

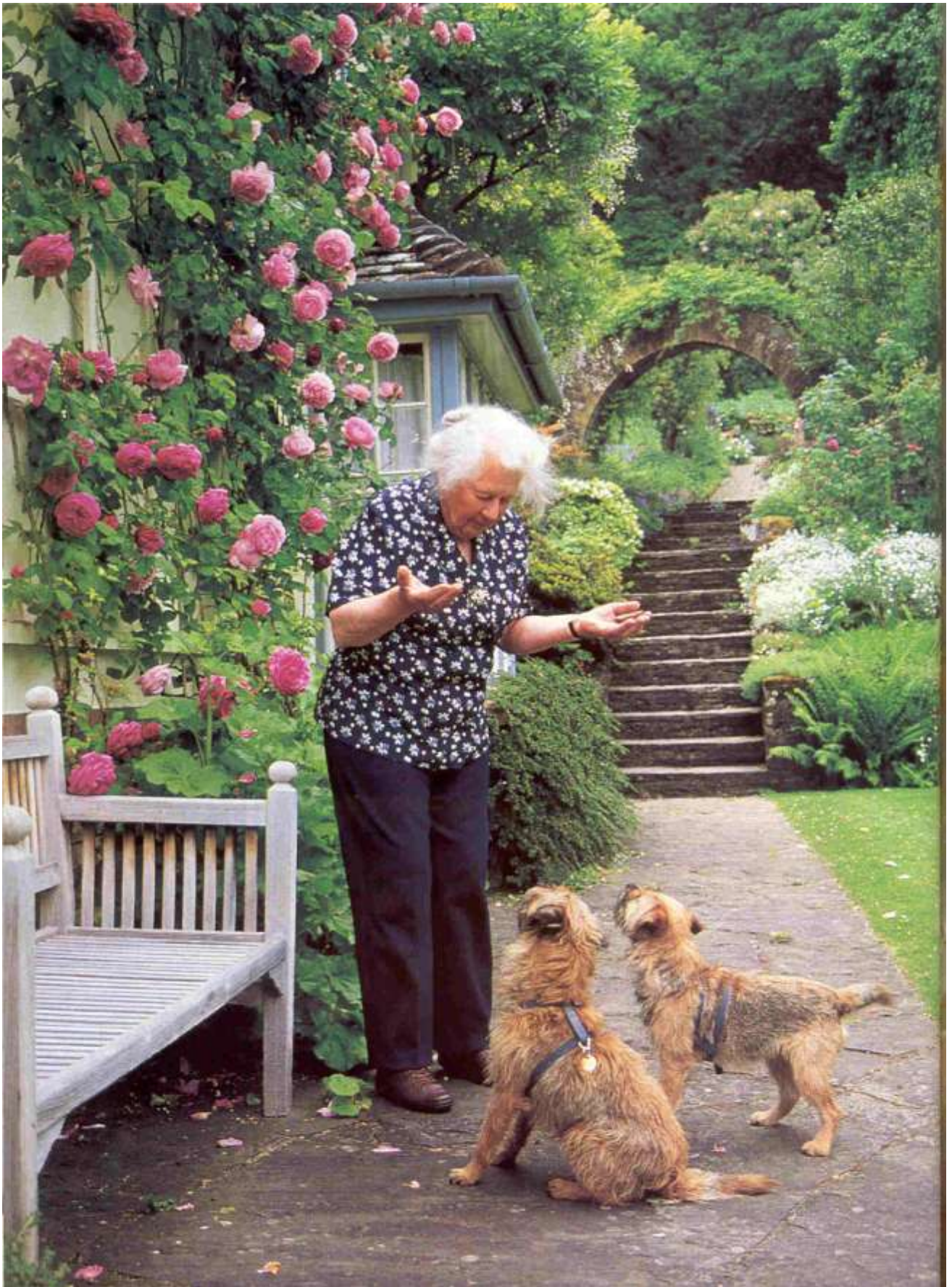


THE WOODLANDER

This stunning woodland garden brimming with rhododendrons and azaleas appears to have magically blossomed out of its unpromising Exmoor site. In reality it's Joan Loraine's reward for over 30 years of dedication and hard work

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS JANE GIFFORD

THIS PAGE The delicate blooms of *Rhododendron* 'Lady Alice Fitzwilliam' produce a heavenly scent.
LEFT Joan Loraine is rightly proud of her organic garden, which has taken over three decades to cultivate.



