

# The plants are the thing

The garden of the eminent plantsman John d'Arcy, The Old Vicarage, Edington, Wiltshire, is home to an astonishing collection of plants, finds Charles Quest-Ritson

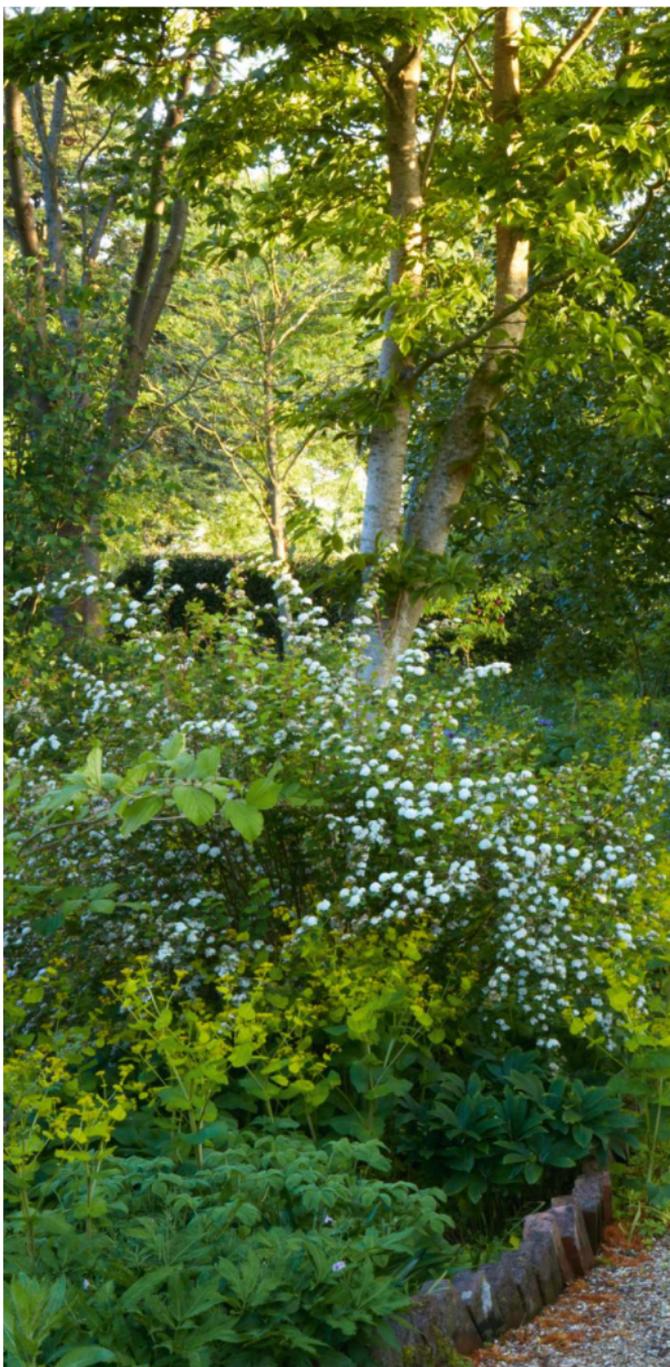
Photographs by  
Britt Willoughby Dyer

**W**HEN John d'Arcy bought The Old Vicarage at Edington in 1982, he remarked that the vicars of Edington had not been noted for a love of gardening. Now, however, the house is surrounded by well-grown, beautiful plants in one of the best plantsmen's gardens in the south of England, full of valuable lessons for all garden-lovers.

The Old Vicarage is a handsome Regency house on a shelf of upper greensand, two-thirds of the way down the northern escarpment of Salisbury Plain. To the west are the Iron Age earthworks of Bratton and the White Horse of Westbury. Below the house lies the battlemented profile of Edington Priory Church, a masterclass in Perpendicular architecture—the remains of the Augustinian monastery destroyed by the local Seymour family during the Reformation.

All that Mr d'Arcy inherited 39 years ago was a vast beech tree and a splendid croquet lawn, now edged by mixed borders, small shrubs, bulbs and magnificent specimens >

In this thickly planted wooded area, the cloud of pale leaves (top left) belongs to *Cornus mas* 'Aureoelegantissima'; the white-flowered shrub (bottom left) is *Spiraea trilobata*, collected by James Compton along the Great Wall of China





of *Ligustrum lucidum* 'Excelsum Superbum' and *Heptacodium miconioides* planted in the early years of his tenure. The lawn sets off the house perfectly, acting as a stage from which to enjoy extensive views across the Avon Vale, and the beech is underplanted by thousands of cyclamen that seed promiscuously and have invaded the lawn. The tiny white orchids known as autumn lady's-tresses (*Spiranthes spiralis*) pop up spontaneously in the grass. Below the lawn, the garden falls away steeply towards the north, its slopes thickly planted with magnolias, maples, hamamelis and much else besides. Flourishing beneath the tree canopy are erythroniums, scillas and narcissus: 'The best of the daffodils is 'Binkie'', reveals Mr d'Arcy.

