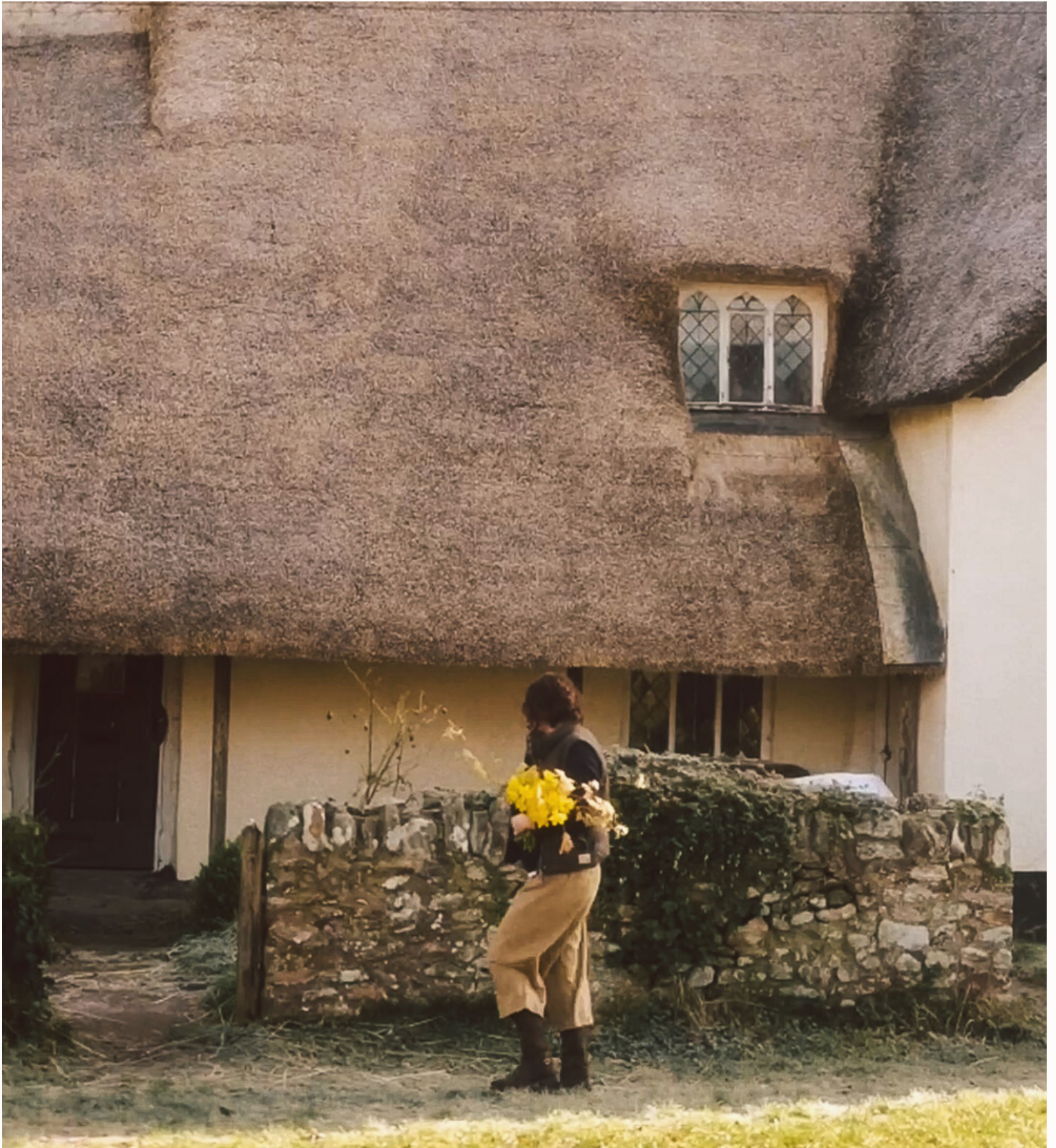


AN ENGLISH COTTAGE GARDEN



GATHER

Five tips for creating
a cottage garden.

Writing & images by
Grace Alexander

GATHER : AN ENGLISH COTTAGE GARDEN

Through Gather, I publish digital, bi-monthly seasonal journals, capturing the changing seasons in flowers, landscapes, food and forms. If you would like to share this journal with friends, please do feel free to direct them to my website [gracealexanderflowers.co.uk], where they can sign up and download their copy.