The site is steep and there is no soil as such, only stone mixed with the leaf-mould of centuries. "It has little in its favour except for the quality of magic that comes from northern light and rare borrowed landscape," says Joan Loraine of her garden.

Greencombe is a three-acre strip of land on the edge of ancient woodland near Porlock, Exmoor. On this apparently unpromising site Joan has lovingly created a garden to silence those of us who blame our raggle-taggle patches on low light, poor soil and cold winds. The whole garden seems to have been designed by nature, which Joan attributes to her desire "that nothing should appear forced or unnatural". But this garden has taken over 30 years of painstaking hard work to create. "Little by little, trees throughout the garden received necessary surgery: the removal of dead wood and the cleaning of jagged edges. There are 123 trees here: 43 oak, 46 chestnut and a handful of hollies, birch, beech and ash." Many have been cut back, while others have been transplanted to more suitable sites.

Over a mile of pathway now winds through the woods edged by trillium, ferns and small woodland plants that



THE EYE DELIGHTS IN A FULL SWEEP FROM GROUND LEVEL TO THE CROWNS OF TREES

are best seen at close quarters. National collections of *poly-stichum* and *erythronium* border these woodland walks, too. Joan follows a system she calls "vertical gardening" where the eye delights in a full sweep from ground level to the crowns of trees, with every aspect carefully orchestrated so as to appear natural.

"Greencombe has been an organic garden for over 30 years," explains Joan. "Nothing has shown me the value of compost more than the results it has brought here. Growth is substantial and withstands bad weather well, and we get comparatively few weeds because we dress the planted areas during winter, spreading a mulch of compost an inch thick like a blanket over the ground. This delays weed germination; it also keeps roots moist and comfortable, lessening the effects of a dry summer; and it brings a look of well-being that makes the garden glow."

When the *Scilla verna* flowers, this is the signal that everything is about to burst into bloom. April is the primrose month when the garden glows with that soft, clear yellow that heralds the start of spring. At the beginning of April, many of the 18 varieties of Kurume hybrid azaleas are in flower. By

MAIN PICTURE A bank of azaleas in full bloom beneath an apple tree creates a cheerful patchwork of colour. **TOP** The stunningly vibrant pinkish-red of *Rhododendron x obtusum* is framed by a long-established Japanese *Wisteria floribunda* 'Macrobotrys'. **ABOVE** The spiky appearance of *Rhododendron macrosepalum* 'Linearifolium' makes it an eye-catching occupant of the garden.



the end of the month, the pink peony-like flowers of *Camellia* 'Elsie Jury' begin to bloom, and *Rhododendron* 'Lady Alice Fitzwilliam' unfurls her bronze buds to fill the garden with fragrance. In May the colour becomes even richer, thanks to the deciduous azaleas. The orange Mollis azaleas bloom in pink, vermillion, salmon and saffron. And not just in one colour each; there is a difference between bud and flower, outer petal and throat, so the variation in a single bush is amazing. Added to this there is the *R. luteum*, with fragrant honeysuckle-shaped blooms, and the richly scented *R. occidentale*, pink and white in flower with an orange throat.

Colourwise, there are no plants to equal these azaleas. As the deciduous groups come into bloom, more evergreen azaleas flower too, notably the Kaempferi hybrid varieties. Their pink and red flowers are larger than those of the Kurume azaleas and many bring out new leaf first – a brilliant, fresh background for the blooms. It's marvellous to see such sizzling colour. When planting for May, Joan recommends Kurume azaleas for a sheer carpet of colour, "and the fragrant rhododendrons like 'Lady Alice Fitzwilliam'. They are



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Mott', 'Huntercombe Purple' and 'Pickering Blue' – a true sky blue. "These three look gorgeous together. They will bloom their heads off and are especially good for awkward areas." As a final tip, Joan suggests planting a crab-apple for the joy of its flowers in spring and for its autumn colour. "If you have other apple trees, the presence of a crab-apple will ensure they will always be fertilised. If you're a tree-lover, they should be in every hedgerow. You can't have too many." ■

Greencombe, Porlock, Somerset TA24 8NU, is open from 4 April to 28 July every Sat, Sun, Mon and Tues from 2-6 pm.

MAIN PICTURE Dappled with sunlight, the woodland garden that Joan created looks as if it has been designed by nature itself. *Rhododendron augustini* in the background bears lavender-blue flowers in mid-spring. **TOP** The two-toned beauty of Mollis hybrid azaleas is at its most glorious in early May. **ABOVE** The snowy white flowers of Kurume azalea *Rhododendron* 'Ho-o' ('Appleblossom').