The Old Vicarage lies on upper greensand, a soil much praised by all who are fortunate to garden on it, but, at Edington, centuries of wash from the chalky edge of Salisbury Plain have raised the pH to 7, even to 7.5 in places. This has made survival difficult for the rhododendrons, mainly raised from seed, that Mr d'Arcy brought from his parents' estate in Shropshire. However, his years of assiduous mulching and composting have lowered the pH in parts of the garden; fine camellias, planted shortly after his arrival, bear witness to his efforts. 'You cannot have too much leafmould or compost,' he insists.

Mr d'Arcy is a plantsman first and foremost. For him, the pleasure of gardening is

to grow and enjoy as many different plants as possible. To this end, he has created a great number of special micro-habitats in which to grow plants that would otherwise struggle to survive. Everything is of interest, from hardy orchids and tuberous species of corydalis to mighty magnolias and species of holly, of which he has a large collection. He tries to position plants in order to create pleasing contrasts or harmonies of colour and form.

## ‘The rare and difficult *Morina afghanica* has made itself at home’

When his designer friends give good advice, however, he follows it. He cites Tania Compton, in particular, as a critical friend whose counsel is insightful and trustworthy. He remembers, too, a fleeting visit in the early days by Sir Roy Strong, who suggested he plant an evergreen hedge on the slope below the croquet lawn to lift the eyes above the village houses below. 'Good advice, which has made all the difference,' he confides.

One of Mr d'Arcy's first enterprises was to turn a small, sunny courtyard to the south of the house into a sheltered gravel garden. He cleared away the topsoil, laid 4in of gravel in its place and set to planting it with bulbs,

perennials and small shrubs that require free drainage. The results are remarkable. South African plants such as dieramas and agapanthus have seeded and spread to the point of becoming a nuisance. The rare and difficult *Morina afghanica* has made itself at home, seeded around and survived for more than 30 years, as has the grey-leaved Turkish thistle *Ptilostemon afer*. Rather surprisingly, the gravel garden—dry and hungry—is also home to swarms of English primroses and a thriving plant of the local woodlander *Daphne laureola*, brought by birds.

Mr d'Arcy is known as a plant-hunter who has travelled the world for garden-worthy plants, usually with Martyn Rix and James Compton. He makes no claim to be a botanist as his distinguished friends are—he made his career as principal archivist for Wiltshire and Swindon—but his contribution to the success of their tours has been significant. What are the best of the plants they found?

From Japan came *Nepeta subsessilis*, now a popular garden inhabitant with several named cultivars ('why did no one introduce it earlier?' he asks); from Argentina, a tall, hardy form of lemon verbena *Aloysia citrodora* to which Dr Compton gave the name 'Spilsbury Mint' because it smells of spearmint rather than lemon; from Mexico came innumerable colour-forms of *Salvia x jamensis* and a new scarlet-flowered species that his botanist colleagues named *S. darcy* ▶



Among these plants is the rather invasive Sicilian garlic, *Allium siculum*, and the dwarf yellow-leaved grass *Hakonechloa macra* 'Alboaura' from Japan, a good edging plant. Behind the white *Deutzia x rosea* 'Carminea' is the tree-like *Heptacodium miconioides*



*Clockwise from above left: Hardy Carolina allspice, *Calycanthus x raulstonii* 'Hartlage wine'; *Cercis chinensis* 'Avondale', a compact Chinese redbud; *Salvia darcyi*, named in John d'Arcy's honour; *Heuchera americana* 'Harry Hay', for the friend who gave it to him*





*Left:* This yucca was planted in the gravel garden about 35 years ago. Underneath is *Lavandula lanata*. *Right:* The botanist Martyn Rix suggested the planting of this avenue of fastigate hornbeams, which frames the view down the slope and across the Avon Vale

in his honour; from South Africa came new species of dierama and two fine geranium species—silver-leaved *Geranium harveyi* and *G. pulchrum*, both collected high in the Drakensberg, which have seeded around the gravelled turning circle in front of his house.

