuring time; the procession of saints' days and other feasts of the liturgical calendar which make up the church year), though the columns are generally more practical in tone and content, often providing me with a way of dealing with a problem or an idea more directly than was possible within the pattern of the book, from which they came to be both an escape and a relief.

The addressee of the columns is frequently a conversational 'you', not in any prescriptive sense, but with the sort of fellow feeling that might have been conveyed in an earlier age by 'one'. Writing the column came to be like writing a weekly letter to a circle of gardening friends – friends who, I felt, would sympathise with my all too frequent failures, laugh at my follies and join in my occasional triumphs, understanding what a switchback ride of highs and lows making a garden is.

I had always written about my gardens, and whether the columns supplanted the diaries or not, there was never any question of ceasing to record in some form or other my life in the garden. What had begun in 1970 as bare chronology – lists of jobs to do and jobs done (or more often un-done) each week in my first garden on the outskirts of Oxford – had by 2001 become a detailed record of thoughts and feelings and observations. The writing had become a way of thinking aloud, a way of answering that perennial question, 'What if?', conjuring a new garden or a new part of the garden into existence by means of words on the page. That process is described in one of the earliest columns reprinted here ('In Praise of Winter'), which tells the story of how in 1989, my first winter at Morville, 'I read and dreamed and cross-referred and made lists', writing the guidebook to a garden which did not yet exist: 'by March my imaginary garden was so real that I could walk about in it and smell the flowers'. Reading, writing

and gardening remain for me indissoluble, the garden not simply the physical place where I spend most of my days, but a mental space built out of thoughts and emotions, associations and memories – mine and other people's.

The urge among gardeners to record their daily doings seems very strong. While I was writing for *The Times* the paper held a garden-writing competition jointly sponsored by the quarterly gardening magazine *Hortus*; we received more than seven hundred entries. Reading them was a delight. Almost everyone chose to write about not great or famous gardens but ordinary, everyday gardens, especially their own. There was one overriding theme: the extent to which memory provides the warp and weft of our gardening lives. Here were parents and grandparents digging for victory, lawns given over to potatoes, flower-beds surrendered to hump-backed Anderson shelters camouflaged with trailing nasturtiums; here were gardens once full of cars and boats and motorcycles, 'filling all the back gardens with a wonderful young man's roar', now quiet again as children grew up and left home; here were gardens left behind, given up, surrendered, but never forgotten.

The book I eventually wrote about making my own garden, *The Morville Hours*, dealt extensively with episodes from my childhood, stories of my parents' own upbringings during the Depression of the 1930s, and especially with the gardens I remember my father making as we moved house from place to place – a theme continued in that book's forthcoming sequel, provisionally entitled *A Rose for Morville* – so I have chosen not to reprint here columns which deal with some of those same issues.

The 105 columns (and occasional feature) selected here are the original versions, and are thus frequently longer than the versions which appeared in *The Time*s. The exigencies of writing for a weekly newspaper meant that, especially in my early days on the

paper, the columns were often trimmed and occasionally hard-pruned by sub-editors to fit a space which varied from week to week. Later on, the columns settled down to a steady eight hundred words apiece. Apart from the removal of some out-of-date references to suppliers or prices or garden opening times, they are printed here as originally written, and in much the same order, month by month, with the exception of an occasional interpolation or rearrangement for the sake of continuity or clarity. Where it is felt that addresses or further information might be helpful, these are included in the appendix at the back of the book. Inevitably some subjects came up every year, and so some columns have been shortened to avoid repetition. I have dated each column, to give the context where this may not be immediately apparent, such as the arrival of the first photographs beamed back by the Huygens space probe from the surface of Titan, Saturn's largest moon, in January 2005 (which prompted one column's reflections on lichens), or the transit of Venus in June 2004 (the starting point for a column about Cook's circumnavigation of the globe), or the election later that year of an American president (prompting a re-examination of Thomas Jefferson in the unaccustomed role of gardener). If there is a common theme, it is that gardening is about so much more than just gardens.

