



A virtuous circle of intelligent life

Tresillian House, Cornwall

Clever custodianship is paying off in a remarkable Cornish garden, finds Kirsty Fergusson

Photographs by Marianne Majerus

OLD-FASHIONED country-house gardens that keep house and staff supplied with vegetables, fruit and flowers throughout the year, and yet remain sensitive to the fragile balance of the natural world within their privileged acres, are few and far between these days. That fortunate mix of sensitive, committed ownership and intelligent, green-fingered stewardship creates a virtuous circle, in which it's not only the plants that thrive, but also the people who live and work there, and the interconnected web of wildlife that nests and hops, crawls and buzzes there, too.

London-based investment manager George Robinson has been the owner of Tresillian since 2000, but his roots go deep in this green, wooded valley, not far from the north Cornish

coast at Newquay, which nudges the loveliest of ancient Cornish houses, Trerice. 'The house once belonged to my grandfather, and my mother grew up here,' he explains. 'When Tresillian came on the market, it was my mother who encouraged me to buy it. She has very fond memories of the gardens as they were in the 1930s and 1940s, and her father's skill as a narcissus breeder is still remembered in the Summercourt daffodil, which grows here today.'

Mr Robinson was fortunate to discover that with his newly acquired garden came old-fashioned wisdom, in the form of John Harris, who has been head gardener at Tresillian House since 1985. Mr Harris, by any measure, is an extraordinary man, with a gift for understanding what makes not just plants, but also

Above **John Harris runs the walled kitchen garden with what he calls an 'Edwardian' sense of precision and love.** *Facing page* **A colourful harvest is brought daily to the kitchens at Tresillian**

people flourish. Over the years, he has brought the gardens into lush, organic production, planted heritage-variety orchards and developed the woodland and lakeside planting and management, as well as sowing the seeds of confidence and self-respect in former prisoners and disadvantaged youngsters by helping them into the discipline of horticulture.

He was himself orphaned early in life, but was effectively saved by gardening. Given his first allotment at the age of 11 under the tutelage of an old family friend, he was taught floristry by an aunt in Newquay. After leaving school, Mr Harris was apprenticed to Noel Masters, the head gardener of a local estate, who took the boy under his wing, taught him all he knew and introduced him to the notion of gardening in tune





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with the phases of the Moon—a practice Mr Harris has never abandoned. It was the kind of horticultural education that might be compared to planting a young tree in just the right place in a soil rich in organic compost.

'Getting the soil right is the fundamental thing,' he says, as we embark on a tour of the garden, visiting first the vast piles of leafmould and rotting farmyard manure that are the keys to his soil management. Horse and cow manure are kept separately,

as they have different properties and applications. A long, deep trench in the walled kitchen garden exposes black strata, showing how the soil has been fed over the years. This will be for the sweet peas, which were sown at the end of October in pots and sit out the winter as sturdy seedlings in the greenhouse, beside pots of hyacinths and paper-white narcissi, which will decorate the table in the house at Christmas.

The bowler hat and green apron may have been lost with the years,

Storing onions the traditional way. Several onion varieties are grown at Tresillian, and dried off in wooden crates on benches in the former peach house

but there is no doubt that this garden is managed with the same discipline and deep-rooted knowledge that once characterised Edwardian horticultural practice. Tools are cleaned and oiled after each outing, however brief; young pears are espaliered to match their older neighbours on the high, brick walls of the kitchen garden; and junior gardeners are given



the opportunity to develop their skills by being given the freedom to plant up marginal areas. Mr Harris looks with a trained florist's eye at the russet foliage of dying royal ferns—'wonderful for flower arrangements'—and with equal pleasure at the ribbon of campions and teasels that fringe the woodland garden. 'We won't cut them down until late November, when the birds have finished feeding from them.'

The garden at Tresillian hasn't always looked so impressive. The pale granite house we see today was built in the first part of the 19th century, on the site of a much older house, the family seat of the Gully

Mr Harris received training in floristry as a boy, and the cut-flower garden and cold greenhouse provide a year-round supply of plants and lovely floral arrangements for the house

Bennets. The 23 acres of garden were landscaped in the prevailing style of lawns and lake, parkland trees and flowering shrubs, laurel hedging and—this being Cornwall—a profusion of camellias. The orchards and walled garden were set a little distance away from the house. Leonard Bennet, who inherited the estate in 1928, undertook the first renovation of the garden, but a further period of decline followed when the property was sold after the Second World War. Restoring the gardens, woodland and orchards has been a monumental undertaking, which suffered heartbreaking setbacks in 1987 and 1990, when storms ripped through the

mature woodland garden. Undaunted, Mr Harris spent eight years clearing out the fallen debris and uprooted stumps and has planted 15,000 trees, including an orchard of apples that effectively forms a library of old Cornish varieties, dating from 1800 or earlier. The cider apples go to Andy Atkinson, a Cornish cider-maker, and return in liquid form.

An older orchard, closely planted with locally indigenous Kea plums, planted in the 1930s, is densely underplanted with egg-yolk-yellow daffodils, too old and, in some cases, too interbred to be named. Medlars and quinces have been added to extend the orchard, as well as the



crab apple, Red Sentinel: 'That's an old habit—it's such a fantastic general pollinator.'

But it's within the walls of the kitchen garden that Tresillian's heart beats loudest. Secret, serene and hugely productive, it looks very much as it might have done a century ago. With his two assistant gardeners, vegetables, salads and cut flowers are rotated annually through the four main beds by Mr Harris, the soil dug, sown and harvested in accordance with the phases of the Moon, following its waxing and waning gravitational pull on the water within each organism.

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At present, the pressures of work keep Mr Robinson from spending much time in Cornwall, but this enlightened owner has future ambitions for these fortunate acres: 'One day, I would like Tresillian to be ranked beside Trebah or Heligan as one of the great gardens of Cornwall.'

Tresillian House offers residential courses in preserving. Visit www.tresillian-house.co.uk. Tours of the garden are by appointment only. Telephone 01637 877447



Above left Ben's Red, a Cornish variety of eating apple raised in the 1830s, shines in the heritage orchard. *Above right* The ornamental lake and south façade of Tresillian. *Right* Espaliered pears trained against the brick outer walls of the kitchen garden

