



THIS PAGE The pale blossom of an old pear tree appears in late March, coinciding with the blooming of the daffodils planted below it.
OPPOSITE *Tulipa* 'Apricot Emperor'

TEXT CLARE FOSTER
PHOTOGRAPHS BRITT WILLOUGHBY DYER

Early risers.

Blossom-covered boughs and spring bulbs provide welcome colour at this time of year in the Cotswold garden of Clare Pike, who runs flower business Rich Pickings with Kate Gordon Lennox





ABOVE A view of the house from the orchard area. An avenue of yew pyramids echoes the shape of the nearby church tower, and provides strong architectural structure in winter and early spring. BELOW Clare's cutting garden is bordered by pleached hornbeams on one side and an old wall on the other, with a view past the greenhouse to the fields beyond. *Tulipa* 'Apricot Impression' is grown in a box-edged beds, with cardoons in another





TOP ROW FROM LEFT Delicate *Fritillaria uva-vulpis*. A spring arrangement of narcissi, forget-me-nots, hellebores, daphne and crab apple 'Evereste'. *Tulipa* 'Recreado'. *Fritillaria raddeana*. BOTTOM ROW FROM LEFT The blue flowers of forget-me-not *Myosotis sylvatica* bring a fresh note to seasonal displays. *Tulipa* 'Couleur Cardinal'. *Tulipa* 'Ballerina'. Hellebores and narcissi look stunning arranged as single stems in glass vases

The magic of spring is palpable on an early morning visit to Clare Pike's beautiful country garden. Burnished with dew, the lawn is studded with narcissi, from white to pale yellow, and fritillaries under a froth of pear blossom, and the borders are aflame with hundreds of tulips. Buds are bursting left, right and centre, and the whole garden is saturated with that fresh shade of green that is unique to this time of year. 'Every day, there is something new to see,' says Clare, pointing out a swathe of tiny *Fritillaria uva-vulpis* in the grass. 'I love spring for the zingy greens and the jewel colours of the tulips, and the hopefulness of new growth unfurling from bare branches.'

Clare has developed the one-acre garden herself since she and her husband bought the 18th-century former rectory near Tetbury in 1994. Early on, with young children in tow, she had little time for the garden, and commissioned Jane Fearnley-Whittingstall to design a border for her. Observing and learning from Jane, she subsequently started tackling other parts of the garden herself, eventually enrolling on a garden design course. 'If anything, this gave me the confidence to take things out of the existing garden,' she says with a laugh. 'I found I started looking

at the space in a different way and tried to make it relate more intimately to the house and its surroundings.'

The setting is idyllic: classic chocolate-box village houses peep over the boundaries on three sides, with open views to the countryside beyond. 'It's all about borrowed landscapes and creating visual links throughout the garden,' says Clare. Grown from tiny hedging plants to screen the pool, the avenue of yew pyramids references the church tower, while hornbeam, beech and yew domes in various sizes reflect the shapes in the landscape. At this time of year, when the garden is just coming to life, shrubby structure is so important and, in the borders, tulips are scattered around a framework of *Osmanthus x burkwoodii*, *Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Golf Ball' and the distinctive uprights of *Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata'.

In each part of the garden, the tulips have their own colour note: the soft apricots of 'Charming Beauty', 'Menton' and 'Apricot Impression' in the borders right next to the house, with the deeper hues of purple 'Recreado', purple-crimson 'Ronaldo', dusky 'Havran' and orange 'Ballerina' creating impact in the borders around the main terrace. In the latest area to be developed – a new walled garden with a simple grid of large beds – the colour scheme is designed to reflect the buttery Cotswold rendering of the house, with pale yellow 'Sapporo', 'Honky Tonk' and 'Françoise'. 'Some of the tulips will



TOP ROW FROM LEFT Mauve *Helleborus orientalis*. A couple of stems of an old double narcissus variety are showcased in a simple stoneware jar. The eye-catching, chequered blooms of snake's head fritillary *Fritillaria meleagris*. Popular pale *Narcissus* 'W.P. Milner'. BOTTOM ROW FROM LEFT *Tulipa* 'Sapporo' has elegant pointed blooms. *Narcissus* 'Geranium'. Striking *Tulipa* 'Apricot Parrot'. The flowers of *Fritillaria raddeana*

come back year after year, but I always add to them every autumn,' Clare explains. 'I like to try different varieties, but stick to the same palettes, and I plant in groups so it is easier to work the border around them.'

The tulips are all-important for Clare's flower business, which she runs with friend and business partner Kate Gordon Lennox. The pair met when their children were at school together and they set up their business, Rich Pickings, in 2013, offering bespoke flowers for weddings and other events, as well as garden and planting design. They also run a series of popular workshops from Clare's barn. Although they buy in most of their flowers – locally and British-grown where possible – Clare has also made a small cutting garden. Here, a succession of bulbs and annuals, mostly in colours and varieties that are not widely available, bloom throughout the year, including tulips, of course, which are densely planted in raised beds.