Katherine Swift
Morville, 14 January 2010

SPRING

March

March comes in with an adder's head
and goes out with a peacock's tail

Gold-laced polyanthus

Lilies in the Snow

We're on the cusp of spring, havering back and forth between spring and winter. Some days are as balmy as April; others still feel like the middle of winter. In Bridgnorth, our nearest town, the gardens are bright with yellow daffodils and purple aubretia, the lawns green and trim. But not up here. It still looks (and feels) like winter – drifts of snowdrops, unkempt grass, not a daffodil in sight.

And my mood, too, swings between periods of mad energy and elation on the one hand, and days when I can hardly bear to stir out of the house. The other day I found two huge cardboard boxes on the doorstep: a consignment of plants and bulbs ordered from the wholesalers in a fit of enthusiasm a week or two ago. And now I can hardly remember what I ordered. Or why. What on earth was I planning to do with all those red-hot pokers? Those dahlias? Those lilies?

The lilies are *Lilium longiflorum* from Japan, the most elegant and refined of all lilies, with long narrow white trumpets washed outside with palest green, and a scent as delicate as sweet box on a cold January day. I had dreamed of filling a dozen large terracotta pots with them to surround the little Ivy Garden. The thought of the lilies cheers me up. So I take them and the pots and some bags of John Innes No. 2 into the open-sided trap-shed to pot them up out of the wind. They are stem-rooting lilies, and the secret is to

plant them low down in the pot (three to a ten-inch pot). You put a good layer of crocks and three or four inches of compost beneath, then just cover the bulbs with a pinch of sand and a little more compost, leaving five inches or so of empty pot above. Then gradually earth them up as the stem lengthens. But they can be tender, so I'll put them in a cold frame when I've finished, and throw an old blanket over them on cold nights.

As I work, I glance up from time to time. The wind seems to have dropped. Then suddenly, with hardly any warning, there's a blizzard steaming down the valley opposite, roaring with a sound like an express train, the grainy whiteness of it outlined against the dark hillside behind, while where I stand only an occasional flake slowly spirals down in the still air. It's like a monstrous flock of starlings coming in to roost: the noise, the numbers so densely packed, the swirling mass of them. And then just as suddenly it's gone. Later, when I drive down to Ludlow, I can see in the distance that the snow has settled on the peak of the Titterstone Clee, transforming it for an afternoon into a Japanese woodcut of Mount Fuji.

9 March 2002

Pilgrimage

For the medieval Englishman, a pilgrimage to St David's was considered so onerous that it counted as the spiritual equivalent to half a pilgrimage to distant Rome itself. Transport may have improved since then, but reaching the far western tip of Wales can still feel like a satisfyingly long and even arduous journey. Last week the snow was still lying in the fields as I headed out of Herefordshire and into Wales: I was on a pilgrimage of my own, in search of the elusive Tenby daffodil.

The Tenby daffodil (*Narcissus obvallaris*) is unique to Pembrokeshire. Its origins are a mystery: some say that it was brought by monks or perhaps by Flemish workers; others have traced it to a wild population in the Montes de Toledo of Spain; still others maintain that it is a hybrid of garden origin which arose by chance in Wales itself. Remnants of a once much larger population can still be found in old gardens and hedge bottoms. Vast quantities of the bulbs were dug up out of the fields and sold during the nineteenth century, and more were ploughed and sprayed out by modern farming methods in the mid-twentieth. It was then extensively replanted in gardens and by roadsides in a new wave of enthusiasm thirty years later. It is probably impossible now to say where or whether or when the Tenby daffodil ever grew wild.

In Tenby itself the parks and planters are awash with daffodils of all sorts at this time of year, including the Tenby daffodil. But I wanted to see them, if not in the wild, at least in great sheets and swathes the way they used to grow. I went to enquire at St John's Church in Tenby, up against the walls of the old town, where the parishioners were holding their annual Festival of Daffodils for St David's Day, with fluttering Welsh flags and ladies outside selling Welsh cakes hot from the griddle, and inside, tied to each pew, bunches of daffodils, each with the name of a loved one remembered on that day. 'Try Manorbier,' one of the ladies said.

