



Trish Gibson
256pp 2011
Frances Lincoln
ISBN 9780711231719
RRP £35

Brenda Colvin: A Career in Landscape

A revealing biography of this pioneer in British 20th-century landscape design

The genesis of the Landscape Institute occurred in a tent at the Chelsea Flower Show on 23 May 1929. One of the founding members present was 31-year-old Brenda Colvin, who established her garden design practice in 1922 and would continue to practice design until 1976. Others in her peer group were friends and colleagues Dame Sylvia Crowe, Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe and Sir Frederick Gibberd.

This biography performs a dual service. It fills a gap in the forgotten history of the post-Gertrude Jekyll, 20th-century garden; and it also presents an insightful and analytical appraisal of the life, work and character of the 'sometimes difficult' Brenda Colvin.

Well-illustrated and with many of Colvin's own photographs, the text examines her deft hand, be it her nurturing of the young Landscape Institute, mentoring designers or landscaping the likes of power stations and reservoirs. Her modern gardens are discussed, too, in which she abandoned her retro Arts and Crafts approach of the 1930s while continuing to weave in her love for plants. In short, this is a well-researched and authoritative book. ■

Toby Musgrave is a garden historian and author



Jane Brown
400pp 2011
Chatto and Windus
ISBN 9780701182120
RRP £20

The Omnipotent Magician

A worthy successor to Dorothy Stroud's study of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown

Even before I turned a page, I wondered why the author had decided to create that title. Far from being magical, the foundations for 'Capability' Brown's remarkable career were all intensely practical: unrelenting hard work, entrepreneurial business sense, and awesome skill at working the networks of the ample rich, land-owning clients of 18th-century Britain.

The author's yardstick is the biography by Dorothy Stroud (1950) though the author's text gives a broader sweep of the man than Stroud's work. The basic dilemma remains the same, however. On one hand there is the huge quantity of commissions where Brown worked; on the other is the paucity of evidence about the man and his personal life. Behind the layers of content our subject remains tantalisingly elusive.

The book will be rewarding for garden historians and students, though challenging for less well-informed readers. ■

George Plumptre is Chief Executive of the National Gardens Scheme



Neil Lucas
276pp 2011
Timber Press
ISBN 9780881929836
RRP £20

Designing with Grasses

A guide to creating a balance between grasses and other garden plants

The author begins by describing how grasses are vital in creating a 'community of plants' in gardens, rather than a collection of disconnected individuals; he also extols the design values of grasses. He then mentions how important it is to understand their habitats and how to re-create these, handily giving his 'top choices' for each habitat or garden condition.

The final section is a detailed A-Z directory of grasses including commonly grown and unusual species. I feel the author could have used more of his personal knowledge of how well different species grow in his garden – it is also disappointing that there is no overall conclusion to link the interesting chapters.

This book is written by one of the most passionate nurserymen in the UK. His knowledge combined with technical advice and great photography make this an inspirational book, suitable for all keen gardeners. ■

Ian Bull is Garden Manager at RHS Garden Hyde Hall



Jānis Rukšāns
288pp 2011
Timber Press
ISBN 9781604691061
RRP £30

Crocuses: A Complete Guide to the Genus

A nurseryman's approach to raising *Crocus* species and cultivars

Crocuses have long been favourites among bulb growers and gardeners. Although this work covers all the species, it is not strictly a botanical monograph. Even though it does contain diagnostic keys, it does not contain formal descriptions.

The author's approach is much that of a nurseryman and grower, and it is doubtful whether other authorities would agree with his classification. That aside, this valuable work is made all the more relevant by the author's personal observations and experience.

There are excellent essays on cultivation such as 'Growing in the open garden' and 'Growing in pots and containers' (both in the open and under glass), and 'Pests and diseases of crocuses'. The bulk of the text, however, is taken up by a brief review of the botanical characters and classification, followed by an account of the species, arbitrarily arranged under headings such as 'Leafless autumnal crocuses', 'The eastern runners' and 'Yellow fever'. Of particular note is the taxonomically tortuous account of *Crocus biflorus*, alarmingly separated out into more than 20 subspecies.



The text is accompanied by some 307 colour photographs (presented in two cumbersome blocks), some taken in the wild. These are mainly of fine quality, although some would have been better omitted, while others are poorly cropped.

Overall the text

is readable, although more judicious editing might have eliminated some of the particularly long, often unpunctuated sentences, and remarks such as: 'I have not had much success growing *Crocus scardicus*, and my stock is not very diligent to flower'. I found terminology wayward in places, with words such as segment, perianth, sepal, petal and tepal all being freely interchanged.

Despite this, the author of this guide should be commended on producing an informative, albeit personal account of this popular, much-loved genus. ■

Christopher Grey-Wilson is Chairman of the RHS Joint Rock Garden Committee



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