

# Gertrude Jekyll at home

*Munstead Wood,  
Munstead, Surrey (Part II)*

As the 19th century gave way to the 20th, garden designer Gertrude Jekyll (*right*) was at the height of her powers.

Judith Tankard, author of a forthcoming COUNTRY LIFE book, reveals Jekyll's gift for maintaining colour through the seasons

Photographs by Julian Nieman  
& Paul Barker

**I**N about 1883, the Jekyll family purchased a tract of land near the family home for Gertrude to develop, which she described in *Gardens for Small Country Houses* as 'fifteen acres of the poorest possible soil, sloping a little down towards the north [with] a thin skin of peaty earth on the upper part'. There was a natural growth of heath, whortleberry and bracken flourishing where a wood of Scots fir had been cut down in the 1870s. A chestnut grove stood in the central portion, where she would eventually build her house, and, below that, a poor, sandy field that she later turned into her working gardens.

Jekyll promptly set out to organise the grounds, keeping some of the natural groupings of trees and shrubs and thinning out others. She began by creating a series of paths through the woodlands, each with a distinct character. A wide grass walk was flanked by carefully chosen groups of rhododendrons—pink tones in the foreground and white-flowering types where the woodland became denser and the shade deepened. She referred to this walk as the ➤

**Jekyll's lupins, irises and columbines run amok under the Judas tree at Munstead**











The tank garden has been restored to its former glory, with pots of *Francoa sonchifolia* and crisp yew hedging, as in Jekyll's day

'most precious possession' because it gave 'illusions of distance and mystery'. Another walk meandered through the heather; wild ferns, bracken, and lilies flanked some of the smaller, more naturalistic-looking paths, each one of which provided a vista to the house.

After establishing the woodland gardens, Jekyll turned her attention to ornamental gardening by creating a series of 'pictures'. Her expertise with seasonal gardens and borders, which was one of the hallmarks of her style of gardening, is fully explained and illustrated in her book *Colour in the Flower Garden* (1908). One of her primary considerations, however, was the inseparability of house and garden. In the normal

course of events, the house and garden would have been designed together, but at Munstead Wood, most of the gardens had been laid out before the house was built.

In about 1895, Jekyll created one of the garden's most memorable features: the main border of hardy flowers, 14ft wide and 180ft long, and backed by a high sandstone wall, which legend has she built herself. To make such a plan, allowing for a succession of bloom from June through October, was no easy task; it evolved from years of prior experience at the family's Munstead House. She describes her intention in the plantings thus: 'The border has a definite colour scheme; at the two ends blue, white and palest yellow, with

grey foliage; and purple, white and pink, also with grey foliage, respectively; the colour then advancing from both ends by yellow and orange to the middle glory of strongest reds.'

Later on, Jekyll developed other colour borders, such as those in the spring garden behind the wall and a dazzling garden of summer flowers consisting mainly of reds, yellows, and purples. In each case, she used bold groups of yuccas or euphorbias to add striking foliage at the ends of the borders or to mark cross-paths to other areas of the garden. The spring garden, first laid out in the early 1890s, was one of her favourite parts of Munstead Wood. It was 'wholly devoted to plants that bloom in April or





A section of the main herbaceous border, with Jekyll's gradations of reds and yellows



This rare autochrome, dating from 1911, shows the spring garden as it once was, with a sulphur clump of *Euphorbia characias* looming over tulips and other spring flowers

May', and wasn't part of the main summer border on the other side of the wall.

In addition to flower borders, there were borders for various autumn shrubs, briar roses and asters, the most famous of which was her Michaelmas daisy border. The hub of the garden, however, was the nursery and kitchen gardens, which visitors rarely saw. Here, she had beds for pansies, China asters, irises, lupins, daffodils and lily-of-the-valley, as well as special borders dedicated to purple, white and pink flowers with grey foliage that complemented the old, grey barn building. This is where she kept the nursery stock that she used for harvesting seed or providing plants for her design commissions. After her house and other buildings were in place, she continued

to add new garden areas and revise old ones.