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Desdemona rose

AN INTRODUCTION

Grace Alexander knows a bit about the need for escapism. When she isn't packing seeds, turning a back lawn into a kitchen garden or debating the pros and cons of dinnerplate dahlias (just *too* big?), she is a child psychologist. The days might be a bit grim, but the weekends are filled with dogs, tea, flowers and the wondrous experience of life in a Somerset thatched cottage set within an English country garden.

She has been gardening forever, off and on. What she lacks in technical brilliance, she makes up for with experience and enthusiasm. Her growing space (about a quarter of an acre, tiny) was all developed from scratch in 2013 and has been going from strength to strength ever since. It includes an orchard, a flower field, meadows and a kitchen garden.

Grace is, believe it or not, a registered and certified seed-merchant. She has been growing flowers for sale (either as flowers or for seed) since 2013 and launched her passion project, Gather with Grace Alexander, in August 2020.

She is also the author of the best-selling book, *Grow & Gather*, and her work has been featured in places like The Guardian, Gardens Illustrated, and House & Garden.

She is not a person of half measures so she doesn't really have hobbies or interests, she has obsessions and all-consuming passions. Currently, Japanese textiles and dyeing, unusual winter squash varieties, intentionally under-exposed photography, and building hazel domes for old roses.

Always dogs though, always.



Maud & a climbing rose, a cottage garden stalwart

01

ROMANCE

The thing I so adore about cottage gardens is that they are *romantic*. Forget strong, minimalist clean lines that invigorate and constrain; think hidden corners, sensuous lines and secret spots, and benches hidden amongst roses for gossip and trysts.

Here's how to achieve that in your own back yard.

Consider all the senses. We so often design gardens with colour and (maybe) texture. Broaden this to consider movement and sound too. And scent. We all need to be whisked away from reality every so often and creating an immersive, sensory experience is the key to doing it. Remember, movement doesn't have to be in the form of the actual plants. A garden which attracts wildlife will take on its own movement and sound. My kitchen garden is full of hedge germander and, when in flower, there are so many bees that the whole garden moves.

Use changes or surprises to capture the attention. The brain looks for change, and things that are unexpected are arresting. Joshua Sparkes (who used to be the head gardener at Forde Abbey in Somerset, one of the most romantic gardens) gave me a tip that he learned from his study of gardens in Japan. Change the texture under your feet. We have cobbles and then bricks, back to cobbles and then gravel. The thresholds and the change in both the noise of the material and the sensation of the texture under your feet will ground you and bring your awareness to the garden around.

Talking of surprises, very old school designers will tell you to fill a border with the tall plants at the back and the short ones at the front. How indescribably boring. Mix them up a bit, and put fine airy plants in the middle and at the front so you have glimpses of the rest of the garden. Sanguisorbas are perfect for this, or grasses if you are feeling brave.



My studio at home

02

STRUCTURE AND FROTH

Once you get your eye in, you will realise that most typically English gardens have one thing in common; they are a little bit of structure holding together a lot of froth. The structure often comes in the form of box hedging (Hidcote in the Cotswolds is perfect for this) or even the mad yew topiary at Great Dixter.

The absolute doyenne of English Cottage gardening was Margery Fish, who built a garden which sits only a few miles down the road from my own garden at Malus Farm. Her structure of choice was the beautiful line of clipped cypresses that flank a central path. It is surrounded by wild, abundant, mad planting. If you put your hand over the trees in the picture, see what a difference it makes? (Next page.) Without it, a cottage garden is a sort of terribly contrived, messy meadow. Add in a touch of structure and you have heaven.

Add a hedge, edge, or low fence around a bed and watch it be instantly transformed. I also make the most of some box balls that I planted into grass; they just elevate a whole space from wanton neglect to understated elegance. The bits in between the structure, let it go absolutely wild. Don't hold back. (More on planting later.)

If you don't have the time, money or the room for a topiary alley (and let's face it, who does?) you can apply the same principles to container gardening. Rather than having lots of plants in lots of pots, find a containers with really strong structural shape, and absolutely stuff it with colour and texture. Arthur Parkinson does this brilliantly so look him up. He favours a dolly tub but they are so hard to find so I go for troughs and tanks. The bigger, the better.



Picture by Jason Ingram

03

QUINTESSENTIALLY ENGLISH

Once you have your structure in place (and a little goes a long way), let's talk about planting. As above, planting should be frothy and abundant.

