

# THE EDGE OF WILDERNESS

When redesigning the gardens at Waltham Place in Berkshire, Strilli Oppenheimer and plantsman Henk Gerritsen were motivated by a shared desire to join forces with nature rather than toil against it

WORDS: Jodie Jones

Strilli Oppenheimer first met plantsman designer Henk Gerritsen in 1999, the day after he received a roasting from members of a Dutch garden club who had been outraged to find his Priona Gardens in Holland in a state they thought incompatible with 'proper' horticulture. Where they saw chaos, however, Strilli recognised a garden that worked in harmony with nature.

Henk's philosophical approach resonated deeply with Strilli, and she invited him to consult on the design of her gardens at Waltham Place, a manor house with adjoining land in Berkshire that appears in historical records dating back as far as AD940. In the years that followed the pair formed a firm friendship as, together, they developed the gardens into a landmark example of ecological planting on a grand scale.

## BREAK WITH TRADITION

Louis and Carlota Oppenheimer had bought the estate in 1910 and had laid out the gardens in high Edwardian style but their son Raymond, who inherited it, preferred golf and dogs to plants. By the time Strilli and her husband Nicky Oppenheimer, who was Raymond's nephew, took over the property in 1984, the estate was ripe for reinvention.

As an enthusiastic proponent of organic principles, Strilli had already developed a landmark 45-acre garden at Brenthurst, the family's home in South Africa. At Waltham Place, therefore, she set to work with educated enthusiasm but, as her interest in ecological gardening grew, she found an increasing tension between the traditional planting and maintenance of the gardens created by Carlota, and her own desire to embrace all of nature, regardless of labels damning some plants as weeds that had no place in an ornamental garden.

In Henk she had found a kindred spirit, and in her he found the first client ever to request a garden design that left the bindweed in place. He recorded their first meeting and his subsequent collaboration at Waltham Place in his seminal book, *Essay on Gardening* (first published in



## HENK BROUGHT IN NEW, ROBUST PERENNIALS THAT COULD WITHSTAND THE INCURSIONS OF GROUND ELDER AND BINDWEED.

2008). "The garden staff wasn't equipped to deal with Strilli's wish to permit spontaneous developments (weeds) within the designed planting, combining forces with nature instead of fighting against it," he wrote.

He brought in new, robust perennials that could withstand the incursions of ground elder and bindweed, and a strong structural framework of hedges, paths and other design

elements to underline the intentionality behind the informality. He also brought in a new head gardener, Gert-Jan van der Kolk, who had worked with Henk in his own garden and was equipped to keep the garden just balanced on the edge of wilderness without quite losing control.

The gardens extend over seven acres, divided into seven distinct areas which Henk worked on gradually over a number of years, modifying →



CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT: espaliered pears and morello cherries line the walls of the Potager, originally a traditional kitchen garden; originally commissioned by Carlota Oppenheimer, the Long Border has recently been restored by current estate manager André Tranquillini; the way the light plays in Nature is key along Friar's Walk; in the Grass Maze, white autumn crocus and the seedheads bedecked with spiders' webs add a romantic touch to the children's play area.



Photographs: André Tranquillini, Niki McCann

## 100 YEARS OF BIODYNAMICS

- In 1924, the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner gave a landmark series of lectures to a group of farmers concerned about the declining health of their crops and livestock. The principles Steiner set out in those lectures challenged the increasing dominance of industrial agricultural practices with an assertion that everything in nature is interdependent.

- Predating the organic movement and British scientist and environmentalist James Lovelock's Gaia theory by some 50 years, the biodynamic methods Steiner set out involved a completely fresh approach to agriculture, nutrition, and nature, based on a belief in the importance of microbe-rich soil and a spiritual relationship with the cosmos.

- In place of synthetic fertilisers, he prescribed composts and biodynamic preparations made with precise techniques from cow horns, manure, silica, and certain herbs in very small quantities. Biodynamic growers also follow an astral planting calendar that indicates auspicious phases in the movement of the sun, moon, and planets for optimum cultivation.

