

The avenue of oaks planted to mark the millennium with a carpet of native narcissi grown from seed

# HERALDS *of* SPRING

A vivid tapestry of golden narcissi, purple cyclamen, maroon hellebores and brilliant white snowdrops signals the arrival of another season at Bates Green Garden in East Sussex

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARIANNE MAJERUS GARDEN IMAGES/BENNET SMITH

## THE DETAILS

### SIZE

1.5-acre garden, plus adjoining woods and meadow

### STYLE

Typical English garden that is relaxed and naturalistic

### SOIL

Heavy Wealden clay with a neutral pH

### SEASON OF INTEREST

Spring through to autumn

### VISIT

Wednesdays and Saturdays, from 25 February to 28 October ([batesgreengarden.co.uk](http://batesgreengarden.co.uk)). The adjoining Arlington Bluebell Walk opens for charity in May (see [bluebellwalk.co.uk](http://bluebellwalk.co.uk)). During this time, Bates Green is open every day



**T**here's a poetic symmetry to the story of Bates Green, where the past and present intertwine in the lush planting of this quintessentially English garden. More than two decades after she arrived here as the first trainee, Emma Reece has come home, not only to tend her mentor Carolyn McCutchan's beloved garden, but to reimagine it for a fast-changing world.

The story begins back in 1968 when Carolyn and John McCutchan moved into the old gamekeeper's cottage in East Sussex - the house where John was born - with one and a half acres of garden and some adjoining woodland. As with many husband-and-wife gardening partnerships, they naturally gravitated towards different areas of responsibility, with John overseeing the 24-acre wood filled with ancient oaks and hornbeams. Meanwhile, Carolyn concentrated on the area surrounding the house. She became a passionate plantswoman with an encyclopaedic memory for Latin names, picking up knowledge from books and garden visits. She discovered a way of gardening that suited her, finding a kindred spirit in Beth Chatto, whose style of planting was to focus on plants that will thrive in a garden's natural conditions.

The result is a seemingly naturalistic garden that has in fact been carefully orchestrated, where native narcissi have been absorbed in the grass. Carpets of cyclamen and crocus spread below a tracery of spring-flowering shrubs, while the woodland garden was inspired by an existing majestic oak and in summer the meadow is rich with native wildflowers.

As Carolyn's gardening knowledge expanded, she decided to share it with students who came to Bates Green for hands-on experience as part of the Work and Retrain as a Gardener Scheme (WRAGS). In 2002, Emma Reece was the first trainee. "My job as a ballet teacher wasn't fitting in with looking after my two young children. I knew that I wanted to work outside, so I decided to try horticulture," she says. Gardening was a revelation to her and she found surprising similarities between the two disciplines: "Carolyn's planting was so fluid; it had so much movement in it, which, as a dancer, really connected with me."

After training, Emma went on to work at Kew and for the National Trust, but she and Carolyn stayed in touch. "We had so much ▶

THIS PAGE, ABOVE A seat at a vantage point with a view across the wildlife pond BELOW An abundance of pink and white *Cyclamen coum* BOTTOM Bursts of purple crocuses add to the jewel-box effect



ABOVE The lychgate into the garden. The striking yellow shrub is *Ligustrum undulatum* 'Lemon Lime and Clippers', pruned to give it an elegant shape FAR LEFT Sawn chestnut prunings are used to edge the paths LEFT Delicately veined *puschkinia*



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in common, not just horticulture. We loved *The Archers*, we loved eating cake; she became a close friend.”

Until she became ill in 2015, Carolyn had spent nearly every day working in the garden, but she was able to do less and less, and by the time of her death in 2019 the garden had become overgrown, its original design blurred. John was determined that her garden should survive to be her legacy and asked Emma if she could help.

One of the first things Emma did was to sharpen her secateurs. “I’m obsessed with pruning. I think it’s because of being a dancer. I like to see a flow through the stem. I hate sharp angles. And so I really try to prune in a way that allows the shrub the chance to move.”

