

# WHAT MAKES A *Dartmoor Garden?*

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF ROBIN AND EDWINA HILL

*Chrysosplenium macrophyllum*

The final article in this seasonal series in which Nick Haworth, Head Gardener at The Garden House in Buckland Monachorum, Yelverton, takes a busman's holiday and visits private gardens on Dartmoor to meet fellow gardeners and explore the challenges and pleasures of gardening on the moor.

It's early February and Nick heads to Belstone, on the northern moor near Okehampton, to see Andrews Corner: a private garden that opens to the public for charity.

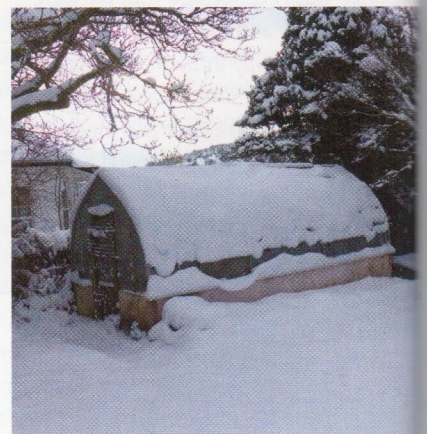
**I**njoy a winter garden visit and think of it as a great opportunity to understand the bones of a place. Winter is often the season most overlooked when gardens are designed. Gardening books and weekend supplements will tell you to tuck the garden into pots near the back door, so you get a bit of scent or colour as you dash from the car to the house. When you're safely indoors you're supposed to spend the season by the fire, reading seed catalogues.

Well, there'll be no armchair designing for me today, nor for Robin Hill, who will be showing me around the garden that he and his wife, Edwina, have created.

And what a day we chose for a stroll. The sleet began almost as soon as I put the key in the car ignition and Radio Devon traffic was full of warnings about the first proper snow of the season. Thinking ahead on arrival at Belstone I turned my car round and parked facing down the lane, making a mental note of where the granite boulders were jutting out from the hedges, then nipped into the garden, straight into the warm welcome of Robin's greenhouse.

I love greenhouses and can while away hours in them in any season. Robin's is only the second concrete-and-glass greenhouse I've seen. I was impressed by the light transmitting shape and the ratio of glass to frame. It houses a grapevine that's been established for over four decades (probably a Black Hamburg) and is a propagation house for Robin to retreat to in the winter.

Just five minutes into my visit and I realise that I am in the garden of a plantsman. Robin grows his collection of Himalayan poppies (*Meconopsis*) mainly from seed and cultivates alpines from specialist nurseries all over the UK. Andrews Corner is obviously home to a gardener with a serious plant habit, so even though I could have stayed in the greenhouse talking alpines and 3D printing of replacement window clips all day, I was happy to venture out into the cold and take a closer look.



Robin's unusual concrete-and-glass greenhouse – a safe haven in the winter months



We walked straight into a view over the Taw valley to Cosdon, just under 1000ft up and with our backs to the north wind.

This garden is about 1½ acres in total (thanks to borrowing some land from a neighbour for 35 years). It feels bigger, though, and has a gently sloping, meandering, meditative layout, with island beds and connecting paths, and pockets of planting under mature trees and shrubs. Many of these are unusual specimens which shouldn't be happy on Dartmoor. *Ginkgo biloba*, for example, is a tree that likes well-drained conditions and sandy soil. Robin's is coming along nicely after 25 years, having adjusted to the annual 70–80in of rain and soil that's acid shale. I admire brave planting, and was beginning to feel spellbound by all the plants.

Galanthus are on show throughout the garden, which opens for snowdrop weekends each year. It's always a pleasure to see the white petals poking through dark leaf mulch. The Himalayan poppies were already showing growth, and the magnolia were further on than those at The Garden House. I was surprised as the garden seems more exposed but it's sheltered to some extent by mature trees, both deciduous and also conifers that Robin's parents planted in 1967. I think they look quite pleasing, but Robin has his eye on some of them for firewood.

The magnolia had well-formed buds and colour showing. It's interesting to see the difference in growth just a few miles away, and it was good to see a *Magnolia sprengeri* 'Diva' showing off. The original tree was at Caerhays in Cornwall, but it's long since passed on.