I knew Manorbier, with its gloomy Norman castle overlooking the sea, the birthplace of Giraldus Cambrensis (one of the first chroniclers of the deeds of Merlin). I had already scoured the lanes, looking for daffodils. But it was here, following a chain of clues, that I at last found my Tenby daffodils. Nick Bean and his wife Pat specialise in growing miniature daffodils as cut flowers, and they have been building up stocks of Tenby daffodils for the past twenty years. Their friend Monica took me up to one of the small

fields they cultivate almost within earshot of the sea, and there they were, Tenby daffodils in their hundreds of thousands, running across the field like liquid sunshine in the melting snow.

The Tenby daffodil is a perfect miniature of the traditional yellow trumpet daffodil. The crisp neat little flowers are hardly more than two inches across, bright sunshine-yellow, against noticeably grey leaves. It is stiff and sturdy, with strong straight stems perhaps twelve inches tall, not at all like the wild daffodils which Wordsworth described 'fluttering and dancing in the breeze' on the shores of Ullswater in the Lake District. Wordsworth's daffodils were *N. pseudonarcissus*, the delicate nodding little Lent Lily, which has an altogether more secretive and tremulous air, with slender, slightly arching stalks, and long narrow trumpets with paler, slightly twisted, outer petals. Both are excellent bulbs for naturalising in grass.

Wordsworth's poem was based upon an actual incident, a walk which the poet took with his sister Dorothy to Gowbarrow Park one windy Maundy Thursday in 1802. But – reflecting Wordsworth's view of poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity' – the poem was not written until two years later, when Wordsworth was recalling the pleasure that the memory of finding the daffodils continued to give him over the years. The poem lacks the immediacy of Dorothy's journal entry, written on that windy day in 1802: it is Dorothy who captures the real feeling of that wild walk over the hills, and how the daffodils 'tossed and reeled and danced and seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind that blew upon them over the lake . . . ever glancing ever changing.' If the Tenby daffodil is like liquid sunshine, the *pseudonarcissus* is a personification of the March wind itself.

I had one final question. In Shakespeare's *Henry V*, Captain Fluellen wears a leek in his hat on St David's Day. Is the daffodil

the true emblem of Wales, or is it the leek? Apparently in Welsh the two names are very similar: '*cenhinen*' is Welsh for leek, '*cenhinen Bedr*' ('Peter's leek') for daffodil. It seems that Shakespeare was only teasing: it's the daffodil, of course.

13 March 2004

Changing Your Mind

It's every gardener's privilege to change their mind. And everyone's duty to admit when they were wrong. We are not all blessed with second sight, and sometimes it can be difficult to envisage how a shape or a colour will look until you see it in the flesh. It took me three attempts to get the shape of my Canal right. It's a narrow water feature halfway between a pool and a rill, running down the middle of a long thin formal bit of the garden. I call it my Canal; my friend Jeremy, more down to earth – he's an archaeologist – calls it my 'long pond'. But whatever its name, the shape at one end was patently wrong. Changing it meant asking the dear man who had done the stonework partly to demolish it and start again. But what could I say? I'd just got it wrong.

We once moved a ten-year-old mulberry tree here, too, which took six of us to carry. Most trees and shrubs can be moved when dormant if you take a few elementary precautions. Better that than endure that irritating niggle every time you walk up the garden.

