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MARCH 2022

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# RUNNING WILD

With its sweeping views across the Malvern Hills, the garden at Arts & Crafts Perrycroft is an exercise in letting go for Gillian Archer, whose increasingly natural approach is enlivened by a sea of rare native daffodils

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS CAROLÉ DRAKE





**This image** Neat topiary in the formal areas of the garden.

**Opposite** A view towards the distinctive outline of the hillfort British Camp.





**Top** Vast swathes of wild daffodils, a native plant, but now a true rarity.  
**Above** Graceful *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* viewed in close up.  
**Right** Nodding flowers of white-flowered snake's head fritillary grow among the daffodils.

**B**ack in 1999, when Gillian and Mark Archer bought Perrycroft, set high on the western flanks of the Malvern Hills in Herefordshire, they had no idea that their new garden was full of wild daffodils until they removed the sheep that had been grazing them off. Since then, the lent lilies, so called because they flower around Easter, have spread themselves across the grassy slopes below the house, trumpeting the arrival of spring with many thousands of sulphur-yellow, nodding flowers.

Wild daffodils, *Narcissus pseudonarcissus*, are a rare sight in the landscape today, although they still thrive in the so-called Golden Triangle around the village of Newent in Gloucestershire, ten miles south of Perrycroft. Their flowers have a grace that is seldom found in cultivated types: pale yellow petals surround a darker trumpet amid narrow, grey-green foliage. Threaded through the daffodils at Perrycroft are primroses, violets and snake's head fritillaries – a feast for early-flying bees and butterflies.

Perrycroft had been a much-loved rural retreat for the Birmingham Battalion of the Boys' Brigade for 30 years when the Archers took it on. Designed





*“To the west the view appears  
endless, stretching across the  
landscape to extend, on clear days,  
across Herefordshire and into Wales”*



The formal garden features clipped yew topiary and elegant box parterres in contrast to the wilder areas.





in 1893 by renowned architect and designer C. F. A. Voysey (1857-1941), the rough-textured, white-washed house, with its 'large hipped roof with deep eaves sitting like a protective hat over the building', enjoys a spectacular position. To the south it looks towards the ziggurat-like form of an Iron Age hillfort known as British Camp, and to the west the view appears endless, stretching across the landscape to extend, on clear days, across Herefordshire and into Wales.

Influenced by the Arts & Crafts movement Voysey designed every detail of the house, from doorknobs to rainwater hoppers, and more than 80 detailed drawings of Perrycroft held at London's Victoria and Albert Museum have been invaluable in Gillian and Mark's sensitive restoration. Only a few drawings relate to the garden, though, so the couple had a free hand. Keen to make a garden in keeping with the house and its ethos, they took inspiration from other gardens of the period, like Lytes Cary in Somerset, a

**Above** Yew hedging is topped with teacups and hares, in a playful nod to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

