

Cultivated minds: Art in the garden

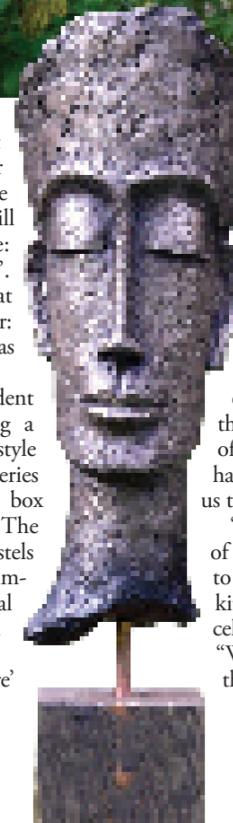
Head gardeners at the National Trust properties of Avebury Manor and The Courts in Holt are all set to welcome a bumper crop of sculptures for the autumn.



PHOTOS BY OPPOSITE PAGE/STEPHEN FLEMING / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; (THIS PAGE, MAIN PHOTO) ABBEY GEORGE

ASK A National Trust gardener for their favourite spot in the garden and they will generally hesitate: there are so many 'favourites'. Simon Brooks, head gardener at Avebury Manor, though, is clear: "I love the Monks Garden. It was the first area we developed."

At Avebury Manor, past resident Laura Jenner set about creating a garden in the Arts and Crafts style in the early 20th century: a series of rooms divided by yew and box hedging and medieval walls. The style of planting saw relaxing pastels in some areas, with a pastel-cum-colour-pop mix in others. National Trust gardeners have continued along Arts and Crafts lines, working with this 'back to nature'



theme. Simon and his team, which includes volunteers and students, have the opportunity to get creative, however, given that the garden is not rigidly related to a particular designer's style.

But there is nature to contend with. "We've had a problem with box blight at Avebury, so it has forced us to make some significant changes and the first of those was in the Monks Garden. This was an area of small box parterres and roses. We've had to rip out all the box which gave us the opportunity to look at the design.

"While keeping the overall structure of the garden, the planting has changed to reflect that it was previously part of a kitchen garden and that we had a small cell of monks here.

"We've also increased the diversity of the annuals. We grow familiar things

like dahlias and love-lies-bleeding, but also cleomes, which visitors love. We try to do something a little bit different every year, so we have herb edging, giving more of a sensory feel with the smell of the thymes, sages and lavender, and the scent of sweet peas and the colours of the plants. We encourage people to use all their senses in the garden."

Simon's love for the Monks Garden is replicated many times over by the Trust's visitors. "We get so many comments about the annuals: how bright and wonderful they are."

Another treat for all the senses will arrive at the beginning of September, when throughout the garden 21 artists will showcase sculptures that range from a stainless steel owl, which will be perched among the shrubbery, to a stylised

Left: Simon Brooks, head gardener at Avebury Manor, particularly likes the Monks Garden
Above: Visitors admire art at last year's event
Left: One of the quirky sculptures from 2017



head carved from wood which will look out across the half-moon walk.

The works on display will reflect a wide range of styles and mediums. Look out for colourful glass sculpture in the flower beds, woven willow geese running across the lawn or beautiful stone sculptures standing among the foliage. With more than 80 sculptures to see, there will be something for everyone and, if you fall in love with a piece, you can buy it and take it home to your own garden.

Hosting a sculpture exhibition is a way to attract people who might not ordinarily come to Avebury. It also adds a whole new dimension to the garden, highlighting particular areas of planting and creating vistas. For Simon, it's an opportunity to turn the clock back and get a feel for the garden when it would have had ornaments, statues and sculptures, which had been lost by the time the Trust received the property. The sculptures will be positioned in areas that reflect their character, with some adding a welcome element of humour.

The garden is at its best from June to September, but many of the plants are at their peak now because of the hot weather. Simon hopes this means they will flower a second time in September and October, around the time that the sculpture trail is on.

"It's great having the sculpture in the garden; it adds a different element for visitors. It's quite exciting for us too, and we all have our favourite sculptures. It's really interesting

to have focal points in the garden. At the end of our Italian Walk there would have been something, but at the moment it feels bereft. We put a sculpture in there every year which brings the 56 columns of yew to life."

Garden design and art have gone hand in hand for centuries; you might say gardening is an art. Both involve similar creative processes.

'The Irish yews look like drunken monks in a row'

Another National Trust garden, The Courts in Holt, is to host a striking collection of highly-finished metal and glass sculptures by artist Ruth Moilliet, inspired by the plant kingdom, in September and October. For head gardener Paul Alexander, Ruth's colourful sculptures will lift the garden once it has moved away from its "colourful summer boil".