Plants can be very forgiving. There are some huge climbing roses here now in their third home. I bought four bushes of the crimson multiflora rambler *Rosa* 'Russelliana', thinking they would look wonderful draped over the entrance to the apple tunnel with the white flowers and sealing-wax stems of the evergreen rambler *Rosa* 'Adélaïde d'Orléans'. But draping is just what 'Russelliana' will

not do – it is stiff and strong – and in any case I decided later on that I wanted to have all white roses in that part of the garden. So I found the 'Russellianas' a home in the Cloister Garden, where they ramped away splendidly over two wooden trellis arbours, mixed this time with *Rosa* x *alba* 'Semi plena'. The problem there was their date. I was trying to reproduce the effect of the arbours seen in many medieval paintings and miniatures where double red and double white climbing roses frame a Madonna and Child or a pair of all-too-secular lovers. But there is no tall double red climbing rose of the right date. It's one of those horticultural mysteries: was the effect produced by multiple grafts? Was it a symbol, poetic licence? Or has the rose just disappeared from cultivation? I substituted the 'Russellianas'. But they wouldn't do: every time I looked at them they screamed 'nineteenth century' at me, betraying their origin by getting black spot (which no self-respecting medieval *gallica* would ever dream of doing).

So last year I moved them again. My long-suffering 'Russellianas' are now planted against the far south-facing wall at the bottom of the Wild Garden, partnered with newly planted pale purple and lilac wisteria, and drifts of pale sky-blue irises. The crimson roses, the tumbling wisteria, the clear cool colours of the irises – it sounds lovely. But you never know . . .

For established wisterias, now is your last chance to prune. My wisterias are only young, and I'm still training them out on horizontal wires in the hope that they will clothe the whole wall from top to bottom. The trick is not to let them run up vertically, otherwise they will only flower at the top. Established wisterias are usually pruned twice a year, once in late August, and then again in February. In August all the whippy new growth is shortened to five or six buds. Then in February the shoots are shortened still

further, cutting them back hard to no more than two buds. The point of this is to insure against the flower buds being pecked out by bullfinches or damaged by frost.

For my wisteria wall I chose varieties of all three common wisterias in order to lengthen the season of flowering – *W. floribunda, W. sinensis* and *W.* x *formosa* – plus the silky white scented *W. venusta* as a highlight in the middle. Then I added standards of white *W. sinensis* at either end, for a touch of frivolity. After all, gardening is meant to be fun, isn't it? And if it doesn't work I can always change my mind.

2 March 2002

[*I did: the standard wisterias were later moved to the Fruit and Vegetable Garden, and were replaced in the Wild Garden by six pollarded silver-leaved* Salix alba *'Sericea' (see 'Taking Stock').*]

Primroses

Everything in the landscape is always older than you think. The ridges rumpling the hillside opposite my garden, like a billowy green eiderdown, are the remains of medieval ridge and furrow – the open field system of agriculture which predated the present eighteenth-century enclosed fields. The terrace below them which seems to stop abruptly halfway along may have been gouged out by a glacier millions of years ago. The track which curves across the valley floor to my left is almost certainly pre-Norman and may well be more ancient than that. And on this side of the valley, sweeping away to the right, is a long flat grassy platform, a seventeenth-century garden terrace, cut into the steep slope beneath a twentieth-century vineyard.

In a few weeks the cowslips (*Primula veris*) will be out on the sunny open south-facing slope above the grass terrace, primroses (*Primula vulgaris*) in the damper heavier ground below it, where the bank is shaded by trees and runs down towards the brook. And I'm told that there are oxlips in the woods opposite. These must be what are known as 'false oxlips' (*Primula veris* x *vulgaris*), which are naturally occurring variable hybrids often found where the two species grow close together. True oxlips (*Primula elatior*) have pale flowers like small primroses, held in drooping bunches all on one side of slender cowslip-like stalks. They are very rare indeed now, virtually confined to the counties of Cambridgeshire, Suffolk and Essex, where they are indicators of ancient woodland. So if they do indeed grow in our woods (I've never found them) it would mean the woodland here is much older than anyone ever thought.

It's always instructive to think about natural habitats when siting things in one's own garden. I grew a few cowslips from seed the other year and planted them in impoverished turf in the poor soil of a sunny bit of the Cloister Garden, aiming at a *mille fleurs* effect like a medieval tapestry, with little clumps of thrift and wild pinks. Although the other things gradually died out, the cowslips self-seeded prolifically, studding the turf in April and May with spikes of bright yellow – and here and there a red one, the result of cross-pollination with some red cowslips I planted elsewhere in the garden. Red cowslips occur naturally in some wild populations and may have been one of the ancestors of the modern polyanthus.

