

This border of
alstroemerias and
delphiniums by
the stone-pillared
summerhouse is
overhung with
white *Rosa*
Rambling Rector.

Helping HANDS

Whalton Manor in Northumberland has an exquisite garden, which its obliging owner maintains with help from career-changing trainees ▶

PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAYERUS | WORDS SUSIE WHITE



For several years now, Penny has had WRAGS trainees, which has benefitted both the garden and the trainees

ABOVE The manor house is smothered in roses, wisteria and broom and is fronted by beds of roses and hostas. **RIGHT** A flagstone path leading away from the pergola is dotted with golden oregano, *Geranium sanguineum*, santolina and *Alchemilla mollis*.



GARDEN NOTES

Three-acre Arts and Crafts garden that hosts trainees

Said to be the longest manor house in England, Whalton Manor runs parallel to the village street, its south-facing walls half hidden by roses, wisteria and Moroccan broom. What was once four houses was linked by Sir Edwin Lutyens, and joined together by a graceful arch. Beyond this lies the three-acre garden, a garden that owner Penny Norton has developed and loved for many years.

'I was 22 when I married my husband Timmy,' Penny says, 'and I had to learn on the job how to look after the house and garden. There's a lot of upkeep, and we've never had a full-time qualified gardener.'

The garden's layout owes much to Lutyens and, although there is no documentary evidence, Timmy has a childhood memory of Gertrude Jekyll being discussed in relation to the planting. Penny has incorporated many

Jekyll favourites, and created colour-themed borders in sympathy with the garden's history.

There is something soothing and timeless in the clematis and roses that fall in swags from the pergolas, and the lamb's ears that form a clippy rug in front of Lutyens' stone-pillared summerhouse. Unpretentious and simple elements fit the Arts and Crafts ethos: a 30m-long peony border; astilbe borders wrapping round a lawn; and a line of catmint running down the entire east wall of the garden. In spring, a grove of laburnum trees becomes a mass of golden rain above frothy white cow parsley.

Maintaining a garden of this size is not easy. 'I open it for groups as well as for the NGS and weddings,' says Penny, 'which in turn means keeping it to a high standard.' For several years now, she has had a WRAGS (Work And Retrain As A Gardener Scheme) trainee, which has benefitted both the garden and the



LEFT Lutyens designed this pretty hexagonal building with pantile roof, which is set into a right angle of the garden wall at the top of a short flight of stone steps. **BELOW** Penny (centre) with her most recent trainee Sue Foster (left) and part-time gardener Maxine Eaton (right).

trainee. This unique training scheme is organised by a charity, the Women's Farm & Garden Association. It was founded in 1899 by a small group of women who were concerned by the lack of opportunities for females to train and work on the land. WRAGS is

a way of bringing together garden owners and trainees. The owner pays £5 an hour to the trainee for a 15-hour week. These days, the trainee may be a man, though it is usually women looking for a change in direction. Penny has had three trainees and her third, Sue Fraser ►



RIGHT Clematis, phlox, roses and alstroemerias feature in the 'brick wall border'.

BELOW Rosa 'Paul's Himalayan Musk' scrambles over the gate to the vegetable garden.



from North Shields, has stayed on as her part-time gardener. 'This couldn't be further removed from my previous job,' says Sue. 'I was in commercial sales, selling flooring products to the construction industry and travelling up and down the A1. I've always loved gardening as an

escape, but it was a leap of faith to try to make a new career from it.'

It was a year before Sue was teamed up with Penny, because more gardens are needed to offer places under the scheme. 'It didn't feel like an interview,' Sue recalls, sitting with Penny under the 300-year-old sessile

oak. 'There was a passionate desire to learn from both sides, as we are both potty about plants. To work in a beautiful garden like this has made a huge difference to me.'

Each trainee works for one year so that, no matter when they start, all seasons and tasks are covered. Friendships develop, working together sparks new ideas, and a lifelong gardener like Penny can pass on her knowledge. 'The three trainees I've had have been inspirational,' says Penny. 'Being older, they are really committed to learning, and often bring different skills with them too. My trainee Tricia Dodds, for example, had a marketing background, so she helped with our leaflets and promotion.' Tricia now works part-time for a local garden designer.

