



Gardens unveiling their secrets

Now in its 37th season, the Bradford on Avon Secret Gardens events – held on the last Sunday of May and June – provide a rare opportunity to discover some of the town’s numerous hidden gardens. Aly Balsom takes a look at just a handful of them.

PERCHED ON top of a steep slope, the old tennis court at Lynchetts offers the perfect view over the higgledy piggledy rooftops of the oldest part of Bradford on Avon.

Now grassed and surrounded by “ballerina” apple trees – so that the view will never be obscured – the court is the only truly flat part of the nearly two-acre garden, which is completely hidden from the town.

The Lynchetts is just one of dozens of gardens across the town that open their gates to the public as part of the twice yearly Secret Gardens event.

The house and gardens of Lynchetts are the home of George and Glenys Lunt who moved to the property 22 years ago. The purchase was long in the making. Having originally been left to the Bradford on Avon Preservation Trust by a previous owner, the gardens had been made into allotments for Trust members – including George and Glenys. Their time working on their plot cemented their love of the place. However, when the Trust decided to sell the property, the pair were not in a position to buy, so they had to wait for another family to come and go before they could secure it for themselves.

It was then that they began their labour of love on the garden.

“The garden had been maintained in a very basic way since the mid-70s, but not much more than keeping the grass cut,” George recalls. “It was a blank canvas, but there were hundreds of self-suckered plums and ash.”

Having done a great deal of clearing, they have since established various areas of the garden, including a half-acre orchard with apple, pear and plum trees. Elsewhere, over 100 trees have also been planted. The ultimate aim is to make the space a haven for wildlife. This includes a pond packed with



frogs and newts and a creche for slow worms under a piece of black plastic against a wall – lift it up and two, minute baby slow worms pop their heads up.

The orchard is the home of four bee hives, each housing around 30,000 bees that busily fly in and out, collecting pollen from the fruit trees and borage – one of their all-time favourites.

“It’s a good place for bees. It’s very open. There’s almost two acres of garden here so there’s lots of space and lots of fruit trees,” comments George.

He says the bees are particularly drawn to the horse-chestnut trees near the Holt Road, collecting the sticky propolis to patch up their hives.

Glenys uses the fruit from the orchard, as well as a Mulberry tree and two unusual Medlar trees, to make jellies and jams. Numerous beds around the garden are also used to grow an array of fruit and veg.

The 18th century house is steeped in history, having been requisitioned in the Second World War to become a centre for the repair and calibration of naval clocks. During that period, a workshop was built on the tennis courts and used as the centre for repair. Today, the only sign of that period is an air raid shelter surrounded by pink roses.

Above: George and Glenys Lunt moved to The Lynchetts 22 years ago and have transformed the garden from ‘blank canvas’ to the delightful space it is today, complete with bee hives, orchards and flower beds

Fragrant roses are a big love of Shirl Mairs, who opened up her garden at Horton’s House, which is located in the centre of town. Positioned behind a tall hedge, right next to the Holy Trinity church, day-to-day visitors to Bradford on Avon would have little idea of their existence.

Entering through a small gate in the hedge, a large lawn leads to a raised patio with a formal box hedge area. To the left of the house, a beautiful wisteria macrobotrys multijuga smothers a pergola, with a large table and chairs below it.

‘I like the David Austin old roses as they repeat flower’

Hundreds of visitors on the day took advantage of the spot to have a slice of cake and a cup of tea from Save the Children, which had set up in Shirl and husband Chris’ kitchen. Others chose to sit in the summer room, or on various seats around the topiary in front of the house. The property itself is unusual because it joins Abbey House – a separate, grand, Georgian property, which was built onto the front of Horton’s House.

Having moved to the house in January 2017, Shirl has worked hard to rid the

property of a substantial bindweed problem. More recently, several raised vegetable beds have been put in at the back of the property, which is accessed through an arch in a wall hidden under the wisteria and crimson ‘Guinea’ rose.

“I absolutely adore roses. I’ve put in a lot of roses. I like the David Austin old roses as they repeat flower,” says Shirl.

Some of these roses, including Phyllis Bide; a double apricot coloured rose, which smells of myrrh, have been newly planted with the view to covering an arch over a wooden bench, which faces the house.

“Bradford on Avon is very busy and everyone is overlooked so it’s trying to build that bit of privacy and space, to sit and retreat from the world,” Shirl explains.

The spot not only provides a quiet haven, it is also perfectly positioned to enjoy a view of the main church spire and a glimpse of the Saxon church, which sits right next to the property.

Next on Shirl’s agenda is revamping the box area at the front of the house.

“I’ll probably do something with lavender as it’s a bit dark and we’ve got a lovely bird bath that we want to make into a fountain,” she says. “I like to stick to whites and blues and calm colours, which is why I like the lavender.”

Neighbours, Sally Wilson and Penny Hopgood are also big fans of colour. They have zoned their stepped patio garden into colour sections; pink and mauve, white, orange and yellow and red.

SECRET GARDENS

Hidden worlds

The town's inhabitants work hard in their gardens every spring in preparation for the annual secret garden events and many of them have been doing so for more than 30 years. For the benefit of a local charity, they open their gates and allow residents and visitors to discover what lies beyond.

Visitors get to discover places they would never have known existed and see gardens that vary from magnificent spaces with beautiful lawns, shrubs and sculptures, to neat or quirky gardens with carefully planned flower beds or vegetable patches.

The scent of roses, jasmine, lavender, honeysuckle and rosemary will tantalise the olfactory system while scrumptious teas and cakes stimulate taste buds.

• <https://secretgardensboa.wixsite.com>

“We’ve concentrated on the colours and plants that take our fancy, fit the colour palette and that are bee friendly,” says Sally.

With Penny suffering from macular degeneration, the sensory aspect of the garden is particularly important. “I’m much more sense orientated than Sally,” says Penny, who is also responsible for the numerous ceramic frogs hidden around the garden.

‘We concentrated on colours that take our fancy’

The garden is very much a team effort, with the two taking pleasure in endless “tinkering”. The spot under the pergola is also a favourite for a glass of wine or an alfresco supper. The position provides a slightly different perspective on the two churches seen from Shirl’s garden.

A short walk back behind the main church and on to the secret side-streets of Barton Orchard takes you to the garden of Chris Mattingly. Having completed a modern extension on the 300-year-old house last year, he has landscaped the garden, putting beds, paving and pathways in. The extension forms a key part of the terraced garden, with a seating area on its roof, providing a view of Barton Farm Country Park, the town and railway. “I spend most of the summer out here enjoying the view,” says Chris.

Glass bricks on the floor provide a glimpse of the new modern kitchen below, whilst numerous terracotta pots give a nod to Serrento, Italy, where Chris got much of his inspiration. **WL**

Right: Shirl Mairs opened her garden at Horton’s House; located in the centre of town, behind a tall hedge, right next to the Holy Trinity church: day-to-day visitors have little idea its existence