"I've seen Ruth's work and I think it's going to be a very popular exhibition," he tells me.

The exhibition is called Co-existence, with the sculptures highlighting the beauty and complexity of botanical forms and the relationship between them and their pollinators. The pieces range from smaller

detailed sculptures to large, eye-catching structures. The works will be placed both in the formal areas and the arboretum, where the rich autumnal colours should provide a wonderful backdrop to the art.

The house is not generally open to the public but dates from about 1720. A textile industry grew up alongside and a mill was built on the site. It was only when the mill went into decline that George Hastings bought the house in 1901 and created a garden.

Described as an English country garden, it dates from the early 20th century and is once again laid out in a series of rooms, influenced by the former mill. These rooms are hidden from each other so as you move from one to another you are greeted with a surprise around each corner. This element of concealment and surprise works well with a sculpture exhibition, especially with artworks that pack a punch.

In the words of Paul Alexander: "There's a couple of spheres that wouldn't look out of place on the Normandy beach; they look quite vicious. They will be really exciting. The *Pollination Sphere* is reminiscent of the *Magic Roundabout* and I like that. There are different styles within Ruth's work and there will be something of interest to everyone."

Again the garden itself is not rigidly tied into the style of any one designer, so Paul has an element of creative freedom. He says: "Over the past 120 years, the garden has developed and we are able to continue that."

PHOTOS BY (THE COURTS) NATIONAL TRUST/JANE STEPHENSON INGRAM; (AVEBURY SCULPTURES) NATIONAL TRUST/ABBEY GEORGE

They have just installed a bridge on the dye pool site, a completely new addition, partly because of safety concerns after children were too eager to get closer to the water. Visitors liken it to Monet's bridge.

And Paul's favourite area of the garden? He says it is the series of yews on the Main Lawn, with the house as a backdrop. "The Courts is a garden where the topiary and hedges are as sharp as possible and yet you've got these weird topiary yews that are all over the place and that to me adds a sense of humour."

Initially, the Trust thought the elements had carved the yews into strange shapes over the years, but Paul says there is evidence that they were deliberately shaped by previous gardeners.

He remarks: "I've heard young people say they look like Moomins. I always imagine them to be drunken monks staggering along in a row." WE

- *Art at Avebury runs from September 1-October 7. Visit www.nationaltrust.org.avebury*
- *Co-existence at The Courts, Holt, runs from September 8-October 14. Visit www.nationaltrust.org.uk/the-courts-garden*

Opposite page: The Irish yews look a little drunken and visitors find many ways to describe them
Above: *Allium Schubertii* by Ruth Moilliet will be at The Courts; Figurative sculptures at Avebury; *Pollination Sphere* by Ruth Moilliet will be at The Courts; Colourful glass artworks at Avebury

Stourhead and the spirit of the place, captured in art

WHEN ARTIST Anouk Mercier met Stourhead's head gardener Alan Power, they talked about their approaches to art and gardening and came to the conclusion that they were the same. "It's about curating a scene," says Anouk, "whether that be on paper or in a landscape. I felt we had a lot in common."

Anouk first visited Stourhead four years ago on a drizzly day in February and was alone in the gardens. "I was overwhelmed by the beauty of them but also the feeling that they were somewhat staged. It gave me the impression of being a character walking through a very designed landscape, discovering a grotto here, a waterfall there. I felt so strongly inspired."

Stourhead commissioned the artist to create a work inspired by *genius loci*, the 'genius of the place' theme that will be interpreted in different ways for the next 10 years at the property. Anouk's work will link to the garden but also to the 18th century landscape art amassed by the Hoare family on Grand Tours abroad. Inspired by art they saw and stories they heard, the Hoare family created a garden scene of their own.

Anouk creates her work by photocopying pages from books of 18th century art,

then applies solvent so she can transfer the image to another piece of paper. She uses only fragments of each original artwork to build up her art. "I'm interested in the dilution of print and how technology can affect an image." In the final artwork the fragments may be slightly distressed or pixelated, creating a whole new effect.

Anouk composed one artwork from fragments of the 18th century art in the Column Room at Stourhead House. In April she spent time talking to visitors there. "I said, 'You see that painting by Ducros with the waterfall? Here is a fragment of it in my artwork. It made them appreciate the artworks in the room in a new way,'" she says.

It's certainly a unique way of making art that plays with our sense of time and place.

- *Anouk returns to Stourhead from August 27. Her new artwork will be displayed in the Temple of Flora, September 1-November 25.*

