



35 YEARS IN MY GARDEN



(Top) Christopher Lloyd. The photographs on this and the following pages chronicle a year in the garden at Dixter. (Above) *Ranunculus Brazen Hussy*

This week is the 35th anniversary of Christopher Lloyd's In My Garden column

STEPHEN ANDERTON marks the occasion with a visit to Great Dixter, where Mr Lloyd has made one of the great gardens of the century.

IT is hard to imagine Christopher Lloyd, grand old man of English gardening letters and a man of iron, independent spirit, applying for a job. It is harder still to imagine interviewing him for one.

Nevertheless, in 1963, this happened. He was a mere 42. COUNTRY LIFE did not

have a regular gardening column at the time. John Adams, then editor of COUNTRY LIFE, showed Mr Lloyd a piece by an eminent writer of the day, written efficiently enough, about mowers and mowing. 'Do you think, Mr Lloyd, that you could write something like that?' Behind the eyes, the Lloydian wheels turned. 'Well, no, Mr



In May, *Tulipa Westpoint* bursts through a blanket of forget-me-nots



Sumptuous colour in the Long Border: *Allium alflatuense* Purple Sensation with *Lupinus The Governor* and *L. The Page*

Adams, I'm afraid I couldn't.' You can sense the smile behind every syllable. From this productive impasse was born the species-rich COUNTRY LIFE column In My Garden, 35 years old this week. (Mr Lloyd recollects the occasion on page 116).

Today, Christopher Lloyd is probably the most influential plantsman and gardener in the country. His books and articles are enjoyed by gardeners everywhere, and his home, Great Dixter in East Sussex, is a constantly changing symposium of influential gardeners who visit from all over the world.

It seems appropriate that the garden at Great Dixter should have been living its life in the pages of COUNTRY LIFE for a third of the magazine's existence. Sir Edwin Lutyens was architect to Edward



The Sunk and Barn Gardens in May: forget-me-nots and *Euphorbia x martinii* (in the foreground) with groupings of *Tulipa Ballerina* and *T. Dyanito*, Fire King wallflowers and *T. Queen of Sheba*, and (back left) *Exochorda macrantha* The Bride

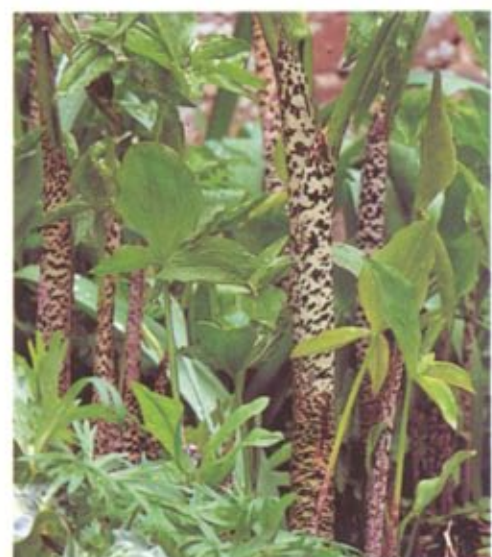
Hudson, who founded the magazine in 1897, and he also restored and built on to Great Dixter for Christopher's father, Nathaniel Lloyd. As a boy, the young Christopher met Gertrude Jekyll, Lutyens's garden-making partner elsewhere. Christopher and Miss Jekyll have both spent half a lifetime dressing Lutyens gardens.

He would hate me saying this. 'Oh. History!' Gardeners can be sentimental, nostalgic, gentle, conservative. But not Christopher. There are few people who live more for the present moment than he does.

Visiting Great Dixter at the start of the season this year was like going aboard a battleship making ready to go to sea. A 50ft timber lorry disgorged beams into a barn being converted into lavatories. A bulldozer snorted about beside the horse

pond. A huge arc of new, black water pipe curled from a trench down the drive. The timber great hall, recently jacked up and under scaffolding, was settled again and ready to admit visitors. Dressed in desert fatigues, head gardener Fergus Garrett, a kind and indefatigable young half-Turk, was arranging pots of scented narcissi, hyacinths, *Geranium maderense* and *Echium fastuosum* by the door.

Some people with a garden to run and a house to support become managers. But Christopher is not interested in that. He sees to it that repairs are done and that there are guides to show people round the house. But he delegates what he can, so that he can concentrate on what matters to him—gardening, growing plants, and writing about them.