**Right** The house at Perrycroft was designed by C. F. A. Voysey to blend seamlessly with its natural surroundings.





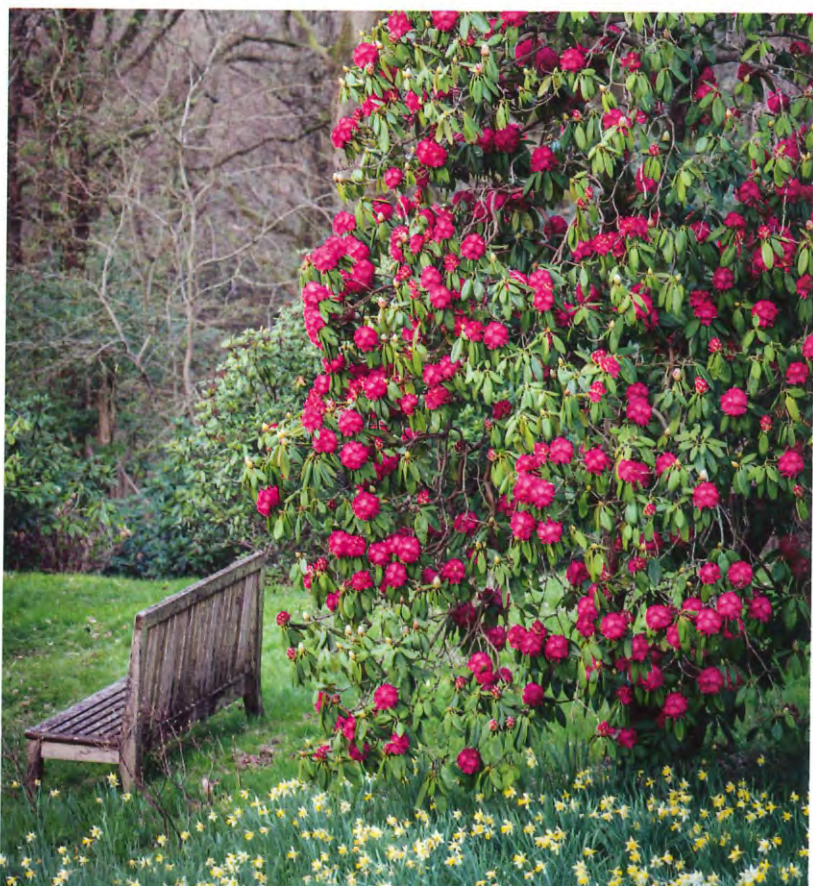


**Above** Clipped box balls and euphobias in the formal garden.

**Left** Waxy blooms of western skunk cabbage, *Lysichiton americanus*, grow in a boggy area.

**Below** Rich magenta rhododendrons contrast beautifully with the pale greenish-yellow of the wild daffodils beneath.

*“The house is fitted with vine eyes for climbers and wall shrubs so it can grow into its setting”*



place Gillian knew well from working in Wessex as regional conservator for the National Trust.

Once the brambles and self-seeded ash swamping the wild garden had been cleared, and the overgrown yew hedges enclosing two sides of the formal garden on the west side of the house cut back, Gillian and Mark could begin to make their garden. “It’s a very exposed site, so for the first six to eight years we concentrated on planting more hedges,” Gillian explains. “In the formal garden I made box-edged beds either side of a central path framed with yew topiary. Originally we tried to make a vegetable garden here: it was a mistake because the soil wasn’t good enough and it was difficult to work because of the slope.” Rethinking this area, Gillian took inspiration from Herterton House in Northumberland where exuberant perennial planting contrasts with a strong formal structure of evergreens. “I conceived a colour scheme that started with soft, cool shades in spring, building to warmer tones in the autumn, using mostly cottage garden plants, particularly late-season perennials, which look good all through the season,” she affirms.

William Robinson’s *The Wild Garden*, published in 1870, would have been an influence on the owners of small country estates like Perrycroft. He was

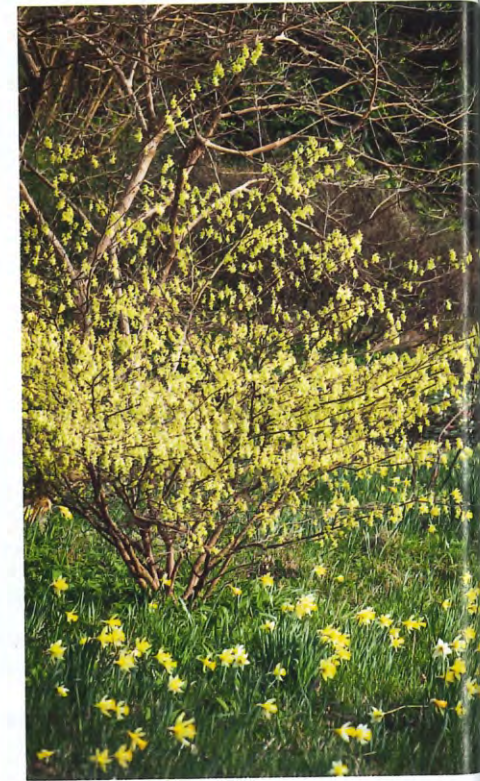
an advocate of working with nature rather than against it, and the wild garden below the house is a reflection of his principles with broad grass walks between mature trees and shrubs, meadows, pond and woodland. Hardy

exotics such as bamboos and rhododendrons look at home here in long grass mixed with native trees and shrubs. “In the right setting rhododendrons are magnificent plants. They enjoy the conditions here, so I’ve recently planted some more with flowers in different shades of pink to lighten a dark area in late spring,” says Gillian. “I like the way the dogwoods do that too, how their white bracts reflect the light.