Acers thrive here, and the collection is being increased by new plants that are coming from seedlings. Acers cross breed, so you can't be sure of what you are going to get, but the bright green in spring and autumnal colours are very welcome in the garden. Wandering through the beds we kept getting stopped in our tracks by scent. The Daphnes were putting on a show, and there were even some *Eucryphia* putting their scent about.

Now I've only visited four gardens to write this series, but three of them have had tennis courts. At The Garden House we have one too – but I didn't expect to find that similarity here! Robin isn't fussy about the tennis court lawn. He's more interested in the plants that thrive around it. Grass care is kept to raking up the worst of the leaves, mulching the others in with a rotary mower and keeping the deer off.

I'm really impressed by the 'long view' planting and patience. Plants get numerous chances to survive and Robin's happy to move them and push the boundaries of planting conditions to see if they will be happy where they aren't supposed to be. Brightly coloured *Roscoea* that thrive in shady wet conditions in the Himalayas are quite happy at Andrews Corner in full sunshine. (Gardener's tip – these plants are on Robin's list as being the next trendy plants to look out for – you heard it here first!)

In common with all gardens on the moor, deer are a pain. All other wildlife is welcomed and the balance between wildlife and gardening is very relaxed. Dormice thrive in the hedges, grass snakes writhe in the compost heaps and



The garden under a heavy fall of snow



*Daphne bholua* 'Jacqueline Postille'



Plenty of winter and early spring colour, including over 60 cultivars of snowdrops



The perfect place to sit and smell the Daphne





Is this the best view from a Dartmoor veg patch?

the garden was full of snow-dodging birds feeding and singing.

Checking back through my smudged notes I could fill this article with the names and planting conditions of unusual plants that shouldn't be at home at Andrews Corner. In fact I have so much Latin to decipher that my notebook is reading like a book of spells. If I could I would certainly magic some of Robin's plants into my garden. We stood in the sleet and reminisced about specialist nurseries, drawing up wish lists of plants that we both want to grow.

If you were to make a list of plants associated with Dartmoor, it won't be long before ferns and rhododendrons spring to mind. There's a good mix of ferns here, and some unusual rhododendrons, including a narrow-leaved variety, *Macrosepalum linearifolium*, that is known as the spider azalea. I've only seen a photo of this plant up until now.

I was thrilled to bits to leave with a gardener's gift of some *Chrysosplenium*

*macrophyllum*. This is a shade-loving plant that is unusual and colourful, and I'll give it a good home.

There is nothing run-of-the-mill about the garden here. If you are a dabbling gardener you can enjoy the scents, colours and forms of the plants. Any serious plantsman would be happy spending time here, nosing into the detail.

Each garden I have visited has had a different feel and a different way of coping with and responding to Dartmoor. This is a fine garden to end the year on, as it shows what a gardener can do in spite of being on the moor. If Robin went by the planting instructions and only planted what ought to do well, the garden would be far less diverse and inspiring. It's over forty years since he put a spade in the ground here and the garden has developed into a space made all the more exciting because he is willing to give things a chance. I've been inspired by Robin and I will try to lure more plants into feeling at home on the moor.

That's a good way to sum up what I



Naturalised crocus (above) and cyclamen (below) provide bright splashes of colour at the foot of the trees



PHOTOGRAPH JOHN RICHMOND

have learned throughout this year of garden visiting. Dartmoor will throw wild wet and cold weather. It will flood our gardens, fill them with deer and rabbits, take over with bracken and give us granite-backache. It also provides beautiful landscapes to borrow and enables us to have the opportunity to create peaceful, plant-filled spaces.

I once heard a rain-soaked visitor at The Garden House say that the garden would be perfect if only it could be picked up and put somewhere dry. Well more than ever I disagree now – gardening on Dartmoor is a privilege, and I'm very happy to count myself a Dartmoor gardener. ■

Andrews Corner is open for the National Garden Scheme on 'Snowdrop Sunday' 17 February 2019 11am–4pm in aid of the Children's Hospice South West. [www.andrewscorner.garden](http://www.andrewscorner.garden)  
The Garden House winter opening Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays 11am–3pm. [www.thegardenhouse.org.uk](http://www.thegardenhouse.org.uk)