Many good plants came from Sichuan, but Mr d'Arcy considers the best to be three forms of blue-flowered *Corydalis flexuosa*, which caused such a sensation when first exhibited at Westminster that the Queen Mother asked if she might come to the RHS show to see them for herself. From the Caucasus, he raised a beautiful red bugloss *Echium rubrum* and rarely seen *Daphne glomerata*, which, as do many daphnes, grew vigorously for about 10 years and then expired in a matter of a few days. All these plant-hunting expeditions were sanctioned by Kew, Wisley and botanical authorities in the host countries; they have added much to scientific knowledge.

Not everything has survived, but, recognising the value of his collections, Mr d'Arcy shares them generously with nurserymen and

## John d'Arcy shares plants generously to keep these rarities in cultivation

gardeners who are good with difficult plants, to keep these rarities in cultivation. As do all gardeners, he wonders whether he has managed to lose more plants over the years than he has been able to conserve, but he has noted ones that fare particularly well and planted more species and cultivars of those that have flourished. Recent additions include forms of cyclamen species (including *C. graecum*, *C. pseudibericum* and *C. cilicium*) that he thought unlikely to survive until they proved hardy and started to seed around.

Behind the house was a yard, screened by box hedges and overhung by yews, that had served as the servants' entrance in times past. Mr d'Arcy has landscaped it and filled it with

a remarkable range of shade-loving plants, such as epimediums and hellebores, and the tall, purple-leaved form of *Heuchera americana* that is now known as 'Harry Hay', after the friend who gave it to him. Against the back wall of the house, he has planted *Schizophragma hydrangeoides* and *Pileostegia viburnoides*, distant relations of the climbing hydrangeas that reach the roof. In a corner, *Eucryphia glutinosa*, planted in 1985, is nearly 40ft high and covered with flowers in late July, its anthers unusually deep pink in colour.

When Mr d'Arcy bought The Old Vicarage from the Salisbury diocese, it had no more than 1½ acres, but, by patient negotiation with his neighbours, he has been able to double that. The acquisitions include an area about the size of two tennis courts at the garden's lowest point that is planted with trees best viewed from the steep slope above. From this vantage point, one can admire the flowers of the handkerchief tree *Davidia involucrata* and the rare Chinese tulip tree *Liriodendron chinense*, as well as fast-growing *Platanus* ➤

*orientalis* f. *dentata*, now 40ft tall, and *Tilia mexicana*, with the largest leaves of all lime trees ('the best tree we brought back from Mexico'). Here, too, is an expanding collection of hydrangeas that appreciate the cool shade.

The tree planting continues: recent additions include *Cornus elliptica* 'Full Moon', with large bracts and an upright habit and *Arbutus x reyorum* 'Marina', perhaps the best of all the so-called 'strawberry trees'. Mr d'Arcy has a special affection for a monkey puzzle *Araucaria araucana*, which came as a seed in a load of composted wood-chippings from the Marquess of Bath's forestry yard. It germinated and is now 15ft tall.

“When asked which is the best, he answers: “*Clematis urophylla* from China”;

Years ago, Mr d'Arcy volunteered to make a National Collection of oenothera species (evening primroses) for Plant Heritage. Some are spectacular beauties, such as gorgeous *Oenothera caespitosa* ssp. *marginata*, but many are so tender, so invasive or so weedy that he is happy to remove them after a trial. Every one has been painted by top botanical artists Joanna Langhorne or Christabel King, with a view to writing a monograph, but Mr d'Arcy says ongoing changes to the taxonomy of oenothera makes his work very difficult. Alas, the collection elicits little interest among the gardening public: in more than 30 years, it has received only one visitor, from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, who wondered whether some of the species might be suitable plants for cemeteries.

The Old Vicarage opened for the NGS for 30 years, but is now open only by appointment. The planting continues, with the cold easterly winds of February this year acting as a reminder of the importance of shelter plantings. 'You can never have enough evergreens,' advises Mr d'Arcy, who has ordered more yews and hollies to add to his collection.

When asked which is the best of all the plants he and his colleagues have introduced, he answers: '*Clematis urophylla* from China—evergreen and winter flowering. Or *Cobaea pringlei* from Mexico. It's hardy, comes up every year, grows to 20ft and flowers right through until the frost.' The *cobaea* is indeed a most handsome plant and its large, creamy-white bells are held more upright than those of the better-known, purple *C. scandens*. Yet it is only one of hundreds of rare beauties in Mr d'Arcy's infinitely fascinating and meticulously maintained garden. 🐉



The monkey-puzzle tree, *Araucaria araucana*, which Mr d'Arcy spotted as a seed in a load of composted wood-chippings that came from the Marquess of Bath's forestry yard at Longleat. Under his care, it germinated and has now grown to 15ft