“Voysey was more of a nature lover than a gardener,” she adds. “His gardens are sketched very simply, but his houses were designed to blend with their surroundings. Benches against the house take in vistas at different times of the day, and the house is fitted with vine eyes for climbers and wall shrubs so the house can grow into its setting.” Unable to find garden furniture to suit the garden, Gillian took inspiration from Voysey’s work and designed her own, including a seat with high sides: “It’s like a fireside chair in a pub. It has a sense of cosiness.”

Gillian’s ideas about how to garden have evolved since moving to Perrycroft. “I have help with the hedges and the mowing, but the most important tasks, which are deadheading and weeding, I do





myself. I like to weed on my hands and knees so I can see what's there and choose what to leave and what to take out. Natural self-seeding really makes the nicest effects, and if a plant fades away and leaves a gap, it's interesting to see what will blow in and fill it. Just step back and see what happens."

Gillian has stopped growing tulips and dahlias too: "Planting tulips messes with the structure of the soil too much, and the dahlias are a lot of work. I want the garden to be as self-sustaining as possible and for the soil structure to remain intact, so we mulch a lot but dig as little as we can get away with." Mirabel Osler's *A Gentle Plea for Chaos*, in which the author argues for a less controlling approach to our gardens, is a favourite text.

The tulips have been replaced with narcissus: "In the formal garden I've planted white daffodils such as 'Thalia' and 'Ice Wings', which look beautiful against the new lime-green growth of the box," says Gillian. Rather guiltily she admits a liking for pink-tinted narcissus too, including 'Bell Song', a jonquil type with a pale pink trumpet, and 'Katie Heath', which has an apricot-pink cup. Silvery stachys leaves, the chartreuse bracts of euphorbias and sapphire-blue scillas also add sparkle to bright spring days.

As the daffodils in the wild garden fade, a succession of other flowers emerge to take their place, starting with native bluebells and fragrant *Narcissus poeticus*, the pheasant's eye daffodil, with its white petals and a flattened yellow cup. Next come summer blooms, such as common spotted orchids, cerise betony, statuesque angelica, mauve knapweeds and bright ox-eye daisies, with the lilac-blue pincushions of devil's-bit scabious bringing up the rear into autumn. Managing the grass for the mosaic of wild flowers that live in it is a complicated



task: "Areas that contain only daffodils get cut first, at the end of June," Gillian explains. "It's more difficult to judge when to cut areas that also contain later-flowering plants. Some areas we tend to leave completely uncut because of the birds, goldfinches in particular, that come to feed on the seedheads."

Like Voysey, Gillian sees herself as more naturalist than gardener, finding herself observing more and intervening less as the garden matures: "I feel you've got to let go and see what the garden does," she concludes. It seems to be doing beautifully. ■

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Perrycroft, Jubilee Drive, Upper Colwall, Malvern, Herefordshire WR13 6DN. The garden opens to groups and individuals by appointment only from 15 April to 29 October, Wednesday to Saturday, 10am to 4pm. For more information or to arrange a visit, see [perrycroft.co.uk](http://perrycroft.co.uk)

**Top left** The steeply sloping nature of the formal garden lends itself to strong structure.

**Top right** *Narcissus* 'Lucifer' is similar to this unnamed variety.

**Above right** Creamy yellow flowers spangle the branches of a *Corylopsis pauciflora* with daffodils at its feet.

**Above left** Clear blue *Chionodoxa lucilliae*.