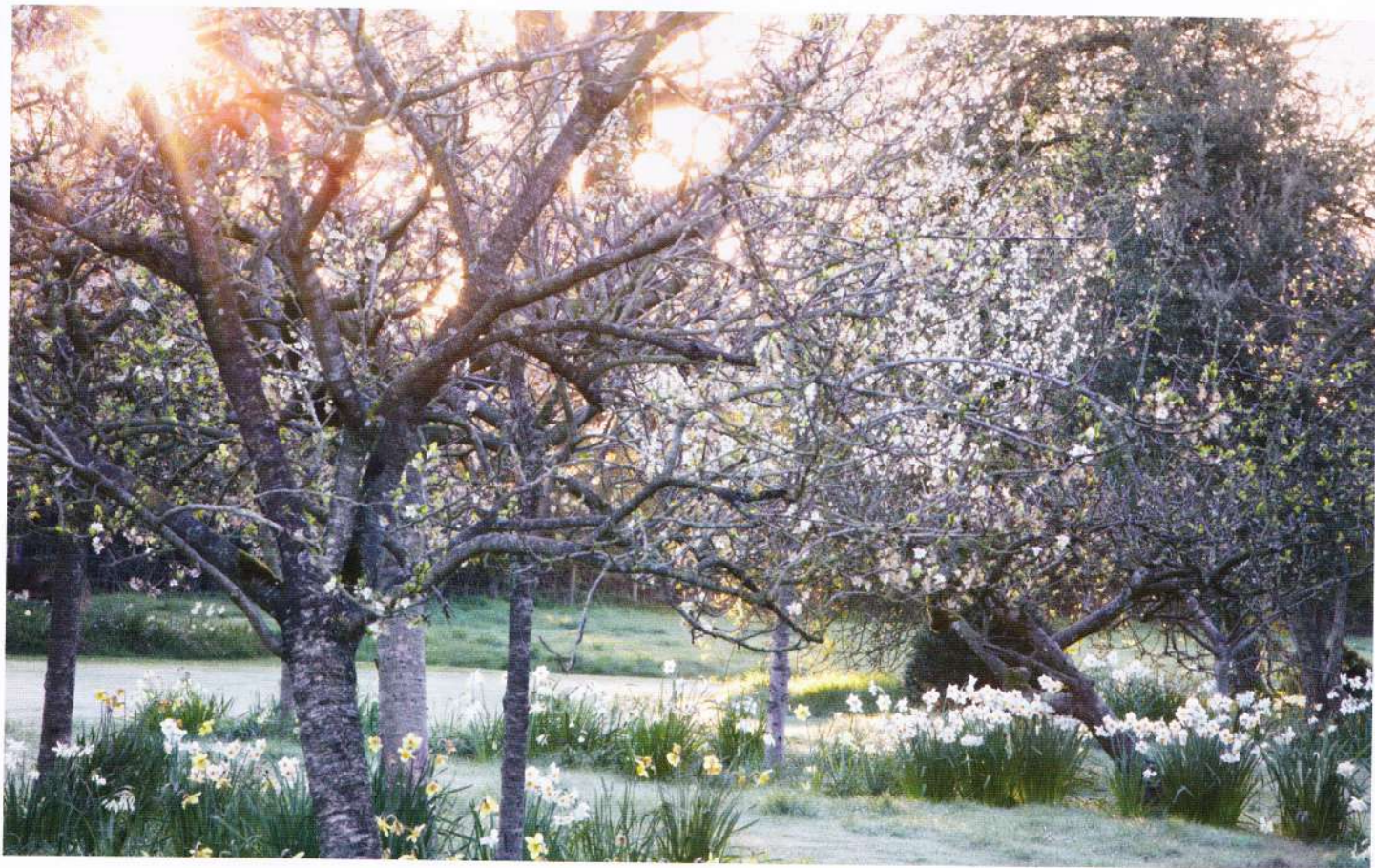
'We avoid growing shorter tulips, as they are harder to use in arrangements,' says Clare. 'When we pick, we pull them up at the base of the stem to get that extra length. They sometimes come up with the bulb attached, which you can either replant or add to the compost heap.' In their displays, the pair mix tulips with blossom boughs, narcissus, euphorbias, pale green *Helleborus argutifolius* and dusky *Fritillaria persica*, in loose, informal compositions. 'We want to make them look as natural as possible,

positioning the flowers almost as they would grow in the garden,' says Kate. Sometimes they will display tulips en masse on their own, or use single stems of different shapes and sizes in small bud vases to create a tablescape. 'They last for about a week after they've been cut and will carry on growing in the vase – but we love the way they twist and turn as the week goes on.'

The pair also like to use seasonal greenery and blossom from the hedgerows. 'Foliage is an unsung hero when it comes to flower arranging,' says Kate. 'The leaves of hazel or horse chestnut are much fresher and more delicate around now. They may not provide the bulk and greenery of summer arrangements, but I love the sculptural interest and varieties of texture they offer.' Pear, apple or crab apple blossom, and shrubs such as forsythia and ornamental quince can also be cut in early spring, as well as catkins and pussy willow, so the whole garden and surrounding woodland becomes a potential supply source.

'You just have to keep your eyes open – there is so much out there you can use,' says Clare. 'There is nothing more uplifting than watching everything come to life in the garden in spring – and so much the better if you can bring a little taste inside to really observe and celebrate the plants that herald this special time of year' □

Rich Pickings: richpickings.co.uk



ABOVE Ancient pear trees are underplanted with swathes of narcissi, including 'Silver Chimes', 'Thalia', 'Geranium', 'Actaea', 'W.P. Milner', 'Jenny' and old pheasant's eye varieties. BELOW The main terrace border features dusky tulips – 'Recreado', 'Ronaldo' and 'Havran' – highlighted by orange *Tulipa* 'Ballerina'. Upright *Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata' are softened by curved topiary yews and the pale blossom of amelanchier and magnolia trees

