

A YEAR
IN THE GARDEN

SEEDS OF CHANGE

Justine Picardie reflects on the fashion inspiration and personal meaning behind the flowers she has chosen to accompany her on a new adventure

ILLUSTRATIONS BY AMY GALVIN

I am writing this on an exceedingly cold midwinter morning, gazing at the stone-grey skies as a storm gusts across our new garden in the Norfolk countryside. I say 'new', but of course the garden has been here far longer than I have, for it as old as this venerable rectory, the original part of which dates back to the mid-17th century. And although I'd been planning a planting scheme months before the builders had finished renovating the house, as soon as we finally moved in and I started to become familiar with the landscape, I realised that the most important elements of the garden are already in place. First and foremost are the magnificent trees that have stood sentinel for several hundred years, overlooking the church and glebe meadow at the front of the property, and on the other side providing shelter to our pasture, grazed by a small flock of Jacob sheep. At the far end of the grounds lies an acre or so of wild woodland, surrounded by undulating hedgerows and a sculptural line of poplars.

Thus it feels wrong to introduce anything too fussy or contemporary into the garden; but we have widened the herbaceous borders around the house, under the expert guidance of Jo Thompson, a brilliant plantswoman renowned for her naturalistic, sensitive approach, and for her award-winning designs at the Chelsea Flower Show. She has also introduced me to the joy of wildflower-meadow turf – it arrived in the autumn rolled up like a shaggily unkempt green carpet,



COCO CHANEL IN HER LAVENDER-FILLED GARDEN IN 1930



LEFT: THE VIEW FROM THE OLD RECTORY. RIGHT: A GARDEN-PLANTING DESIGN BY JO THOMPSON

as long as the rapacious squirrels haven't eaten the thousands of bulbs carefully hidden beneath the grass.

One of the features that I love most about the house is its tall Regency windows, which look out onto every aspect of the garden. The borders have been designed with this in mind, featuring bounteous quantities of my favourite flowers (including a delightful array of roses given to me as a leaving present by the charming team

ready to be laid where a large area of ground had been churned into mud by the builders' vans and equipment. With any luck, this should burst into life by April, just



THE OLD RECTORY IN NORFOLK. BELOW CENTRE: A CHANEL CAMELLIA BROOCH

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF JUSTINE PICARDIE AND JO THOMPSON, RACHEL WARNE, COURTESY OF CHANEL, STUDIO 33. SEE STOCKISTS FOR DETAILS

of this magazine, when I stepped down as editor-in-chief at the end of last year). Each of these plants is as dear to me for its emotional significance in the various chapters of my life as for its scent, colour and beauty.

Lavender remains forever associated with my beloved sister Ruth, who planted it in her own garden, as well as giving several cherished pots to me, before she died, too young, of breast cancer at the age of 33. Ruth was not miraculously healed by the lavender oil that I gently stroked onto her skin when she was ill, nor by the hand-gathered bouquets that I placed on her bedside table; yet these were the wordless emblems of my love for her, and hers for me, as are the lavenders that I have planted in this peaceful garden, where my thoughts are still entwined with my sister's spirit.

Then there are the white camellias that speak to me of Coco Chanel, whose legend and life I chronicled in a biography, and whose influence continues to shape my own creative aesthetic. It was thanks to my research into Chanel that I visited Eaton Hall – formerly the home of her lover, the 2nd Duke of Westminster – and saw the splendidly ornate glasshouse that still contains flourishing camellias dating back to the 1920s (a period when Chanel often came to stay, thereby developing her own, distinctively chic version of 'le style anglais'). The Duke had wooed Chanel with fresh camellias from his estate; and they became an integral element of her couture house in Paris, decorating her salon, and as subtle adornments for her signature little black dresses, flowing white satin gowns and softly tailored tweed jackets.

As it happens, it is another, very different Frenchwoman who has inspired my most recent choice of roses: Catherine Dior, the subject of my forthcoming book. Like her brother, the great Christian Dior, she was an ardent horticulturalist, sharing a passion they inherited from their mother, who had created a romantic cliff-top rose garden in their childhood home on the Normandy coast. Catherine's courage took her far away from that idyllic haven: she joined the French Resistance as a young woman during World War II, but was captured



LEFT: THE PLANTING SCHEME IN THE FRONT BORDER OF THE OLD RECTORY. BELOW: JUSTINE AND HER SISTER RUTH



PLOT DEVICES



SEEDS, FROM £2.50 EACH, PETERSHAM NURSERIES

APRON, £30, DAYLESFORD

TRUG, FROM £46.35, SUSSEX TRUGS

VASE, £48, LSA AT AMARA

FORK, £22; TROWEL, £20, BOTH DAYLESFORD

by the Gestapo in Paris, then deported to Germany in August 1944 and imprisoned in Ravensbrück concentration camp. Against all the odds, she survived, and returned to Paris in the summer of 1945, much to the joy of her brother. Indeed, when Christian launched his couture house in 1947, he named his first perfume 'Miss Dior', in honour of Catherine. And astonishingly, it was Catherine herself who grew the roses that would be the key ingredient for the perfume, tending fields of the sweetly scented *Rosa centifolia* at her home in Provence.

Hence my choice of this enchanting variety for the sheltered, south-facing borders in our own garden, alongside several climbing roses on the walls: for example, the graceful 'Aimée Vibert' (a Rambler known for its delicious fragrance and clusters of blushed buds that open up into white petals) and the bold 'Mme Caroline Testout', famed for her taffeta-pink blooms. The rain is lashing down on these today, but at least their roots will not go thirsty; and their dark-green stems contain within them the miraculous promise of the coming spring... □