East Lambrook

With its comfortable, homely feel and relaxed, generous planting, this RHS Partner Garden in Somerset created by plantswoman Margery Fish is an enchanting and inspiring place to visit, especially for those seeking a relatively modest yet charismatic outlook on garden making.


East Lambrook is undoubtedly a great garden. Its homespun, rather modest feel using simple materials and understated design provides its distinctive charm and appeal. However, the apparent simplicity is deceptive as the profusion of this informal planting shows. Restrained use of colour and attention to form using plants such as Cynara, Sisyrinchium, Euphorbia and Erysimum prevents planting looking fussy, while an alpine-filled pot makes a typically low-key focal point.
nyone who has read Margery Fish’s classic We Made a Garden (1956) will know the attraction of a visit to her 8,000sq m (2 acre) garden at East Lambrook Manor in Somerset.

The book outlines both the creation of the garden, and her progress as a gardener, her friendly tone encouraging readers in their endeavours.

The old hamstone (local limestone) house was a wreck when Margery and husband Walter moved in during the late 1930s. They set about making a garden as ‘modest when Margery Fish first started gardening. Small, stone paths were used to create the crooked paths.

Running like a spine through the centre of the Terrace Garden is a broad, stepped path lined with Margery Fish’s ‘pudding trees’, clipped, pointed domes of Chamaecyparis lawsoniana ‘Fletcheri’, planted to add effective yet typically modest structure to this largely ephemeral mix of plants. Spilling out like pink custard between the puddings is Phuopsis stylosa, its stems of whorled leaves flowing onto the path, topped by vivid pink pin cushions of flowers. Elsewhere, the glorious lipstick red flowers of Tulipa sprengeri mark the passing of spring, being invariably the last of their kind to bloom.

A living legacy

I visited East Lambrook Manor Gardens at that magical time between spring and summer as wisterias reached their peak, but before most roses open, that all too brief moment when the garden catches its breath before high summer’s full-on exuberance.

Arguably the best-known area is the Terrace Garden on the rising ground beside the house, an area where Margery Fish first started gardening. Small, stone paths cross the site forming island beds, some raised with hamstone edging. Self-seeding plants create a delightfully rich and haphazard feel; swarms of Meconopsis cambrica nod their heads amid the golden haze of grass Milium effusum ‘Aureum’, while here and there purple bells of Nectarsorum dicotyledon blue bellough stems. Bolder colour comes from the first Oriental poppies and showy bearded iris which revel in the sunny, well-drained conditions. A sense of solidity is provided by evergreen clumps of Libertia grandiflora, its wands of white flowers waving above spear-shaped foliage; elsewhere Euphorbia characias subsp. wulfenii, a signature plant, forms soft domes topped by chartreuse-green flowers.

Histories of the gardens

Margery Fish was best known as a champion of a style she described as cottage gardening, using informal planting with self-seeding plants that were encouraged to colonise paved areas and walls. But she also favoured planting for year-round interest and collected old-fashioned garden plants. Her views often clashed with those of her husband who died in 1947, but they agreed on certain principles, such as that a garden should have ‘good bone structure’. Since Margery’s death in 1969, East Lambrook Manor passed through various hands, but the garden’s appeal endures. Current owners Mike and Gail Werkmeister appreciate the legacy of the garden, and have injected considerable reserves of enthusiasm in working to keep the garden flourishing with a valued and well-established team of skilled gardeners, many of them volunteers.

A garden of silver

The Silver Garden fills a discrete corner at the end of the terraces, with a meandering path, a few small well-placed pots and a stone bench. The range of plants...
Recreating the feel

Head Gardener Mark Stainer looks at some plants associated with East Lambrook Manor Gardens.

Margery Fish was keen on Geranium so we have a large collection in the garden. Another favourite was Astrantia; she grew many, including pink. A. maxima and wonderful white and green A. major subsp. involucrata ‘Shaggy’. She enjoyed helichrums and grew masses of Helichrysum x hybridum, as well as green-flowered H. argyrophyllum, and of course snowdrops that thrive in the Ditch.

Various plants are named after the gardens, including silver-leaved Artemisia abrotanum ‘Lambrook’, Silver, lovely Polemonium L. Mauve, Euphorbia characias subsp. wulfenii ‘Lambrook Gold’, and snowdrop Galanthus ‘Margarine’. ‘Fasciner’s’ provide a great counterpoint to blue bearded Iris, pink Papaver orientale ‘Blue’, an unknown selection from the days of Margery Fish, white Liriope ‘Luna’ and white double campania. A wisteria ‘Argentea Variegata’ scrambles up the Malthouse to form a perfect backdrop to the whole scene.

Adding structure to informality in the Terrace Garden

As charming as informal planting can be, the best effects are often achieved when it is contrasted with more formal features. Clipped Chamaecyparis Lawsoniana ‘Paxtonii’ provides a great counterpoint to blue bearded Iris, pink Papaver orientale ‘Blue’, an unknown selection from the days of Margery Fish, white Liriope ‘Luna’ and white double campania. A wisteria ‘Argentea Variegata’ scrambles up the Malthouse to form a perfect backdrop to the whole scene.

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Planting old and new

Along the back of the Malthouse, past old pollarded willows, the Ditchee borders, richly planted beds spill out on either side. These are home to impressive displays of snowdrops and helichrums, some of Margery Fish’s favourite plants. In the Ditchee in summer, ferns luxuriate with Telfima ground flora, Geranium phaeum and, something I love and have not seen as a garden plant, Brunanculus acris (meadow buttercup), its yellow cups atop tall stems blinking in the shade. Higher up the banks, Aquilegia and vivid Gladiolus communis subsp. biglandulosus run riot. On one side was an impressive clump of Polygonum x hybridum (Solomons seal), its horizontal growth contrasting with upright Necturus cordatum.

The Wooded Helichrysum Garden is a triumph, designed in 2005 by Head Gardener Mark Stainer, who has worked here for 39 years. A hair path leads through a sea of Astrantia, Geranium, blue-leaved Hosta, charming Lamium orvala and many helichrums, not to mention fenners such as Matteuccia struthiopteris. Choice Paeonia ‘Late Windflower’ opens its single white blooms while a maturing canopy is contributed by Forsythia suspensa (later to be hung with white fruits), Cercidiphyllum japonicum and multistemmed, white-barled Betula.

The joyous, carefree nature of East Lambrook Manor Gardens is infectious. Ideas that might easily translate to your own garden fill the mind. As I ambled the narrow, but inviting paths the feeling was one of contentment – the garden is never overpowering or humbling. All is on a human scale and the unpretentious nature of the place is truly appealing, be it the paths of recycled stone roofs or wildflowers that fill the Somerset hedgerows and have mixed with other self-seeders, which in turn mingle with border plants.

As I left, I noticed a rather stout visitor who, I fancied, looked rather like Margery Fish. ‘This is just the sort of garden I love,’ she told her friend. Me too, I thought.

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