Spring at Dixter: the macabre *Dracunculus vulgaris* in the Barn Garden. (Middle) A tapestry of primroses, *Fritillaria meleagris* and *Anemone nemorosa*. (Right) *Euphorbia robbiae*, honesty and wallflowers fringe a hedge bottom



Head gardener Fergus Garrett and Christopher Lloyd at the front porch. (Below) Ox-eye daisies, *Erigeron karvinskianus*, and valerian riot over the circular steps in June



The Long Border explodes with a rich mass of form and colour in July



Another section of the Long Border. (Below) *Cotinus coggygia* in full smoke in the Topiary Garden



Succulents in late summer in the Exotic Garden: *Aeonium arboreum*, *Yucca aloifolia* and *Cotyledon orbiculata*



St John's wort berries with *Cyperus longus* in August. (Below) Bright summer partners: Phlox and *Mina lobata*



(Above right) Vibrant August colour in the Exotic Garden: *Canna indica* Purpurea, *Verbena bonariensis* and *Dahlia Hillcrest Royal*. (Below left) *Atriplex hortensis* var *rubra*, *Fuchsia* Versicolor and *Stipa splendens*. (Below right) Colourful patchwork: coleus backed by *Hedera helix* Buttercup





October bounty: *Aster lateriflorus* Horizontalis, *Amaranthus* Dexter form, *Cortaderia selloana* Pumila, *Kniphofia linearifolia* and *Miscanthus* Silver Feather. (Right) *Plectranthus argentatus*, *Anaphalis margaritacea*, *Aster* Little Carlow, *rudbeckia* and *M. sinensis* Zebrinus



In summer, the grand showpieces of Dexter, the Long Border and the Exotic Garden, have a panache which some take for effrontery. But in spring, things are quieter. In the Sunk Garden, where Nathaniel Lloyd built his octagonal pool, great hedgehog domes of *Osmanthus delavayi* are covered in white wands of flower, all grown since last year's late spring clipping. A pool of Brazen Hussy celandines, found by Christopher in his woods, shines like a spill of Golden Syrup.

Nothing goes hungry at Dexter, and anything with an appetite is given 'the Fergus treatment', a serious, regular mulch of good compost. What was a single row of canary yellow *Arum creticum* just a few years

ago is now a long-running clump: 'And that is despite digging up a lot to sell.' A clump of *Dracunculus vulgaris* was recently just one set of marbled giraffe legs. Now it is a herd. 'I cannot have too much of . . . ' is Christopher's familiar strain of recommendation (he uses fewer words to damn).

There is no real off-season at Dexter. Spring is always rehearsing somewhere—a brief chamber choir of crocuses, a sweet solo for winter honeysuckle or sarcococca. And of course there is the ever present architecture of the yew hedges.

Dexter would be a gift to any serious gardener. It has bones to die for: a geometrical structure of hedges and spaces which cry out to be dressed. But it is tel-

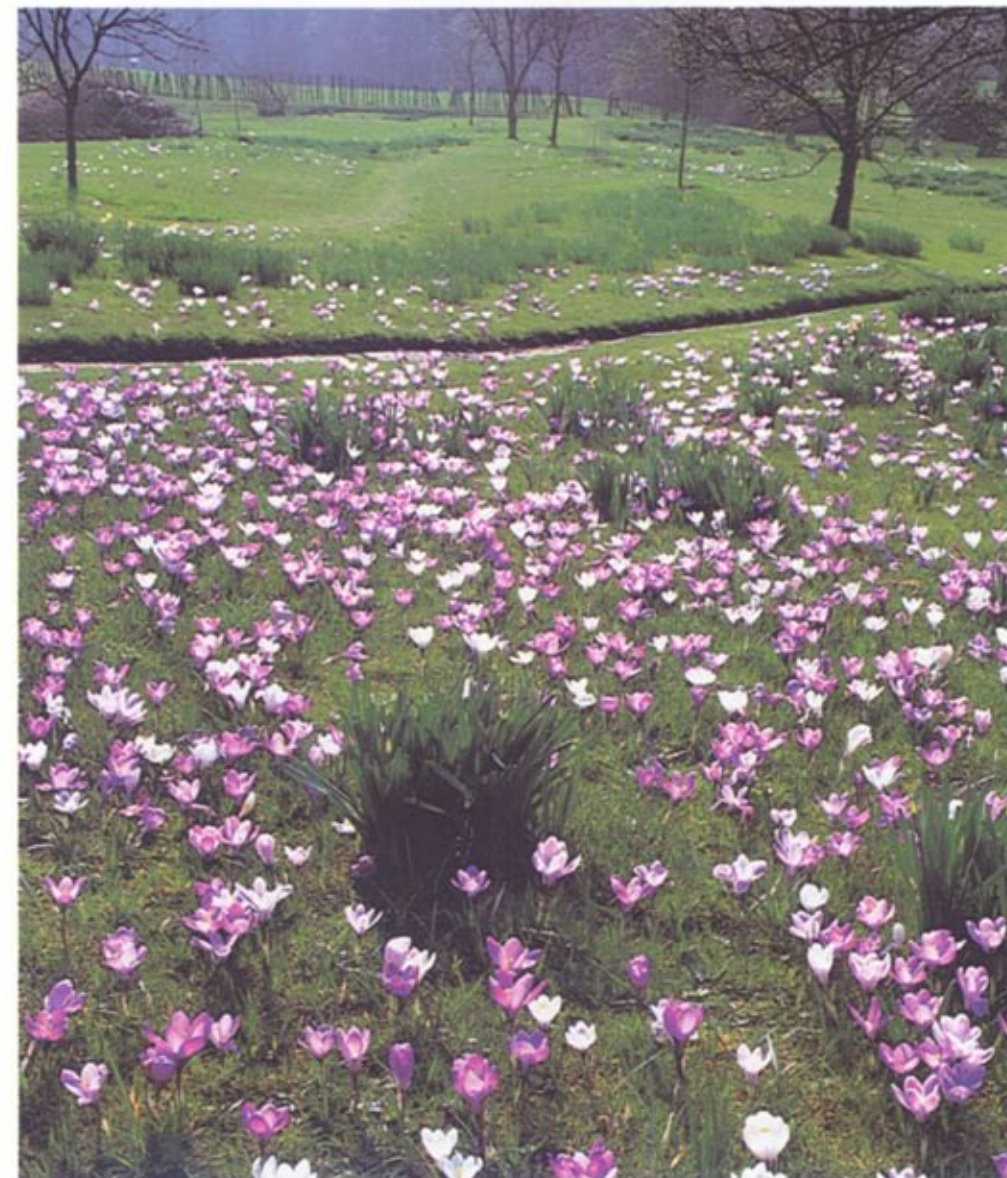
ling that Christopher never mentions the hedges. They are just his catalyst, his framework. He sees that they are tended, but they do not fascinate him. His interest is in the soft furnishings of the garden.