I have more difficulty growing primroses (especially the garden doubles which are notoriously difficult to keep), but I think I may now have found just the spot where the wild ones will be happy and seed themselves around without further mollycoddling from me: up in the Nuttery, where the canopy of the hazels has gradually closed overhead and suppressed the taller grasses.

Primroses and cowslips are fascinating plants. They throw up a large number of highly attractive mutant forms such as the jack-in-the-green, where the terminal lobes of the calyx continue to grow as leafy appendages, making a little ruff of leaves around the flower, and the hose-in-hose, where the calyx is transformed into a second corolla, giving the impression of one flower sitting inside another. Then there is the jackanapes with a striped calyx – a mixture of petal and leaf; the gallygaskins with an enlarged ribbed calyx; and even double and triple mutations such as the jackanapes-on-horseback. Elizabethan and Jacobean gardeners loved them all.

Before the great influx of exciting new plants from Turkey and Persia in the seventeenth century, gardeners depended for novelty upon finding chance mutations of common native flowers like these. The science behind such mutations is now more clearly understood. It is known, for example, that many of the mutated genes in anomolous forms of primrose are dominant (which is why these plants have survived for so long). Start your very own seed strain with seed from Barnhaven Primroses, guaranteed to yield a high proportion of such forms.

30 March 2002

Horehound & Hyssop

It's been a terrible winter for 'flu. My mother, my husband, my next-door neighbour Bridget, Reg the butcher, Mark the milkman, Nick who brings us logs – just about everyone seems to have had it. My husband in fact had it twice, poor man, with bronchitis afterwards for good measure, which left him with a nagging cough. So I went up into the garden the other day to look for some horehound for him, to make an infusion. I was relieved to see that one

or two plants had survived the recent bad weather and were still leafy enough to yield a few sprigs (this is not ideal, of course: the best way is to pick the flowering tops in early summer and dry them). But I can see that I shall have to sow more this year. It's one of those plants I simply couldn't do without.

White horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*) has been known since Roman times as an excellent remedy for chesty coughs. I sympathise with those old Romans, posted up to Hadrian's Wall in their short skirts: no wonder they got coughs and colds. A tea made from the leaves tastes reassuringly nasty but is one of those old cottage remedies that really does seem to work. You can make it palatable (just about) by disguising the bitterness with lemon and honey. Simply pour on boiling water. I often combine horehound with hyssop (*Hyssopus officinalis*) – equally bitter, but wonderful for the sinus troubles that often accompany a cough.

Horehound is a perennial which grows wild in this country, especially in the lighter soils of Norfolk and Suffolk, and is easily raised from seed, though my experience is that it has long tap roots and resents disturbance, so sow it *in situ* or transplant early. It is about a foot high, with square stems and small densely white-felted leaves and whorls of tiny white flowers, not unlike a deadnettle. I grow it with purple sage and catmint beneath some pink 'Königin von Dänemark' roses.

Hyssop is a low evergreen woody plant, best kept clipped, which comes in pink, blue or white. I like the blue form best, and I grow it as a low hedge round a bed of yellow-flowered woad in the Cloister Garden, next to some old white Alba roses.

Last week I finally got down to pruning the roses. I sometimes suspect that one of the chief reasons why people don't grow more roses is that they are alarmed by the prospect of pruning them,

which is a pity. My rule is that there is no rule. On the one hand, all old roses have their own unique characters and habits of growth (and are likely to grow differently in different parts of the country and in different situations), so they all need to be treated as individuals in any case. And on the other, it all depends on what you want to do with them. Many big shrub roses can be pruned into a conventional shape, but can equally well be treated as short climbers or pegged down as ground cover, or even cut really hard like hybrid teas. I've seen a big moss rose like 'William Lobb' treated in all these ways, and they all work. It's comforting to remember that pruning roses is just like having your hair cut: if you don't like the result, console yourself with the thought that it will grow again and you can have another go next year.

