

# Leave it to nature

**Antony Woodward** explains how he came to make his 'not garden' on a Welsh hillside

"So where's the garden?" visitors sometimes ask, having heard our home is in the National Gardens Scheme. "It's all around you," we reply. "Ri-i-ght," they say. Our garden, you see, is not visible to everyone. There are no lawns, no borders, no paths or paving, no shrubberies or pergolas. There isn't even a garden gate, yet. But to those who can see it, we think, we have a beautiful garden. Let me explain.

When I was six, I developed an obsession with mountains. Following an uncharacteristically sunny holiday to the west coast of Scotland in 1970, cobalt skies and heathery summits lodged themselves in my head. To these would be added *Heidi* scenes of alpine flower meadows (especially the one on the Caran d'Ache crayon tin). Later, it was mountaineers with frosted beards and colourful tents perched above the clouds. In due course, I went mountaineering in the Alps, the Andes, the Himalayas. At one point there was even talk of Everest.

Eight years ago, however, my upland fantasies finally reached their apotheosis. I found a mountain refuge of my own, or rather we did. For by now I was married and a father-to-be. Tair-Ffynnon consisted of five bracken-invaded acres enclosed by tumbledown dry stone walls 1,200 feet up on a ridge of the Black Mountains.

We arrived to find wild Welsh mountain ponies drinking from the old bath tub where a spring rose in the yard. A pair of red kites circled overhead. Tair-Ffynnon's policies extended to some ramshackle tin sheds and a Nissen hut. Other chattels included two Opel Kadetts with nettles growing through them, a grounded Marina van and assorted carcasses of rusting farm machinery. The fields were lumpy with ant hills ("ant-tumps" as they're known) and the views extended to 70 miles – when the place wasn't lost in fog. I fell in love.

The plan was to have the place as a retreat, but I soon found myself incapable of thinking about anything else. I was secretly dying to move – as a writer I could work anywhere – but my wife's work was linked to London. In the end, mercifully, she

suggested it. But the move only served to worsen my addiction. I yearned to get to the root of the place's strange grip on me; to somehow consummate my relationship with it. I could think of only one way: by making a garden.

But what sort of garden? Frankly, my relationship with gardening was not unprejudiced. My mother was a botanist, and like so many practitioners of that ancient calling, she had the gift of making her subject both dull and incomprehensible. With my father, also an academic and keen gardener, I had trailed round Stourhead, Hestercombe and Westonbirt Arboretum while they discussed – well, goodness knows what, since it was all in Latin. Nor did most gardens seem remotely relevant for a mountain-top. Nevertheless, a garden still felt the way – perhaps because paradise is always a garden.

I collected little scenes that appealed, from mossy stone roofs to ferns on crumbling chimney stacks. What I liked most were those natural gardens, those pitch-perfect tableaux – a wind-sculpted tree, an unknown churchyard where crooked tombstones sat in a sea of spring flowers. They were the "pleasant places" the poet John Clare wrote about: "Old stone pits with veined ivy overhung/Wild crooked brooks o'er which was rudely flung/A rail and plank that bends beneath the tread/Old narrow lanes where trees meet overhead".

Then other thoughts emerged. That trip to Scotland, perhaps, had deeper significance. It had been our first family holiday following an accident which had confined my mother to a wheelchair. A cage had descended over our lives, in which the bars were tiny topographical details we'd hitherto scarcely noticed: sharp corners, steps and level changes. "Upstairs", "downstairs", and "just over here" had become as remote as the moon. Perhaps Scotland stood for all the wild places from which, at the time, I felt I was excluded.

Which was when the penny finally dropped. Tair-Ffynnon already was a garden – at least to me. It needed no



**Simplicity: box balls roll down the hillside at Tair-Ffynnon; the rill at Rousham House, inset, by William Kent**

#### Garden info

*The Garden in the Clouds* by Antony Woodward (Harper Press, £8.99) is available from Telegraph Books, <http://books.telegraph.co.uk>  
© Tair-Ffynnon opens under the National Gardens Scheme on July 30 and 31 ([www.gardenintheclouds.com](http://www.gardenintheclouds.com)).

embellishment. Our "garden" would consist merely of the existing idioms of the hill: the spring, walls, gates, wildflower meadows, stone piles, rusting farm implements. The views and clouds could do the rest. Once we'd cleared up the broken glass and bid farewell to the Opel Kadetts, all we had to do was a loving restoration job.

I say "all". On present reckoning, this could take the rest of our lives. After months of deliberation we kept the vegetable patch exactly where it was – because it was clearly in the right place (just as ancient country paths and buildings have a kind of genius "rightness" in their siting).

All we planted were native bulbs, rowans, gorse, a small orchard and (yes, a shameless conceit) box balls "rolling" down the hill. Otherwise, so far as most gardening conventions go, we have none. A "not garden", as a waggish friend put it.

Of course, there's little new about all this. In the 17th century, in his poem "The Mower Against Gardens",

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Andrew Marvell was railing against the crass insensitivities of garden-makers ("Tis all enforced, the fountain and the grot/ While the sweet fields do lie forgot"). By 1713, Alexander Pope was calling for gardens with the "amiable simplicity of unadorned nature", soon followed by landscape gardeners such as Capability Brown and, before him, William Kent – the man described by Walpole as the first to "see that all nature is a garden".

Most of our visitors seem to "get" it and our broad-minded National Gardens Scheme County Organiser let us into *The Yellow Book* (without the word "garden" in our entry). One hard-boiled metropolitan friend looked baffled until he saw our vegetable patch. Here, plainly, was the "garden". Understanding spread across his face, turning to one of deep admiration: "You wrote 294 pages... about that? Respect, my friend."

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