Absolutely no bare soil – every corner should be full of plants. The added benefit of this is much better soil health and much less weeding.

In 1955 Vita Sackville West wrote:

'Cram, cram, cram, every chink and cranny. My liking for gardens to be lavish is an inherent part of my garden philosophy. I like generosity wherever I can find it, whether in gardens or elsewhere.'

Amen to that I say.

This is my dream list for planting for the perfect English cottage garden. These plants are picked for being bold, vibrant, abundant and generous, as well as being a mix of tall spires, frothy

fillers, and soft rounds. The ones marked with an * are the ones I sell in my members' seed shop for growing in both English and American gardens:

Hollyhocks
 Foxgloves*
 Roses
 Cosmos*
 Nigella*
 Sweet peas*
 Hesperis*
 Honesty*
 Ammi majus*
 Borage* and other herbs
 Viola*
 Cornflowers*
 Globe thistle*
 Ox eye daisies*
 Bladder campion*
 Cornflowers*
 Scabious*
 Poppies*

Play the numbers game. A cottage garden wants to look like it was a result of some very lucky self-seeding, like it just sort of evolved in the way Nature intended it to. However, to stop it all just becoming a tangle of plants, clump the flowers together in groups of three or five. Borage is bigger than you think, so you only need three. Cornflowers can look weedy on their own, put them in fives. Not too many though, you don't want it to look patchy.

There is such a sweet spot between having one of everything (which looks like a headache because it is such a muddle), and over-curating down to three different, colour-coordinated plants (which looks like suburban hell to me).

One of my absolute favourite gardens, South Wood Farm, wins full marks for romance. It is stuffed with flowers but, on closer inspection, it is a certain number of plants repeated over and over again. The same roses. The same textural plants and airy gestures. The

designer of the garden told the story that he imagined an old farmer living in the house and creating a garden of beauty from only a few plants. Driving off to the local garden centre and filling the boot with pots wasn't an option. He had to build a garden by propagating what he had, by taking cuttings from his roses, by saving seed from his delphiniums, by letting the daisies spread in the cracks in the paving.

Cottage gardening once meant frugal gardening, but it still means abundance.

Start with just a few packets of seed, and be amazed about what you can do.

How to grow lots of plants from a packet of seeds:

Start your seeds when the soil is starting to warm up. If you where you live has a late, wet, cold spring, start seeds off under cover so they are growing on strongly before the weather warms up. Make sure they have enough moisture and heat to burst into life (germination – the action coming to life of a seed needs warmth; the growing on needs light). Invest in good compost. It truly can make all the difference to how many seedlings you get out of a packet of seeds. It really is worth putting a bit of effort in for the first year or so, because hopefully, once all your flowers have bloomed and set seed, they'll spread the next generations around without your help.

How to multiply with cuttings:

I find the middle of spring to be the best time for cuttings. Not when the growth is lush and a bit floppy, they just wilt. So not the first flush of spring, but once the growth has settled down a bit.

The technique is the same for almost all cuttings. Cut a length of stem without flowers or buds about the length of a pencil. Trim it neatly just below a node (the point where the leaves branch from the stem) and cut off the lower leaves to give you a bare stem. Push it down the side of a pot into gritty, free-draining soil. Do not forget the grit; it is essential. I find cuttings just rot otherwise. Yes, this is the voice of sad experience. Take a few extra because they won't all strike, and having extras to share is a core part of the English cottage garden way. Leave in peace in a sheltered spot.

Some take only a few weeks to put out roots (box, rosemary, lavender). Some take the best part of a year (roses). You'll know when they are ready for planting out because you'll be able to see white roots at the bottom of the pot and the cutting will start to put on its own growth.



FOXGLOVES

04

RIGHT PLANT, RIGHT PLACE

I am blessed. My cottage garden is set in Somerset in the west of England (the rainier side). It nestles in a sheltered valley, where the hills meet a wide sweeping vale. The soil, the climate, the warmth and the wet make for lush and abundant planting in the spring, happy flowers in the summer, and the relatively warm winters mean that even my dahlias make it through from year to year. Pre-climate change anyway.

If you are anywhere with a relatively mild climate (does grass grow lush and green around you without too much human help?), then you and I can use many of the same plants, including that more romantic of cottage garden plants, the sweet pea.

If I could only grow and sell one flower seed, it would be the ultimate vintage blush sweet pea, 'Piggy Sue'. In such demand it is now rare as hen's

teeth, it is almost impossible to get anywhere except from me.

