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Front Cover: An urn with tulips and wallflowers in the 'secret garden' at Stourton House (p. 50).
Photograph by Jane Gifford.



A kind of Eden

Jane Gifford discovers that flowers are not the only thing to have flourished in Elizabeth Bullivant's garden

Photographs by JANE GIFFORD



IT WAS THE HYDRANGEAS THAT BROUGHT ELIZABETH BULLIVANT TO STOURTON HOUSE SOME THIRTY YEARS AGO. 'I had been used to gardening on chalk where of course they won't grow.' The garden and shrubbery at Stourton were a mass of brambles, elder and nettles and the lawn had become a deep mossy

hay field. Could she cope? 'I only had to look at the blue hydrangeas in full bloom above the chaos to know that the answer was - yes. Blue is my favourite colour. I didn't realise then what a task it would be. I had a romantic vision of a garden of Eden full of daffodils, tulips, honeysuckle, wisteria, sweet peas and roses (and now I could ▶



add hydrangeas) flowering together all year round in permanent sunshine!

'During the first year here I spent every available moment outside clearing the ground elder and bindweed, discovering plants and experimenting with new ones from cuttings or from seed. We rescued the blue hydrangeas as well as many pink ones from the brambles and found lots of hidden rhododendrons and azaleas.'

In the autumn, to Elizabeth's surprise, several strangers came to the door to ask for hydrangeas to dry. Elizabeth obliged and began experimenting herself. 'And so it was that blue hydrangeas started our dried flower business. There is nothing difficult or complicated about drying them. You just pick them at the right time, strip off the leaves and hang them up near the hot water boiler.'

Elizabeth's approach to her garden is refreshingly straightforward - everything has a place, wildflower invaders and rare and unusual garden plants alike. Nothing is wasted. 'We pick armfuls of greenery and seedheads that would end up on the compost heap or bonfire in most gardens. We rescue and preserve unfortunate flowers and tree limbs smashed by storm or snow.'

Elizabeth has succeeded in creating a kind of Eden. In May, it comes close to her vision. The house is covered in fragrant massive *Wisteria sinensis* and white *Clematis montana*. Stone urns filled with



Strangers came to the door to ask for door to ask for hydrangeas to dry

fragrant *Azalea luteum* shines sunshine yellow in the cool shade. Wild bluebells and pink purslane are massed beneath *Rhododendron 'Loderi King George'*, Elizabeth's favourite, which has produced bunches of enormous blushing white flowers from velvet buds shaped like ballet shoes. 'It needs grafting and is complicated to grow but it's worth it for the heavenly scent.' Elizabeth also recommends ▶

a traditional English mix of old-fashioned Parrot tulips, wallflowers and forget-me-nots decorate the terrace. The climbing rose 'Madame Butterfly' is producing perfect early flowers in the shelter of the veranda. Amongst variegated grasses and reeds, a cosseted lady prepares to dive into a pond, surrounded by bog-bean, water-lilies and water-irises. Nearby, the hardy pitcher plant, *Sarracenia purpurea*, has decked out its insect traps with five-petalled purple flowers.

Magnolia soulangeana gleams against a tall switch-back hedge of Leyland cypress which has taken 27 years to reach its present impressive height enclosing the lilypond and many lavish island flower beds and borders. It was fifteen years before the arches in the hedge closed. The pinnacles, added over the last two years, provide a final flourish to a perfectly private and magical part of the garden, sheltered from the wind.

Daisies and speedwell are allowed to flower in the lawns. In a wooded corner of the garden, sweetly



Previous page: *Wisteria sinensis* covers Stourton House. Main picture: Urn planted with a traditional English mixture of flowers. Top: Elizabeth Bullivant with last season's hydrangeas. Above left-right: *Rhododendron 'Loderi King George'*; tulips are an important source of colour; *Pieris 'Wakehurst'*



The best method needs patience and a dark well ventilated place like an airing cupboard

Pieris 'Wakehurst'. 'It has the best red when the leaves are young and the hanging bunches of tiny scented white flowers look splendid against them at this time of the year.' The leaves turn through pink to cream before becoming their final dark green.

Elizabeth has unearthed many unusual daffodils, including two unregistered old varieties; one with a split lemon yellow corona and white petals which she has named 'John Copeland' after the famous daffodil grower's son; and the other a creamy white daffodil which Elizabeth believes to be the original 'Mount Hood'.

Preserving flowers, seed heads and foliage is an all year round process. By May, the hydrangeas picked at the end of autumn are



dried and bunched ready for sale. Specially prepared flower beds have been neatly stocked with essential annuals like statice, helichrysums, nigella, acrocliniums, cornflowers and delphiniums. According to Elizabeth, evergreen ferns are best picked in spring as are the young fronds which can be pressed before they unfurl.

Years of work at the 'dried flower experimental station', as the kitchen Aga became affectionately known, have shown Elizabeth that almost everything in the garden can be preserved for everlasting flower arrangements. 'You don't need chemicals or dyes. Glycerine is a very effective preservative; it keeps the leaves supple and intensifies their colour.' The best method is a patient process

Top: The fragrant flowers of Azalea lutea brighten a wooded corner of the garden and wild flowers flourish in the dappled shade Bottom: A corseted lady prepares to dive into the lily pond in the 'secret garden'



of natural drying in a dark, well ventilated place with an artificial source of heat such as a boiler. An airing cupboard is ideal. 'But,' Elizabeth warns, 'the most crucial consideration is when you pick. For instance, hydrangea heads will not dry well when freshly flowering.' The large coloured individual florets of a hydrangea head are sepals and are sterile. The real flower is small and inconspicuous in the centre of each sepal. It opens when the head has been in colour for a few weeks. 'In order to dry, the real flower must be over. The whole has then to mature, "turn colour" and feel firm and papery before it is ready to dry.'

For red, purple and deep blue hydrangeas, Elizabeth recommends 'Altona', 'Europa'



and 'Hamburg'. 'Générale Vicomtesse de Vibraye' dries bluey-green and 'Madame Emile Moullière' dries lime-green or sometimes faded white flecked with crimson ... but colour is ultimately dependent upon the kind of soil in your garden. So experiment yourself. ❀

Elizabeth's book *'Dried Flowers - when to pick and how to dry'* can be ordered from the address below. Price £12 + p&tp. The garden is open from April to November on Wednesday, Thursday, Sunday and Bank Holidays from 11am-6pm.

Elizabeth Bullivant, Stourton House Flower Garden, Stourton, Wiltshire, tel: 01747 840417.

Top: An urn with Parrot tulips and wallflowers in the centre of the lily pond in the 'secret garden' created by the switchback hedge of Leyland cypress
Above: The fluorescent yellow flowers of *Euphorbia polychroma* (syn. *E. epithymoides*)