In a winter garden, you can’t hide your mistakes. “You see the skeletons of the shrubs and trees so clearly in the winter, and if pruning is poor, then it’s nothing but an irritation,” says Emma.

At this time of year, it’s the winter garden that enchants visitors, with its carpet of vivid purple cyclamen, crocuses, intense yellow aconites and dashes of contrasting white snowdrops, plus taller clumps of dark maroon hellebores. “It’s like a jewellery box of colours,” Emma says, albeit one with its contents upturned and spread out under a canopy of carefully pruned bare-stemmed dogwood (*Cornus mas*) and just-emerging pussy willow, pink viburnums and spidery witch hazel. Also making up the canopy is the impossibly named *Betula medwediewii*, a type of birch that is really more a tall shrub than a tree, with attractive peeling golden bark. A magnificent Persian ironwood (*Parrotia persica*) rises out of the winter garden, surrounded by a tapestry of cyclamen as rich as any oriental carpet. “Oh boy, you know why it’s called ironwood when you try to prune it. It blunts a pruning saw immediately!” Emma says.

Since she first came here all those years ago, Emma can trace the effect of climate change on the garden. The winter garden has proved the most resilient. The shrubs come into leaf as the bulbs have finished their display and retreat below ground, and the canopy provides protection from the summer heat.

By contrast, the more formal middle garden hasn’t fared so well, and many of the herbaceous perennials such as helenium and phlox have succumbed to the combination of fierce summer heat and sodden winters. The clay soil bakes bone-hard in summer, and is claggy and wet in winter. While cottage-garden stalwarts such as forsythia seem to flourish, the equally traditional flowering currants have not. “All our ribes have died over the past three years. We’re not going to plant any more.” Emma says.

Thankfully, mature trees remain unaffected. At the turn of the century, John planted a Millennium Avenue of oaks to link the adjoining woods with the garden. As the years passed and the oaks flourished, he mentioned to Carolyn how pleased he was that native narcissi had spontaneously appeared at the foot of the trees, only to discover that she had been saving seed from the narcissi in the garden and surreptitiously scattering it in the avenue.

The garden now stands once again as a living testament to all the hard work and love Carolyn poured into it over the years, and its restoration means the world to John. “The garden was Carolyn’s whole life, her passion, and now I’m watching it come back to life and being developed by Emma and the garden team. I’m a very lucky man. I feel Carolyn’s presence whenever I walk round the garden. She’s here.”

FOR MORE DETAILS head to [batesgreengarden.co.uk](http://batesgreengarden.co.uk).



OPPOSITE, ABOVE The spidery flowers of witch hazel ‘Jelena’ have a peppery scent OPPOSITE, BELOW Looking towards the six-acre wildflower meadow, framed by the branches of a Bramley apple tree planted by John’s father THIS PAGE, ABOVE The strong sculptural lines of the Persian ironwood by the path to the farmhouse BELOW Hellebores hybridise wildly in the garden



### EMMA’S TIPS FOR A CARPET OF SPRING FLOWERS

**APPLY LEAF MOULD** It’s the best mulch for spring-flowering bulbs. Ideally, make it yourself because it mimics nature. Add in the mulch as you clear the beds in late autumn.

**RAKE UP AUTUMN LEAVES** as soon as they fall on your spring-bulb beds. Unfortunately, you can’t simply leave them in place to mulch down naturally on top of the bulbs because they are the perfect hiding place for slugs, which will then destroy the bulbs. Rake them off the bed and compost them elsewhere. In other areas, it’s fine to leave them to rot down.

**WATCH OUT FOR WILD ARUM** as the leaves will smother bulbs. At Bates Green, as fast as we dig it up, it multiplies. If you spot it, dig it up very carefully to avoid the tubers shattering: it can regrow from tiny pieces. It’s one of the few weeds that we burn in the garden. I’m even wary of the marble-leaved ornamental arum (*Arum italicum* subsp. *italicum* ‘Marmoratum’); it’s not a good idea to add to planting.

**TIDY UP HELLEBORE LEAVES** and cut them off by the end of the year. We find that mice like to shelter beneath them and nibble the fat, juicy hellebore buds.