

Q&A

In *Secret Gardens of East Anglia*, Barbara Segall, with photographer Marcus Harpur, relates the stories of 22 gardens worthy of a wider audience



How would you describe the new book?

East Anglia is a relatively out of the way and unvisited region, so the book is a calling card inviting garden lovers to the wealth of interesting and unique gardens, of which there are plenty, in the region.

What are the criteria for a garden to be 'secret'?

Secret suggests no-one knows about it but there are no secrets in the garden world. Some gardens are little known, sheltered behind walls and hedges; some have secret places within them, which you discover as you walk through them. I have come to realise that however much you know about a garden, through word of mouth or from social media, until you actually step into one, it is unknown. Once you walk through the garden's gate, it is as if its secrets are unlocked and the garden is revealed.

What is it about the region that inspired you?

I have lived in Suffolk, one of the four counties covered in the book, for more than 30 years and have always felt that East Anglia is a bit of a secret itself. It is sometimes dismissed as flat but I love the wide, open horizons, the high skies and wonderful cloudscapes, which fascinated artists such as

Gainsborough and Constable. Our wonderful gardens are often unsung. I hope that, with its super photographs by Marcus Harpur, the book will inspire people to get to know its hidden garden gems.

Did you notice any similarities in the gardens?

Hedges of size are a common feature in some of the gardens. They contain and divide the garden in a similar way to hedges in gardens elsewhere, but here their primary function is also to provide shelter from the wind, which can be fierce and chilling in East Anglia. Moats, ponds and lakes also feature in many of the gardens. Another common feature, though not a design element – was the intensity of the garden owners' enjoyment of plants and garden-making.

Which garden had the most surprising story?

There were surprises in all the gardens I visited, even the ones I felt I knew well. Once you start talking to gardeners and garden owners you learn about their individual inspiration. No garden ever really stands still and gardeners enjoy creating new features, replacing plants as well as downsizing and changing areas, if they need to. The modern sculpture at Barnard's Farm, so well-placed in the landscape, was a revelation, while the vibrancy of the two-season planting at Ulting Wick left me awe-struck.

How do the gardeners manage to overcome problems caused by the region's low rainfall?

Most use a combination of methods including the choice of drought-tolerant, sun-loving plants. Despite the region's low rainfall, many gardens are on moist clay soils, so drainage is equally important. On some of the sandy, lighter soils such as those at East Ruston Old Vicarage, compost and well-rotted manure are continually added to improve the soil.

Which garden was the most enjoyable to visit?

That would be telling! Each garden was full of enjoyment and surprises. There is nothing like being the only person in a garden, except if you are walking through it with the person who has created it and knows its background. The garden owners I met were generous with time and gave me insight into their tribulations, as well as their successes.



Secret Gardens of East Anglia

By Barbara Segall,
photographs by
Marcus Harpur
Frances Lincoln, £20