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JANUARY 2014 • ISSUE 197 • FOR EVERYONE WHO LOVES BEAUTIFUL GARDENS • WWW.THEENGLISHGARDEN.CO.UK

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Art among the plants in the Wye Valley Sculpture Garden, which sits in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.



An artist's AWAKENING

A gardener who crafts both the land and her art is at home in the lush surrounds of the new Wye Valley Sculpture Garden ▶

PHOTOGRAPHS JOHN CAMPBELL | WORDS STEPHANIE MAHON

gardens: monmouthshire



'This garden was my playground... I'm never happier than when I'm out there building and making'

ABOVE LEFT The idea for the *Pea Pod* came from the shape of a felled tree.

ABOVE RIGHT These snaking stone towers are the focal point where two paths converge.

RIGHT *The Dark Spiral* has a sinister element to it, like a scorpion's tail coiled to strike.

If there were such a thing as a rural bohemian, then Gemma Wood is it. An artist and landscaper with a remarkable mass of curly blonde hair, she's the sort of person who built her home with her own bare hands - the kind who shows that being creative and capable are not mutually exclusive. She admits to hippie tendencies, such a passion for her old camper van and the wish to commune with nature. Yet beneath this can be found a rod of iron purpose and belief, that she can take any material, from slate to soil, and physically mould it into something beautiful.

Her stone cottage sits on a plot of land that also encompasses an old farmyard, her parents' house and the family garden. Here Gemma has created and placed a collection of artworks evocative of the surrounding Wye Valley. These sculptures, as well as the garden's bountiful planting and its stunning

location in the village of Tintern, on the border of England and Wales, drew plenty of plant and art lovers when it opened to visitors last summer. But its enchanting views and organic principles have actually been enticing people here for decades.

'My grandfather bought the property in the late 1960s, with the aim of creating an organic smallholding,' Gemma explains. 'He and my grandmother also started to provide accommodation as a guesthouse, and then passed it on to my mum and dad. So I grew up in possibly the first vegetarian guesthouse in the UK, which was always full of many weird and wonderful people.'

Work on the garden began about 40 years ago, as a place to satisfy

GARDEN NOTES

Sculptor's three-acre plant-packed garden



the plant lust of her parents, and Gemma got involved upon returning from art college 15 years ago. It is a loose, relaxed plot with areas of lawn and woodland, an orchard, boisterous borders of colourful perennials and surprises around every corner. There is a map available for visitors, but the space encourages an enjoyable aimless ramble around on the many skinny intersecting paths. Routes through the planting lead from sun to shade, up gentle slopes and down steps. Amid this happy plant profusion rest large sculpted shapes including stars, spheres, totems, pea pods,



nuts, cones, beans and spirals. They have been crafted from stone and slate, but mostly wood, and were made by Gemma to complement the garden she loves.

She has shaped its contours too, fashioning out features such as the raised curved beds in the circular hot garden. ‘This garden was my playground. There was conflict at first between me with my need for structure and my parents with their love of plants, but this has worked out over the years,’ Gemma says. ‘I’ve developed a passion for natural landscape and wildlife, while they have accepted that my initial landscaping choices work well and are beautiful in their own way.’

Gemma says that starting out green as a landscaper was both a steep learning curve and at the same time ‘something I always knew and just naturally started putting into practice - I had an innate sense of how things work’. She took that passion and turned it into a business, and now ►



ABOVE LEFT Intricate patterns are cut into the wood with a chainsaw. **RIGHT, FROM TOP** The *Totems* were created from fallen trunks in the woods; the *Cones* in the orchard are made from Douglas fir and are a comment on farmed woodland plantations; these *Nuts* are extremely tactile and Gemma welcomes visitors to stroke them.





Portrait of an artist - Gemma's workshop is attached to her house and is a treasure trove of tools.

transforms other people's outdoor spaces with her trademark stonework. 'You'll always know a Gemma Wood,' she jokes. 'There are never any straight lines - I'm the mistress of curves and cutting stone. I'm never happier than when I'm out there building and making.'

So how, I ask, do the land work and the art work fit together? 'The landscaping influences my sculpting in every sense,' she explains. 'It has taught me that functionality is essential - things have got to last and be permanent. When people buy a work, they want it to be durable, and so I design things for longevity. This is so important that I find it can sort of strangle my creativity at times. But I have learned to accept the limitations of certain materials, such as the shorter life span of wood when it is placed outside.'