- More than 63,0118 acres of land across 55 countries (including many farms, vineyards and some gardens in England) are now managed according to biodynamic principles, by custodians who believe that simple sustainability is not enough to correct the damage that has already been done to the earth. Regeneration, as Steiner asserted a century ago, is key to a self-sufficient future for our planet.

For more information, visit [demeter.net](http://demeter.net). Waltham Place offers biodynamic gardening courses for professionals and beginners, and is also one of the centres that offers apprenticeships as part of the work-based training offered by the Biodynamic Agricultural College; visit [waltham-place.webflow.io/biodynamic-gardening](http://waltham-place.webflow.io/biodynamic-gardening) and [bdacollege.org.uk](http://bdacollege.org.uk) for details.

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what was there to make it fit for a future that Strilli hopes to see.

Down the grand 262-foot Long Border he planted a curving sequence of tightly clipped beech hedges to bring order to a scheme combining naturalistic perennials with Strilli's cherished bindweed, and clipped the backdrop of established yew hedging to echo the shape of the treeline in the landscape beyond.

In the Square Garden, he put in a meandering line of low boxwood hedging to link a newly created gravel garden filled with drought-resistant plants and an area of robust perennials, where his selections included the slightly thuggish *Persicaria polymorpha*, all chosen for their ability to co-exist with a healthy population of ground elder. There were also lots of South African bulbs and ornamental grasses, to remind Strilli of her homeland.

Other areas included the Butterfly Garden, Herb Garden, Japanese Garden, and a Potager with a combination of soft fruit, trained pears and annual cut flowers to which, according to current estate manager André Tranquillini, today's visitors find it easiest to relate.

'In the six years I have worked here,' André comments, 'I have seen a marked change in the attitude of visitors. There used to be a certain amount of scepticism and complaint about "mess" or the lack of flowers, but now I hardly ever hear that sort of thing. People now seem to have a deeper understanding of our ethos and principles.'

### FEEDING THE SOIL

Since the early 2000s the garden, and the wider 220-acre farm, have been run according to strict biodynamic principles, with a closed system that aims to build resilience into the soil and promote overall health through the use of various homemade composts, foliar feeds and soil drenches.

These are time-consuming techniques based on close observation and when André took over the daily management of the gardens in 2018, he found some areas in need of a little extra attention to bring them back to their peak. 'Over the years, the Long Border had suffered natural compaction, leading to plant losses. At first, I proposed a programme of replanting, but Strilli said if we corrected the problem, the right plants



**TOP:** the New Garden, which lies between the Winter Garden and the meadows and wilderness of the wider estate, was originally planted with bearded iris. Unhappy in the heavy clay and water run-off, they have been replaced by wildlife-beneficial plants such as *Deschampsia cespitosa* and *Brachypodium sylvaticum*.

**BOTTOM:** the 17th-century walled garden was originally a vegetable garden that Carlota reworked for ornamentals. In 2000, Henk Gerritsen further developed it with gravel beds and a 'caterpillar'-clipped boxwood hedge that has withstood blight and moth.

would return. So we gently lifted the soil with a broad fork, to aerate it, then applied compost and herbal preparations, and sure enough the border healed itself.

'We even managed to rescue Henk's playful boxwood caterpillar hedge, which had been almost killed by blight, by using a combination of good husbandry and biodynamic preparations (including teas made from compost and *Equisetum arvense*) to populate the area with beneficial fungi. This work was presented to the European Boxwood and Topiary Society, and its members were astonished by our success.'

Strilli is now advanced in years but continues to be a powerful presence and on the Waltham Place website, she clearly expresses her feelings about the garden she has lovingly tended for the past 40 years: 'We seek to combine forces with nature rather than fighting against it, and to explore the boundaries between garden and nature. In doing so, we have created a haven to an abundance of insect and animal life, fungi and indigenous flora. This is our legacy, our investment in the future.' ○

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