

Casting a spell

De Wiersse garden, Achterhoek, Holland

In the hands of its Dutch and Anglo-Irish owners, the remarkable wood and water gardens of a moated manor house bewitch James McGrath as winter gives way to spring

Photographs by Marianne Majerus

SOME gardens possess a unique spirit, measured by a careful balance of geography, landscape, layout and plants, but, most importantly, it's the people who create and inhabit the garden that are intrinsic to its success. In my estimation, no other place achieves the balance of these elements more gracefully than De Wiersse, in the Dutch countryside.

Several key areas of the garden are contained between two moats, the first wrapping immediately around the house and the second placed at some distance. In between the two lie the West Lawn, a rose garden, a sunken garden and what is known as the Lime Garden. These garden rooms, in close proximity to the house, have an intimate feeling and are used frequently.

Beyond the outer moat, the garden becomes more open and expansive, looping around the rest of the property, making the perfect situation for a relaxed stroll. Its garden paths, wide enough for two people to walk side by side, alternate through areas of bright, open meadow and heavily wooded parts, revealing vistas across the streams and ponds that are encountered along the way.

From the wild garden, a pair of gates leads into a productive kitchen garden at one of the furthest points from the house and to make a return to the house from there, the best way to go is through an old orchard that links to a serpentine beech tunnel. Upon exiting the beech tunnel, you are

greeted by a small fountain garden from which, in turn, you can find your way back to a bridge over the outer moat, thence to the rose garden next to the house.

Since 1678, the gardens of De Wiersse have been gently shaped by the hands of one family and, everywhere, details of craftsmanship and skill suggest there has been much thought and planning. The present gardens were chiefly made between 1912 and 1928, initially by Alice de Stuers and her father, Victor de Stuers, a mover-and-shaker in the world of art collecting and conservation, then by Alice with her husband.

In 1912, when aged 17, Alice designed the Rose Garden, quickly followed by the sunken garden and kitchen garden. (The Rose Garden still contains some plants from Alice's time, including deep-pink Laurent Carle and Mrs Oakley Fisher, an early hybrid Tea of the 1920s, as well as more modern roses such as Lili Marlene, dating from 1959.)

In 1926, Alice became the second wife of William Edward Gatacre, an Anglo-Irish former prisoner of war, who brought to the property some of the romantic spirit of Irish gardening, injecting into it some of his memories of Co Waterford. Gatacre concerned himself with creating a progression through the garden along unbroken walks on soft, sandy

The view from the formal garden, out to the wood and wilder areas



Need to know

The estate, which covers some 740 acres, includes 38 acres of gardens and 74 acres of parkland, surrounding a 17th- and 18th-century moated manor house built on medieval foundations. A Saxon farmhouse in the grounds is available to rent as a holiday *gîte*, with access to the grounds.

paths, which are perfect for admiring the many vistas.

Believing that paths must have a reason for stopping, he placed urns, steps, a fountain and statuary throughout, providing surprise and pleasure to visitors while letting some trees and shrubs spill over into paths, a deliberate reaction against formality. As in an English—or Irish—landscape park, trees remain in natural form, seamlessly linking the gardens to the Dutch landscape beyond.

In 1963, Peter Gatacre, son of Alice and William, began managing the estate, with his wife, Laura, joining in from 1978. They are avid plantmen and together manage a small gardening team. Nothing is done in haste and, when changes are due, all details are first considered at length.

Spring awakenings

In spring, swathes of snake's head fritillaries emerge on the banks of the meadow, spreading by way of seed and the aid of gardeners' hands. The fritillaries' nodding heads, some chequered, some white, are reflected in the outer moat, the water acting as a mirror reflecting light and the canopies of the great trees.

The 'wild garden' opens into a spinney of birches—*Betula pendula*,



Above: Perfect pruning of box.
Below: *Fritillaria meleagris*

B. pendula Tristis and *B. pubescens*, with a carpet of narcissus and dog's tooth violet *Erythronium* Pagoda lighting up the woodland floor. In creating the open wood, Gatacre had been inspired by Curraghmore, the same Irish garden that influenced a young William Robinson. 'Chance' views are all important—one such unexpectedly draws the eye from an octagonal tea house, through a gap in the trees and to the farmland beyond.

Every five years, an acre or so is more or less cleared, the fearlessness in felling

‘Don't make a museum of plants, but use strong groups’

tall trees allowing De Wiersse to stay ahead of itself, with the open space used to plant new saplings. The cycle of growth, clearance and renewal prevents the sort of stagnation that can be felt in most mature gardens; it keeps the plantings fresh.

Proportion of space, rhythm, forms and colours successfully echoes what Alice decreed during the garden's development: 'Don't make a museum of plants, but use strong groups.' Mrs Gatacre continues this approach today. A plethora of spring bulbs is a prelude to intense combinations later in the season. Borders and an acacia pergola are visually held within a framework of sheared yew hedging, whose dark, matte texture sets off the mixed plantings of seasonal interest.

The West Lawn is the final act, showcasing the descending sun with its golden hues and ribbons of pink and orange, between sharply clipped yew forms. Such a sight celebrates the beautiful Netherlands light. I am constantly haunted by the sublime beauty that is De Wiersse.

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Below: Looking across the formal *parterre* to the house. Facing page: Early-morning mist on the riverbank