'I could not design a garden,' he says earnestly. 'I just go to look at other people's—and carp.' The smile in the voice again. He knows his reputation as a critic. He has a keen eye for how gardens work, how the planting complements the design, but he is not interested in the process of the making of those designs.

It is only since Christopher's mother, Daisy Lloyd, died 25 years ago that Dexter has been entirely his to develop. And the more he makes it his own, the more



Winter bright: *Cotoneaster horizontalis*, *Miscanthus sinensis* cultivars and the dwarf pampas grass *Cortaderia selloana* Pumila in the Sunk and Barn Gardens. (Right) *Cotoneaster horizontalis*, *Spiraea thunbergii*, and *Buxus sempervirens* on a side approach to the porch



In March, Dutch hybrids of *Crocus vernus* flower in the orchard. (Below) *Fritillaria meleagris* growing among the emerging leaves of a gunnera, with *Anemone nemerosa*



energy he throws into life there. He approaches gardening with infectious optimism and rigorous discipline, refusing to let the garden stand still. Dexter has more people to stay than the average small hotel, and Christopher's cooking, encouraged by his friendship with the late Jane Grigson, means that the kitchen garden is important. It is not remotely ornamental, but it provides the goods.

Christopher travels widely, looking at gardens and at garden plants in the wild. He made a world lecture tour with Beth Chatto in 1989. He loves the vitality and excitement of American gardeners. 'In Minnesota it is terribly cold, and mop-head hydrangeas and buddleias are cut to the ground every year. But they still flower because it is so hot and light again in summer.' Always, he comes back to how things grow, what makes plants tick, and how to understand growing them better.

Five years ago, the Topiary Lawn at Dexter was a shaven plinth upon which sat the winter-crisp clipped yews. It has changed. Now the starved grass (he wastes



Emperor daffodils in the orchard, beneath *Malus hupehensis* (left)

no time on lawns) grows long in summer, and orchids are springing up everywhere. The eye for detail finds greatest reward in this Dexter. In the meadow, too, as the daffodils fade, the turf is thick with the mottled flutes of early purple orchids and the snouts of green-wingeds.

Christopher loves to mix the old with the new, indoors and out. He has commissioned several pieces of furniture from Rupert Williamson, and in the garden, a large, new pebble mosaic, made by Maggie Howarth and Mark Davidson and designed by Miles Johnson, depicts Christopher's two dachshunds couchants.

All round, the gardening is rampant. The Long Border is being loaded with layer upon layer of annuals, bulbs and perennials, like shells into a magazine. The new Exotic Garden in the old rose garden, is still waiting to load. June will be soon enough to plant havoc for October. For now, 12ft shoots of paulownia stand waiting to be pruned, and tall wigwams of winter protection sprout tufts of flappy leaves in the precocious spring warmth. 'It's the bananas,' Christopher says. 'They don't know whether they are coming or going.'

Photographs: Jonathan Buckley.



Christopher Lloyd and Fergus Garrett with Dahlia and Canna, on the circular steps