Pegging down is one of my favourite ways with taller roses. Bend down any strong new shoots coming up from the base and hold them in place with pegs and string, or with hooks of wire (this is a good use for all those wire coat-hangers from the dry cleaners which clutter up your wardrobe). Bending the stems has the effect of making the rose flower all along the stems, instead of just at the top. You can bend them right down to the ground, or you can tie them into a wooden support around the bush – both will make a pretty arched shape. If they are long enough, you can fan the stems out along the ground through other plants or through roses of a contrasting colour. I grow a couple of big climbers like this: pale pink and white 'Baltimore Belle', pegged down through beds of deep crimson Portland roses. Cut out all the old flowered stems each year, and tie the new ones in.

As for timing, I try to finish the rambling roses before Christmas (it's easier then, when they are totally dormant, because it means you can yank away with impunity, without damaging the emergent buds) but I'm never in a hurry to prune the other roses,

as so often new shoots can be damaged by late frosts. And although snipping and shaping is a lovely job for a nice day in late winter, most roses won't mind a bit if you don't prune them every year – or indeed at all.

8 March 2003

What's in a Name?

What's in a name? Romance, adventure, derring-do? There are some things I swear I could grow just for the name alone. Take 'Lord Anson's Pea', for instance. Admiral Lord Anson is best known for two things: getting spectacularly lost off the coast of Chile in 1741, and for the blue perennial sweet pea named after him. Anson had been despatched to the Philippines via Cape Horn in 1741 to capture the Manila galleon, a Spanish treasure ship which each year crossed the Pacific from Mexico. But, blown off course by storms when rounding the Horn, Anson found himself unable to re-establish his correct longitude, and helplessly zigzagged up the South American coast for two excruciating weeks while his crew dropped dead of scurvy around him. He ultimately lost more than half of his five hundred men. Nevertheless, Anson went on to capture the Manila galleon, and returned to London in triumph with the treasure and with the seeds of the sweet pea, which the cook on board Anson's ship the *Centurion* had found growing near the Strait of Magellan on the return journey.

Turning disaster into triumph – and pausing to do a little botanising on the way back – seems a particularly British form of heroism. The debacle was one of the two great maritime disasters which spurred the search for a correct method of determining longitude – eventually achieved by clockmaker John Harrison, as

told in Dava Sobel's 1996 bestseller *Longitude*. (The other was the wreck of Sir Clowdisley Shovell's fleet off the Scillies in 1707, with the loss of two thousand lives.)

For very many years the true 'Lord Anson's Pea', *Lathyrus nervosus*, was very difficult to come by, and it was often confused with two other blue peas, *L. magellanicus* and *L. sativus*. But now all seems clear at last, and both seed and plants of *L. nervosus* are available from Thompson & Morgan. *L. nervosus* is a vigorous climber (six to ten feet), with round-oval greyish heavily veined leaves (hence the name), and clusters of soft mauve-blue flowers which – unusually in an everlasting pea – are sweetly scented. Although it is hardy it dislikes the winter wet, so if drainage is a problem, grow it in a pot or protect the roots with a sheet of glass in winter. I'm going to grow mine through a yellow climbing rose at the foot of a warm wall in the Ivy Garden.

1 March 2003

Black & Gold

What *was* it he reminded me of, Blackberry, the cat next door, turning on me the searchlight glare of his black-and-yellow eyes? On his best behaviour, front feet neatly together, impeccable in his black coat. There he sits in the back kitchen, not a hair out of place, eyes fixed on mine. He has recently taken to joining my cats for breakfast, and – weakly – I feed him: not so much to encourage him, but to reward him for not beating them up. They are all sitting together now, waiting for their food; I secretly hope this rapprochement will continue outside in the garden.

