

Gwyneth's border

We weren't planning to move house. But the 'For Sale' board, planted in the overgrown front garden of a dilapidated wooden bungalow, seemed to possess magnetic properties, drawing us in, first to cup our hands against the windows and peer inside and then to wade across the unkempt lawn and slip along the side alley into the back garden.

The house – with chintzy three-piece still in place and mugs on the kitchen counter – had an air of abandonment. But the garden was enjoying its newfound freedom, throwing out a mishmash of anarchic blooms. Bindweed trumpeted from the choisya. Meadow cranesbill mingled with rich-hued pansies in the once-orderly borders. Scrambling sweet pea twined through the honeysuckle. Two potted camelia were vying for treehood.

The door of the greenhouse was open, as if someone had just popped back into the house, leaving the pots they were tending to lined up on the shelf. But the roof was open to the June sky, and broken glass crunched under my feet. The air smelled of earth and sun and faintly of tomatoes.

There was an apple tree, small, pockmarked fruits scattered below it, branches encrusted with lichen. A yellow-blossomed broom curved up from the ground like a snake charmed from its basket. And towering above it all, a great Norwegian spruce, shading the ground beneath and carpeting it with copper needles.

Later – when the garden and its bungalow were ours – we learned that the spruce had started life as a family Christmas tree before being planted out, decades before. Our source

was reliable – the granddaughter of Gwyneth, the woman who had lived here for most of her 96 years. We also learned that as a member of the local Garden Society and a keen botanical recorder, Gwyneth had been one hell of a gardener.

As we set to work ‘sorting out’ the back garden, I felt Gwyneth’s presence. Whatever my aspirations, uprooting a lifetime’s work seemed dishonourable, both to her and to the garden itself. This tempered my usual gung-ho approach, prompting me to prune and trim, rather than cut down or dig up, and teaching me the value of ‘wait and see’. We dismantled the broken greenhouse but left the ramshackle shed because the sparrows like to sunbathe there, hunkering down on its warm felt roof.

As the summer unfolded, the garden revealed more of itself; the guelder rose swapped its lace-doily flowers for clusters of glossy red berries, umbels of wild carrot tottered on tall stems amongst the verbena and Japanese anemones, ragwort marched across the lawn. Vibrant, colourful chaos.

‘You’ll be taking down the spruce, will you?’ a neighbour asked as we sipped white wine in their perfectly manicured garden.

‘I doubt it. Why?’

‘It’s always full of pigeons,’ she said.

It is. And jackdaws. Goldcrest flit among the higher branches, too, uttering their tiny ‘seep seep’ calls – and there’s the occasional lemon-yellow flash of a siskin.

It’s our fifth summer here this year.

The old apple tree never again bore fruit. Nor came into leaf. It's dead, yet resolutely full of life. Blue tits pick through the lichen for insects and its gnarly limbs are the perfect place to hang the birdfeeders, so we leave it standing.

In fact, much of the original garden remains. An evergreen spindle tree still greets you at the kitchen window, blousy pink roses bloom against the back fence and in the area that I call 'Gwyneth's border', a blue hydrangea continues its reign, attended by tulips in spring and sedums in summer.

But there are many new additions, too. We have three new apple trees, a silver birch that's finally overtaken me on the growing chart and a wooden cabin-cum-shed nestling under the hazels. There are nest boxes and log piles, a bug hotel and wildlife pond.

I suspect Gwyneth might not approve of the flagrant disorder in the borders, nor our wild lawn, but I like to think she would enjoy watching the dragonflies dart and hover over the pond and the bumblebees foraging on scabious and greater knapweed.

I never expected to learn so much from a garden. I can plant and tend and water, but it turns out that I can't force things to grow against their will. I can't change the soil or the weather. Even if I do exactly what it says on the label, or in the gardening book, I can fail.

At first, this failure smarted. I could picture Gwyneth shaking her head sadly as my magnolia tree (a housewarming gift) refused to produce any flowers for the second year running. Or when my plug plants carked it. I felt as if it revealed something about me – an ineptitude that rendered me a taker of life, not a giver. But gradually, I've learned to accept that I cannot control everything.

Some garden pleasures are all the better for being unexpected. Oak saplings – perhaps planted as acorns by a forgetful jay – are one. (People say I should take them out, but I'd rather leave them be. I can always coppice.)

But oh, the exquisite joy when things go to plan. Ragged robin, sown two years ago in the wildflower patch, shyly peeped its dishevelled pink head above the meadow grasses for the first time this spring, while this year's teasel has grown to beanstalk-like proportions, its mauve-tinged flowers scratching the sky.

Unlike Gwyneth, we won't be here for the best part of a lifetime. But we'll still leave our mark on the garden, just as she did – with a great Norwegian spruce towering above it all, alive with birdsong.

ENDS

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