If you are looking to create the English cottage garden look somewhere less hospitable, then the trick is to use all the design principles I've talked about in this guide, but switch up the actual plants. Peer into neighbours' gardens, research native plants that thrive for you. It will be slightly different for everyone; there are going to be plants that thrive here that will turn up their toes on the other side of the Atlantic. There are ones that I adore and nurture into life that are so enthusiastically invasive in other countries that I would be arrested if I so much as sent you a packet.

If you are in a really hot climate, I have recently come across a really helpful gardener in Australia, Timothy Pilgrim who recommends amazing plants. I fear that I will increasingly need to

know about drought-tolerant plants and so I pay attention to what he says. You can find him on Instagram. Can you believe this picture is a garden in Australia? Admittedly the slightly more hospitable of it but even so.

One you have a plant list, then just apply the tips:

1.
Think about the different senses
2.
Add a bit of structure and a lot of froth
3.
Plant densely with heights staggered and textures mixed, but group in threes or fives

Top marks and go to the top of the class if you can look at Timothy's picture and tick off all the principles that he's used that I talk about in this guide.



05

BREAD & ROSES

The term 'Bread and Roses' is from a political speech given by American women's suffrage activist, Helen Todd. The line in her speech 'bread for all, and roses too' inspired the title of the poem Bread and Roses by James Oppenheim. The poem was first published in The American Magazine in December 1911, with the attribution line "Bread for all, and Roses, too"—a slogan of the women in the West."

In short, we deserve enough sustenance to survive, but we also deserve beauty in our lives to truly thrive.

Traditionally, English cottage gardens are full of usefulness as well as beauty. Flowers can lift the heart and make life worth living, but they will not sustain your soul for long if you have nothing to nourish your body. Everything in a cottage garden has earned its place; kales and cabbages, herbs and hazels rub alongside flowers that were grown

for scent, teas, medicines, or for dyeing cloth. The separation of the 'veg patch' from the rest of the garden is a very modern invention.

Be brave. Mix up your beauty and your bread. With a cottage garden, you can have it all.

My favourite, beautiful edibles

Borlotti beans, or any of the peas and bean family (added bonus that the frames for growing them up add height and give structure)

Black kale
Broad beans
Mint

Edible flowers

Calendula*
Violas*
Borage*

*Seed for these edible flowers are available in the Gather seed shop.



06

EMBRACE THE WILD & THE WONKY

Straight lines might get you from A to B directly and efficiently, but where's the fun in that? Curves and softened edges are more natural and somehow more human. There is a happy medium to be had here – if you make the patch from your front gate to your front door too wiggly, the postman will simply walk over your delphiniums, just as they were starting to flower. They haven't got time for enjoying the journey.

The path through my kitchen garden leading from the back of the cottage to my studio and then my truck was meant to be dead straight. (Absolutely not my idea.) But when we had a trench dug for the water and the electricity to go to the studio, the man on the digger dug it backwards so he couldn't see where he was headed, and it went a bit off course. He corrected himself about halfway along, but when we paved over his trench, it was undeniably a bit wonky. My husband was incandescent about it, but I (characteristically) embraced the imperfection.

*Other ways of softening
hard landscaping:*

/ Planting tumblers along the edges (Lady's mantle, Violas, thyme)

/ Let creeping plants start to move into any cracks in the paving. Creeping thyme is perfect, although be mindful of it not making the path unsafe or slippery. Also releases gorgeous scent under foot.

*Other ways of bringing in
the wild imperfections*

Let flowers self-seed. You can dig up and move volunteers early in the season, but sometimes, they know best where they want to be and this can bring a touch of the unexpected to your space. My highlight of last year was a white aquilegia which appeared under a bay tree. Absolutely no idea where it came from, but you can bet that I scattered the seed everywhere at the end of the summer.



My kitchen garden, showing the 'bones' of the hedges

bonus tip

DON'T LEAVE YOUR FLOWERS AT THE DOOR

Imagine the garden is an ocean and the house a ship, floating gently on the colourful water. The plants should lap at the front door, and sometimes break through.

Bring flowers indoors whenever you can. Sweet peas by the bed. A jug of mint and roses in the kitchen. A handful of cheerful violas scattered on a lemon drizzle cake.

Life will be all the sweeter for it. I promise.



Me & Hugo, planning our planting