



GARDEN PLOTTING

by Sarah Langton-Lockton

Gertrude's Munstead

Gertrude Jekyll's finest gardens were made in collaboration with architect Edwin Lutyens

The garden designer Russell Page observed of Gertrude Jekyll in 1962 that he could think of few English gardens made since her death in 1932 that 'do not bear the mark of her teaching'. For Christopher Hussey, Country Life's architecture critic, her 'influence on garden design has been as widespread as Capability Brown's in the 18th century'. Our gardens today, with their long drifts of colour, grey foliage used as a foil for brighter plants, our interest in the forms of plants and their role in softening the hard lines of garden structure, provide evidence of how she continues to inspire.

Gertrude Jekyll At Munstead Wood, by Judith Tankard and Martin Wood, first published in 1996, has been revised and reissued, with some previously unpublished photographs, by the new independent publishers Pimpernel Press. The book, say the authors in the introduction, is neither a biography of Gertrude Jekyll nor a discussion of her

contribution to garden design, but an exploration of 'some of the many activities and enterprises in which she engaged', the aim being 'to paint a fuller picture of a remarkable woman who had "a passion for doing useful things"'. In addition to gardening as a craft as well as an art form, and photography, Jekyll's many works and endeavours included embroidery, carpentry and wood inlay, jewellery, silver repoussé work, gilding, house-painting and brickwork.

The book begins with a walk in the garden at Munstead Wood, described by Gertrude Jekyll when she bought the land in the early 1880s as '15 acres of the poorest possible soil'. It consisted of a self-sown mixed wood, a chestnut copse where the house would be built and a poor arable field. All this was transformed into woodland avenues, a rhododendron and azalea garden, 'waving rivers' of daffodils, fern and lily walks and banks of shrubs. Most famous are the spectacular borders with their seasonal and single-colour plantings - of primroses or Michaelmas daisies - the spring garden wholly devoted to plants that bloom in April and May, and the 200ft-long main hardy flower border.

As is often the case with great gardeners, Gertrude Jekyll's passion for gardening began in childhood. Her parents moved to the country when she was five; when her brothers went away to school she was left to her own devices. Accompanied by her pony, Toby, and dog, Crim, she explored the countryside and observed local gardens. As she said later: 'I have been more or less a gardener all my life.' At 18, she studied painting in London and



made an expanding circle of artist friends, among them Hercules Brabazon, an English watercolour artist who had studied with Turner. Gertrude took lessons with him and later acknowledged his role in helping her 'understand and enjoy the beauty of colour'.

Born in 1843, by the 1880s Gertrude Jekyll was settled into a life with gardening and writing at its centre. She then discovered a new interest: photography. This, write Tankard and Wood, had 'a profound effect on her artistic development, and one that helped to preserve the evidence of her gardening talent for posterity'. Some 2,000 black-and-white photographs have survived, many of them of exquisite texture and tonality.

Among Gertrude Jekyll's many lively interests was a love of vernacular architecture. In 1889 she met the young architect Edwin Lutyens. They ambled happily through the Surrey countryside in a pony and trap, looking at old cottages and discussing traditional building methods. 'Thus began a legendary

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Munstead Wood,
the south front

Gertrude in her garden

Under-gardeners with
The Great PumpkinGlowing colours
in the Michaelmas
daisy border

‘Gertrude and Edwin ambled happily through the Surrey countryside in a pony and trap’

friendship and partnership that seldom wavered and ended only with Miss Jekyll's death in 1932.'

Munstead Wood was one happy result, a house that expressed the character and personality of its owner, thanks to 'a skilful architect, a determined client and good fortune'.

The gardens at Munstead Wood extended to four or five acres and provided employment for a head gardener and four under-gardeners. In addition to the pleasure gardens, there was a large orchard, kitchen garden and nursery. Gertrude Jekyll had her own strains or selections of plants, and a nursery was a natural development, its main business being to supply plants for garden-design clients.

Her growing myopia, which cut short her painting, propelled her into garden design. She probably designed

more than 400 gardens, although records for fewer than 250 survive among her papers.

Her finest gardens were those where the architect provided the basic layout, and the very best were in collaboration with Edwin Lutyens. Her guiding principle was 'gardening for beautiful effect'. Lutyens provided the geometrical framework and architectural features, which Gertrude Jekyll's cottage-garden planting style softened and set off. The gardens at Hestercombe House in Somerset are perhaps the best of their gardens that survive.

This is an absorbing and readable book, a genuine classic, which a short review can only hint at. ■

♦ *Gertrude Jekyll At Munstead Wood* by Judith Tankard and Martin Wood (Pimpernel Press, £25).

♦ sarah.langton-lockton@lady.co.uk

Plant of the week



Leucanthemella serotina, the moon daisy, a favourite of Gertrude Jekyll, has masses of white flowers on tall stems. Prefers moist soil in sun or part shade. 9cm pot, £3.95: 01366-728401, www.norfolkcottagegarden.co.uk