Her day job means she is confident using power tools, but shaping her timber artworks saw her take on an



exciting if dangerous new helper. 'I have a small chainsaw with a sculpting bar for making intricate cuts. It's a real joy to get it out and start slashing in the marks - I love the energy of that. But it's a scary beast, and I have huge respect for it. I keep it well maintained and use the proper gear, and if I start to feel tired, I put it down.'

All the materials Gemma used to create her garden sculptures were sourced either literally on her

doorstep or very close by in the valley; for example, trees that blew down in a storm. Occasionally, she uses natural materials such as ice or wild plants to create ephemeral works that last perhaps only an hour or a day.

'I live in one of the most beautiful places in the country, and lots of the forms I create are inspired directly by this place,' she says. 'My work is an immediate response to my environment. The starting point for these sculptures was the richness of this garden - it is a phenomenal collection of organic planting. I never cease to be wowed when I walk through it.'

Wye Valley Sculpture Garden, The Nurtons, Tintern NP16 7NX. Open May to Sept, and sometimes Feb for snowdrops. Tel: +44 (0)1291 350023. www.wyevalleysculpturegarden.co.uk

Tips on siting sculpture ▶

LEFT A hand-laid stone sphere.

BELOW LEFT Fiery heleniums blaze a trail to the hot garden. **BELOW**

RIGHT Vibrant daylilies and phlox in the courtyard in front of the house.

'I live in one of the most beautiful places in the country, and lots of the forms I create are inspired directly by this place'



WYE VALLEY NOTEBOOK



SLATING HER WORK

At present Gemma's working on a new series of slate pieces on the cycles of the moon, intended for display indoors in a gallery. 'Frost and UV light are the biggest challenges for outdoor work, and pieces designed to be outdoors in the garden are very different to those made for a gallery,' she explains. Gemma also works to commission. More examples of her work can be seen at www.gemmakatewood.com

PERKY PLANTS

There are lots of half-hardy and more tender plants outside in the garden here, such as agapanthus, dierama and a large collection of salvias. Phormiums are happy to bloom on this sheltered, south-facing slope. Many plants do require some extra care and fleece over the winter months, however.



GARDEN CHALLENGES

SHADY: Gemma would like to create more sites for her work around the garden, but many trees have grown to dominate the space and block out the light. 'Next year, I'll be letting more light into the garden by pruning and clearing trees,' she says. She likes the natural feeling of the mature planting, but plans to focus on cutting back some areas.



HISTORICAL HOUSE

Gemma lives in a stone cottage by the farmyard that adjoins the house where she grew up. This historical house (*above*) borders the garden and has views across the valley. It has 12th and 13th century parts, with some Tudor bits and a Victorian facade. Gemma's parents live here and spend a lot of their time in the garden.

GEMMA'S TIPS ON PLACEMENT

- **The key element for me is always light.** What aspect is your garden? You could buy the most fabulous piece of artwork in the world, and it will look quite tired and green when it is covered in algae. Don't hide it in the shade.
- **People with smaller gardens** can and should consider large works instead of small pieces, as they will create more impact.
- **Don't play it safe.** The greatest relationships are between the things that go against each other and create tension. Put rough with smooth or clash colours. Take yourself out of your comfort zone.
- **Anchoring a sculpture** can be as important as the work itself. You have to think about the weighting of it because of the weather, and theft, and also health and safety regarding kids - you can't have something loose that they might pull over on themselves.



ALSO IN THE AREA

If you are visiting the Wye Valley Sculpture Garden, you could also try:

- **GARDEN Medhope Garden** A tiny but pleasant market garden open on weekends through summer, where you can purchase fruit and veg straight from the soil, and more. On the same turn off as the Sculpture Garden - look out for signs.
- **BREWERY Kingstone Brewery** Award-winning ale is produced in this microbrewery beside the Sculpture Garden. Book ahead to make your own batch, or enjoy a tasting. Tintern NP16 7NX. Tel: +44 (0)1291 680111. www.kingstonebrewery.co.uk
- **VINEYARD Parva Farm Vineyard** Tour the vines and taste wines produced on site. Mead also on sale. Monmouth Road, Tintern NP16 6SQ. Tel: +44 (0)1291 689636. www.parvafarm.com