But for days I have been tantalised by those eyes of his. What *do* they remind me of? Unlike the pupils of Grace's eyes – sly,

slanting, opal-green cat's eyes, rarely more than lazily half-open – Blackberry's eyes are two perfect concentric circles of black and gold, staring fixedly at me. Like something half-glimpsed disappearing around a corner, I sometimes think I have it, only to discover no, that's not quite it at all. The bright round eye of the blackbird who follows me about as I weed the garden, his head cocked as he searches for worms? The filigreed gold of the key to the tiny black japanned box which sits on the mantlepiece in my study? The braid of half-remembered school uniforms? Even the black and gold strip of Wolverhampton Wanderers, our beleaguered local team, battling it out against relegation? (I pass their egg-yolk yellow stadium every time I drive to the railway station.) But no.

And then I have it: gold-laced polyanthus.

Surely they are not out yet? But I go and look, and they are. Gazing up at me from a litter of winter-brown oak leaves and wayward trails of ivy: tiny, neat, utterly improbable, sandwiched between the sprawling trusses of rose-flushed *Helleborus* x *sternii* and a samphire-green thicket of *Helleborus foetidus* – so perfect that they might have been hammered out of black metal and gold wire, or stitched with gold thread on black velvet, each black petal outlined with a narrow rim of gold which dips in the middle, seeming to divide the five petals into ten gilded loops around a central yellow eye, gazing up at me with their pinprick pupils of filament and anther.

The gold-laced polyanthus is, as the doyenne of plant historians the late Ruth Duthie once said, a very English flower. It was one of the eight 'florist's flowers', grown by amateur breeders and exhibited at their shows or 'florists' feasts' in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but it never seems to have been popular on the Continent, and even in this country it seems to

have had a shorter reign than most. It was on the decline by the 1880s and by the Second World War it was reputed to be almost as defunct as George IV himself – the name of one of the most famous of the old varieties. In recent years, however, it has made a comeback. Seed-raised plants are now relatively easy to find: mine came from a market stall beneath the arches of Bridgnorth's seventeenth-century town hall.

Its ancestry is a mystery. The word 'polyanthus' was originally used to denote any multi-headed flower. What we now know as a polyanthus is of garden origin, and seems to have arisen in the second half of the seventeenth century. The fact that the flower-heads of a polyanthus consist of several separate florets held as a group at the top of a single stalk (like a cowslip) but the florets open wide and flat like the flowers of a primrose has led some experts to suggest the false oxlip – a cross between the two – as one ancestor. But where the dark colouring of the gold-laced polyanthus came from remains a mystery. Possibly it owes something to 'Tradescant's Turkie-purple Primrose' (*Primula vulgaris*, ssp. *sibthorpii*), introduced into English gardens at about the same time from the Near East.

There are silver-laced sorts as well as gold-laced, and flowers with a dark red or chocolate-brown background, but none to my mind has the cachet of the black and gold. For all their strangeness, they are tough and easy to grow. They can be grown in pots, but the best plants are raised in open ground, ideally in a north-facing bed where they get the benefit of early morning sun without having to endure a long day's grilling in the heat. A decent heavyish soil seems to suit them. Divide the plants up every year after flowering to maintain vigour, and replant them with the addition of some garden compost or old manure and some sharp sand.

27 March 2004

Easter Gardens

After the long damp winter, the garden here is dripping with moss: great frondy swathes of bright green feather moss, smothering the concrete coal-bunker and threatening to engulf the tottering stacks of spare auricula pots; neat little cushions of screw moss on top of the walls; velvety cord moss (*Funaria hygrometrica*) on the hoggin paths; more feather moss on the limestone of the mock 'ruin' in the Wild Garden.

I remember gathering moss as a child for the miniature gardens we used to make at church on Holy Saturday. There was always a little hill, with three crosses on top of it for Calvary, and a cave beneath for the tomb, with the stone rolled away to show that it was empty. We used moss for the green 'grass', and we used to push flowerheads into it – especially primroses, I remember – to make the flowers for the garden where on Easter Sunday morning Mary Magdalene mistook the risen Christ for the gardener.

