BETWEEN THE LINES

Cecily van Gend

The South African couturier, Greta Abrahamson, once said: 'When I was a much younger woman who used to make clothes for older women, I decided that the day I could no longer lie in the sun, the day I could no longer wear high shoes, the day I walked about with a basket and clippers and raved on about my garden - that day I would know I was an old lady.' Well, I have never much liked lying in the sun, and I have been wearing flat shoes for years. But lately, I have developed a passion for gardening, so I guess I must officially declare myself an old lady.

I have, however, been reading books about gardening for years. I don't mean those large, lavishly-illustrated coffee table volumes of gardens to drool over, wonderful though these are, nor do I mean the gardening manuals, the how-to's and the ones that tell you what plant is which. I am referring to the personal accounts of gardeners who are also writers, or perhaps it is the other way round, who write about their experiences in the garden, and their favourite plants and how they grow them.

Foremost of these, I would place Vita Sackville-West, whom I first encountered in **Portrait of a marriage**, the account of her very unconventional, yet no less successful and loving, relationship, with her husband, Sir Harold Nicolson, written by their son, Nigel. Separated for long periods of time, the Nicolsons nevertheless shared a mutual passion for their Kent gardens, first at Long Barn, and then at Sissinghurst - today still a magnificent garden maintained by the National Trust.

For fourteen years, from 1947 to 1961, Vita contributed a weekly gardening column to the **Observer**, in which she dispensed advice, giving her views on plants and describing her experiences in her own garden. A selection of these was later published as **In your garden**, followed by **In your garden again**, **More in your garden**, and **Even more in your garden**. In 1968, after her death, her daughter-in-law, Philippa, published a further selection from these four volumes, which appeared as **V. Sackville-West's garden book**.

Although she gardened in a different hemisphere, with different climatic conditions and different plants, I still find her advice useful, and her gardening philosophy has had a profound effect on my own attitude towards my garden. Here she is on feeding your soil: 'Most of us amateur gardeners are inclined to stick in a plant all anyhow, and leave it to take its chance, a chance which probably results in death to it and disappointment to us. Good gardeners, the gardeners who know their job, take far more trouble. They prepare the soil first, making it suitable for the plant they wish to put in; and then later on they look after it, caring for it in times of drought, cosseting it along for the first months of its young life, nourishing it in its middle age, and never neglecting it even when it attains a ripe maturity... The principle is always the same: you cannot expect your soil and your plants to go on giving you of their best if you are not prepared to give something back in return. This is as true of gardens as of human relationships.'

And in a section called *Ruthlessness in gardening*, she says 'Gardening is largely a question of mixing one sort of plant with another sort of plant, and of seeing how they marry happily together; and if you see that they don't marry happily, then you must hoick one of them out and be quite ruthless about it. That is the only way to garden. The true gardener must be brutal, and imaginative for the future.'

Closer to home, we have Eve Palmer, who died a few years ago. She grew up on a farm near Graaff-Reinet, about which she wrote most lovingly in **The plains of Camdeboo**, and **Return to Camdeboo**. She married the writer, Geoffrey Jenkins, and they made their home in Pretoria, where they created a very lovely garden, beginning with the planting of a number of indigenous trees, and which became quite famous. She describes it as '... a garden which grew up around the trees that we planted which were given a hole wherever we could get a pick between the stones. The plants have grown around them...mostly simple plants, some ancient, many African, with history and associations which are part of their charm for us.'

With Norah Pitman, she wrote what I think is still the definitive work on our indigenous trees, **Trees of South Africa**, but her gardening philosophy is contained in a delightful book which appeared a short while before her death, simply called **A gardener's year**. Although her garden was an eclectic mix of plants from around the world, she was a staunch supporter of indigenous plants, about which she writes with enthusiasm. Her descriptions of plectranthus for example, opened my eyes to the beauties and usefulness of this most attractive indigenous species. 'The sprawling plectranthus between the bushes is *P. ciliatus*, which must be one of the handsomest groundcovers in the world, its purple sap giving it a grape-purple look as it spreads over the ground. The leaves are more or less egg-shaped and handsome, and the tips of the branches turn up attractively bearing whitish racemes that are so speckled with purple that they seem mauve at a glance. They are beginning to bloom now, not in masses but in delicate scattered candles that look fragile but are not.'

I have referred in a previous column to Hildagonda Duckitt, who, in her **Hilda's diary of a Cape housekeeper**, interspersed her domestic advice with descriptions of her garden, and hints on growing things. About a hundred years later, in the 1950s, VM Fitzroy wrote a series of delightful books on her family and life on a smallholding on the Cape Flats, in a charming thatched cottage called Squirrels Leap. One of these, **Down to earth**, was all about her struggles and success in creating a garden on the sandy, windswept and drought-stricken Cape Flats.

Moving back onto the international scene, I cannot end this column without mentioning one more of my favourites. This is **The 3,000 mile garden: a magical correspondence between two passionate gardeners**. Cookery writer Leslie Land gardens in a remote woodland in Cushing, Maine. Author and photographer Roger Phillips is responsible for three acres of a square in the heart of London. The two met at a conference in 1989, and began correspondence which lasted for years. It has been described as 'a kind of horticultural/gastronomic version of **84 Charing Cross Road**', and has now been made into a Channel 4 television series. Both are gifted writers, describing the day-to-day events in their lives and gardens, with vitality and humour.

All these writers employ a style which has, I think been epitomised by Philippa Nicolson, in describing her mother-in-law, Vita's writing. She says: 'She established with her readers a gentle, bantering relationship, like that of an amateur gardener talking to a friend about their horticultural triumphs and follies - boasting a bit, laughing a bit, grousing a bit, mingling reminiscence with hard advice, and sentiment with something approaching poetry...(a style) conversational more than literary, and it had all the untidiness and colour of a cottage garden.'