Lutyens' role in planning the gardens at Munstead Wood was minimal, but he did have to contend with them when it came to positioning the house and terraces, which resulted in 'awkward angles'. The small, paved courtyard on the north side, in fact, was the only portion of the garden scheme with a definite plan. The pairs of low steps leading up to the courtyard from the garden, and the tiny, square water tank between them, provide a dissonant, formal note in an otherwise informal garden. The most successful aspect of linking the house and grounds was the small footpath leading from the lane to the house, for there was no carriage drive sweeping up to the front door, as one might have expected. 'I like

the approach to a house to be as quiet and modest as possible, and in this case I wanted it to tell its own story as the way in to a small dwelling standing in wooded ground.'

The hall and south terrace were centred on the grassy woodland walk laid out 15 years earlier; where it met the lawn, there were groups of silver birch mingling with the rhododendrons. From the terrace, one could see large sweeps of daffodils growing in the old smugglers' tracks and, in a clearing in the centre of the woodland, there were brilliantly hued Ghent hybrid azaleas. Along the south terrace, Jekyll planted masses of rosemary and pink China roses, with a grapevine trained on the wall. The courtyard on the north side was wreathed in *Clematis montana* and ➤





**Azaleas and Solomon's seal invigorate the woodland, the area that Jekyll first turned her attention to when she came to Munstead Wood**

decorated with pots filled with hostas, lilies and ferns. Pots also lined the edge of the tank garden, with lilies and cannas reflecting into the pool. Each of the paths in the ornamental gardens to the west was flanked by borders, which provided a succession of bloom as well as unique vistas of the house.

Jekyll's gardens gave her ample subject matter for the hundreds of garden notes she wrote for more than 30 years for *COUNTRY LIFE*, in addition to her books. In her articles published before the First World War, she supplied most of the pictures herself, but after that, she relied on photographs taken by Herbert Cowley, who became *COUNTRY LIFE*'s gardens editor after the departure of E. T. Cook in 1911. Cowley, a frequent guest at Munstead Wood, snapped the famous picture of Jekyll strolling in her spring garden in 1918.

Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, Jekyll wrote regular columns for *COUNTRY LIFE*'s 'In the Garden' feature, and, with a few exceptions, they were about borders in her kitchen gardens rather than the ornamental gardens surrounding the house, indicating where her gardening energies were directed at that time. One of her constant themes was the use of grey foliage: 'To those who regard their gardens as giving opportunities

of displaying a series of pictures of plant beauty... the use of grey foliage with the accompaniment of suitable flowers is one of the most valuable,' she wrote in 1921. Ever the artist, she suggested that 'in walking through a garden, after passing some groups of gorgeous red and orange, it is an extraordinary relief and pleasure to the eye to come to a place of tender colouring set in a ground of grey.' In another article, she suggested that purple, lilac and pink flowers were especially suited for grouping with grey, provided there was a sprinkling of white blossoms. Most of the borders she described were in separate areas surrounding a picturesque clapboard loft that Lutyens had concocted from an old barn that was about to be demolished.

The end of the First World War brought financial hardship to Jekyll, who was by then in her seventies and growing more reclusive. Before that, she may have lived beyond her means, with a large staff, including a head gardener and two under-gardeners. Her nursery sales helped to defray expenses, but in the end, she made few improvements to the house or garden. At the time of her death in 1932, the shrubberies around the house were considerably overgrown, and most were later cleared

so that an entrance drive could be added. By then, the house and garden were considered an anachronism, which, together with the dispersal of her estate and the breaking up of the property in 1948, seemed to spell doom. Her professional papers found a good home at the University of California at Berkeley, after they were purchased by the American landscape architect Beatrix Farrand, who was an early admirer of Jekyll's and had initially visited Munstead Wood in 1895.

The house and woodland gardens survive in excellent condition, and separate parcels, all still privately owned, include The Hut, the gardener's cottage, and the kitchen gardens (now known as Munstead Quadrangle). Jekyll's legacy lies primarily in the books and articles she wrote about Munstead Wood and in the photographic record by Charles Latham, Cowley and Jekyll herself, now updated, a century on, with new *COUNTRY LIFE* photography to be added to its archive.

*'Gertrude Jekyll and the Country House Garden' will be published by Aurum Press on May 25*

**Facing page** Plentiful mounds of rosemary and sage enhance the house's exterior