Trainees work two days a week and this makes it possible to spend the other days earning. They are also encouraged to study horticulture; Sue was named student of the year at



FAR LEFT Beans growing in the kitchen garden - there is a lot of upkeep to do at Whalton.

LEFT The long bed of catmint along the east wall is reached through a metal arch with Clematis 'Duchess of Edinburgh', Rosa 'Easlea's Golden Rambler', and an early Rosa 'Madame Grégoire Staechelin'.

BELOW Pink Rosa 'Morning Jewel' blooms above lime-yellow Alchemilla mollis and lavender in the courtyard.

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nearby Kirkley Hall college. Now that she is staying on at Whalton Manor, Penny will take on a new trainee, who Sue in turn will help supervise - though working on their own initiative is very much a part of learning. 'Having a trainee concentrates my mind,' says Penny, 'and makes me think about what needs to be done at a given time of year. It helps me think about the structure of the garden and what is needed to fill in gaps for her career.'

Gertrude Jekyll was one of the Women's Farm & Garden Association's early members, and its vice-president in 1916, so there's a pleasing link in being able to train in a garden with Jekyll connections.

The soothingly cool white and blue border gradually changes into lime green, blue and copper; roses arch abundantly against the old

brick walls; and Lutyens' stone-paved courtyard soaks up the sun. Vegetables run in neat lines behind a yew hedge, a greenhouse is packed with tender plants, and its nearby coldframes bursting with unusual specimens propagated for selling from a barrow on the roadside. There are stone urns to fill with summer planting, wide lawns to maintain, and climbers to prune. Within its three acres, Whalton Manor encompasses most things that a gardener needs to learn.

Whalton Manor, Whalton, Morpeth, Northumberland NE61 3UT. Open to groups by appt. Call +44 (0)1670 775205. www.whaltonmanor.co.uk If you want to host trainees or retrain yourself, go to www.wfga.org.uk

Advice on hosting trainees ►



WHALTON MANOR NOTEBOOK

RETRAINING AS A GARDENER

The WRAGS scheme is now open to men and women who wish to change career and get hands-on practical training at a garden. Trainees learn how to do all the tasks required in a garden throughout the year, from pruning wisteria (*below*) to planting. Penny is presently looking for a new trainee for next year.



TIP TOP

The high garden wall is topped with pyramids on short brick pillars (*above*). These are stackstones that once supported haystacks (to prevent rats living beneath them). It is typical of the Arts and Crafts appreciation of artisan work.

GARDEN CHALLENGES

UPKEEP: Penny's biggest challenge is 'just keeping the show on the road. I have to make sure the gardens are up to scratch for groups and weddings, which help pay for the help I get in. It's labour-intensive here but I suppose that's my own fault!'

ALSO IN THE AREA

If you are in Northumberland, Penny recommends the following places:

- **GARDEN Mindrum** There's similar romantic planting to Whalton in this garden, overlooking the Bowmont valley. Mindrum, Northumberland TD12 4QN. Tel: +44 (0)1890 850634. www.mindrumestate.com
- **NURSERY Halls of Heddon** Penny buys her dahlias from this famous nursery. West Heddon Nursery Centre, Heddon on the Wall, Newcastle upon Tyne NE15 0JS. Tel: +44 (0)1661 852445. www.hallsfofheddon.co.uk
- **RESTAURANT The Old Boathouse** Great for freshly caught seafood and local produce. Leazes Street, Amble NE65 0AA. Tel: +44 (0)1665 711232.



TENDER LITTLE DAISY

'I saw this daisy, *Argyranthemum gracile* 'Chelsea Girl', at Glyndebourne years ago,' says Penny, 'and had to search hard to buy it. Now I take cuttings every year to fill the urns, pots and stone troughs. It's not at all hardy, but I love its grey feathery form.'

PENNY'S TIPS ON HOSTING TRAINEES IN YOUR GARDEN

- **Share the workload** by taking on a committed trainee and learning to delegate rather than trying to do everything yourself.
- **Employ a skilled gardener part-time** if you can, so that they can take on teaching the trainee on the days you can't be there yourself.
- **Make a plan the day before** so you know what needs doing. But be flexible as things can change overnight because of the weather.
- **Prioritise.** I'll have already walked it the day before, but I will still go around the garden first thing in the morning with my trainee to show the order for doing each job.
- **Try to match the capabilities** of the person with the job. Make the most of their individual talents; this will then be positive for them and you.

