

# THE REVIEWER

Explore our evolving relationship with plants through a fascinating new Radio 4 series, check out some of the latest new releases, and read the amazing story of two Cornish plant-hunting brothers

## BOOK REVIEWS

### *The Gardens at Brantwood*

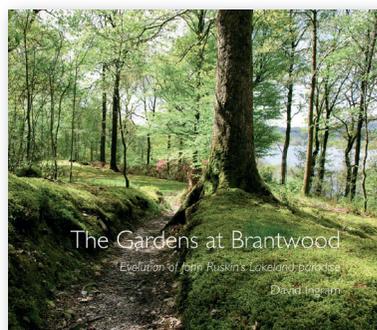
by David Ingram (£14.95, Pallas Athene Arts)

Anyone who has wandered through the gardens or sat outside the Jumping Jenny café overlooking Coniston Water will have fallen under the spell of Brantwood. This house and small estate were bought by art critic and social reformer John Ruskin in 1871, who described it as 'on the whole the finest view I know in Cumberland'. Within the woodland of its steep hillside, Ruskin made a series of small gardens in and of the landscape, idiosyncratic and using far-sighted principles: sustainability, local materials and skills, seasonality, harmony with nature and challenging accepted beliefs.

Two other great gardeners have added to this special place. Ruskin's cousin Joan Severn created colour and scent-filled walks that made the most of Brantwood's spectacular view of lake and fells, and since the 1980s head gardener Sally Beamish has redeveloped and created new areas in the spirit of Ruskin's thinking. He made a garden that was constantly evolving; Sally keeps it moving, not hampered by the past, as in some historic gardens, but being experimental in the spirit of its originator.

Just as Sally's approach is with awareness of the place, the story of this delightful garden is told in this book with a light, sensitive touch by distinguished botanist David Ingram. Brantwood is a garden that gets under your skin, and you feel this in the subtle and thoughtful way this book is written. It is illustrated with Ruskin's beautiful paintings and drawings, with evocative photographs and plant lists. Tellingly, one of the first photos is of Sally with her three staff, all of whom have had significant input in this latest phase of garden making. Brantwood and this book are full of ideas, from the wilderness garden to biodynamic agriculture, from Dante's imagery to simple farmhouse herbs; there is much here to think about.

Reviewed by Susie White



### *Garden Design: Inspiration and Ideas*

by Andrew Mikolajski (Robert Hale £22)

'Most books on garden design are either very technical or are predominantly picture books. This manual is different.' So says the blurb on the jacket of this book, which claims to offer a 'complete breakdown of the process involved in creating a garden'.

It's aimed at amateurs, but would also be of value to would-be professionals entering the trade. This is a timely focus, what with the RHS blurring the boundaries between professional and amateurs in the sector, through running competitions for amateurs to design at RHS Chelsea and allowing students and first-timers to design on Main Avenue.

The author - who has written 30 gardening books and has taught garden design at Warwickshire College and The English Gardening School - begins the book with a brief history of garden design. Things get more practical in subsequent chapters on site assessment, choosing plants and lawns, water and boundaries.

The book promises provocative reading, and the author does offer some views on planting. He says gardens must contain plants, though not 'gangly' old roses, eucalyptus (also 'gangly'), 'brittle' *Robinia pseudoacacia* or 'rampant' *Rhus typhina*. He is more measured on design, expressing little opinion on other people's, preferring to (usefully) précis principles instead.

The author says he's out of his comfort zone on hard landscaping, and there are probably more usable guides out there. With draughting, it's a similar story. But as an introduction to designing your own garden, this book offers as much as you might need to do it yourself, to put a design together for a professional to implement, or even to enter a competition for amateurs for a place at - heaven forbid - a premier flower show.

Reviewed by Matthew Appleby