Moss is lovely stuff: it seems a pity that in the European gardening tradition it is all too often looked upon as an enemy to be eradicated. In Japan, whole gardens are devoted to it. Moss naturally grows abundantly in the moist climate around Kyoto – one of the ancient capitals of Japan – and it is here that the most famous moss garden of all was created, at the fourteenth-century Saiho-ji Buddhist temple. In place of the raked gravel of the later 'dry' gardens of Zen Buddhism, at Saiho-ji (also known as Kokedera, or the Moss Temple) it is moss which undulates over the ground, beneath the trees, swirling round rocks and lapping the shore of the little lake – lush, green, silent, and utterly tranquil.

There are moss gardens too on the Pacific north-west coast of America, which has a similar climate to Kyoto. In this country

too, you have the best chance of making a moss garden if you live on the north-west side of the country. Mosses have no defence against drought, so a moss garden needs to be sited somewhere moist and shady, and preferably north-facing. The terrain should be slightly uneven, in order to get that gently swelling, swirling effect. A site under trees looks good – mossy tree roots are a classic ingredient of this style – but you will have to pick up every fallen leaf in autumn, otherwise the moss will discolour and eventually die. You also need to decide how you are going to view your moss garden: moss will not stand the tramp of feet, so it is best to provide some stepping stones through it, or to view it from a separate path at one side.

There are eleven thousand species of moss worldwide. At Saiho-ji alone there are more than one hundred. Many species are available commercially in Japan, giving Japanese gardeners a wide range of colours and textures to experiment with, such as the fine needle-like leaves of the hairycap (*Polytrichum commune*), and the feathery texture of the fern moss (*Thuidium delicatulum*). In this country you will have to collect mosses from the wild (with the landowner's permission, of course) or transfer them from another part of the garden. Or you could use a substitute such as *Sagina subulata* (known as Pearlwort or Irish moss), together with its golden counterpart *S. subulata* var. *glabrata* 'Aurea', both of which are listed in *The RHS Plant Finder*.

Pearlwort bears minute white flowers in summer. True mosses are flowerless. They propagate themselves by means of spores, like ferns. The one that invades poorly drained lawns is apparently the rough-stalked feather moss (*Brachythecium rutabulum*). My lawns are full of it. Keen gardeners rake the moss out and use it to line their hanging baskets. But I rather like the cushioned feel of it as I walk round the garden at this time of year. And I know

that the moss will retreat once I start to cut the grass regularly again in spring – cutting stimulates the grass, which then outcompetes the moss (though it is important not to cut the grass too short, as this has the opposite effect of weakening the grass and encouraging the moss).

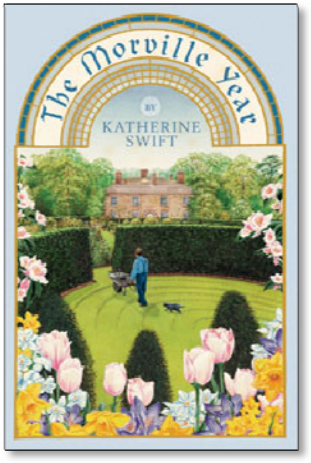
Besides, the birds love it. All through the recent cold spell I have been throwing down boxes of apples for them from the fruit store – great big dumpling-like Lord Derbys, as yellow as buttercups, getting past their best now – and the birds are repaying me by scratching the moss out of the lawn to line their nests.

Before being permitted to enter the moss garden at Saiho-ji, visitors are required to spend time chanting from the Buddhist sutras and preparing themselves spiritually for the experience they are about to undergo. It makes me look at my mossy grass with new eyes.

26 March 2005

THE MORVILLE YEAR

by Katherine Swift



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First published in Great Britain 2011

All articles first published in *The Times*/nisyndication.com

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
36 Soho Square
London W1D 3QY

www.bloomsbury.com

Bloomsbury Publishing, London, New York and Berlin

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4088 1109 2

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Limited, St Ives plc