

A view of the house, garden and pond at Fullers Mill takes in spring bulbs such as snake's head fritillaries and daffodils.

Faith, Hope & Charity

Bernard Tickner's former garden at Fullers Mill in Suffolk is now cared for by horticultural charity Perennial and maintained in harmony with its creator's vision

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The bumpy track that leads to Fullers Mill doesn't prepare you for the awakening spring mix of connoisseur's plants that spills from the brimming borders, nor for the mists and shapes that rise from lake and stream.

Over the course of 50 years, plantsman and head brewer of the Greene King brewery, Bernard Tickner (1924-2017), transformed a wild and untamed seven-acre site deep in the forest at West Stow, Suffolk, into a magical, secluded haven for plants and wildlife. The garden he created has overflowed into the spaces alongside the twin watercourses of the River Lark and the Culford Stream that meander gently by.

Nestled snugly at the end of a track in the Kings Forest, the original small garden set around a former fuller's cottage, is full of plants, both unusual and commonplace. Bernard renovated the cottage extensively in the 1960s, and slowly but surely filled the garden with choice trees, shrubs, bulbs and perennials. First and foremost, he chose species plants rather than what he considered to be blowsy, flouncy hybrids. But inevitably he let things evolve, allowing some leeway, depending on a plant's attributes. Since he was red-green colour-blind, plants had to offer him more subtle pleasure beyond vibrant flower colour. For Bernard, an interesting plant was interesting for many reasons.

Leaf texture, tree bark, seedheads and shapes were aspects that attracted him to particular plants, and with those in mind he created a woodland and waterside garden that changes daily and seasonally. The views shimmer and dissolve as seasons change, mimicking the misty and watery reflections found in the waters of the Culford Stream, the River Lark and the Mill Pond, which add character to the planting.

Below left Annie Dellbridge has been head gardener at Fullers Mill for over a decade.

Below middle Pink buds open into paler flowers on deciduous *Viburnum carlesii* 'Charis'.

Below right Covered in delicate spring blossom, *Magnolia x loebneri* 'Leonard Messel'.



As he worked his way outwards from the house, Bernard improved the land, digging out curved beds for planting and putting in sinuous paths. He was insistent that there should be minimal hard landscaping, with no statues and no straight lines. He felt that curved barked, gravelled or grass paths that followed the shapes of the beds enhanced rather than detracted from the natural world.

He acquired more land as his enthusiasm for plants grew. He had strong ideas and was clear that he wanted the garden to evolve, rather than being created as a designed space. He didn't start with a plan, but it must have been hard work over a long period of time, transforming the site from woodland scrub into a garden filled with such choice plants.

As is the case at any garden, Fullers Mill comes to life in early spring, and for head gardener Annie Dellbridge this is an extra-special time of year.

"Walking around is always interesting as there are exciting plants at every turn, but in spring it is like greeting old friends you had almost forgotten were there," she explains. "Some announce themselves with unfurling foliage, others with sensational perfume that hangs in the early-morning air."

Annie has been at Fullers Mill for the past decade, and with her team of gardeners and volunteers is able to interpret Bernard's thoughts about the garden and how he hoped it might develop over time. In 2004, Bernard and his wife Bess donated the garden to The Fullers Mill Trust to manage and ensure its future. In January 2013 the Trust gifted the garden to Perennial, the charity for people in horticulture. At that stage Perennial had just one garden in its portfolio: York Gate, in Leeds. Fullers Mill and York Gate have now been joined by The Laskett, the garden created by Sir Roy Strong in Herefordshire.

Above The lake was de-silted when Perennial took over the garden, and a new, safer bridge installed; candelabra primulas, darmera and skunk cabbage will soon fringe its banks.

SPRING STARS at *Fullers Mill*

Delicate seasonal blooms turn heads from March as this Suffolk garden quietly awakens



HYACINTHOIDES ITALICA

The Italian bluebell has starry flowers held on conical flowerheads. Order the bulbs for planting in autumn.



ANEMONE BLANDA 'WHITE SPLENDOUR'

Ideal for naturalising in areas of sun or dappled shade for drifts of white.



EUPHORBIA AMYGDALOIDES VAR. ROBBIAE

Excellent groundcover for the dry soil beneath large trees, flowering in spring.



OSMANTHUS X BURKWOODII

A leathery-leaved evergreen shrub with scented flowers in March and April.



PRIMULA DENTICULATA

Drumstick primulas can be relied on for bright colour in spring. Grow in moist, well-drained soil in sun or light shade.



ORNITHOGALUM NUTANS

Plant this attractive bulb in light, free-draining soil in autumn for sprays of silver-grey blooms in spring.



EUPHORBIA 'BLACKBIRD'

Gorgeous purple-tinged foliage contrasts beautifully with zingy lime-green flowers in late spring.



FRITILLARIA VERTICILLATA

Slender stalks bear nodding, pale green, chequered, bell-shaped flowers.



MAGNOLIA X LOEBNERI 'LEONARD MESSEL'

Pale pink flowers become star-shaped as they open on medium-sized, 4m trees.



Left Near the house, the Alpine Terrace is home to daintier specimens.
Middle left *Pulmonaria* 'Diana Clare' is one of the best for silver leaves.
Middle right Fronds of the shuttlecock fern, *Matteuccia struthiopteris* unfurl through blue-flowered *Scilla bithynica*.
Bottom *Euphorbia characias* seeds about in the woodland areas.



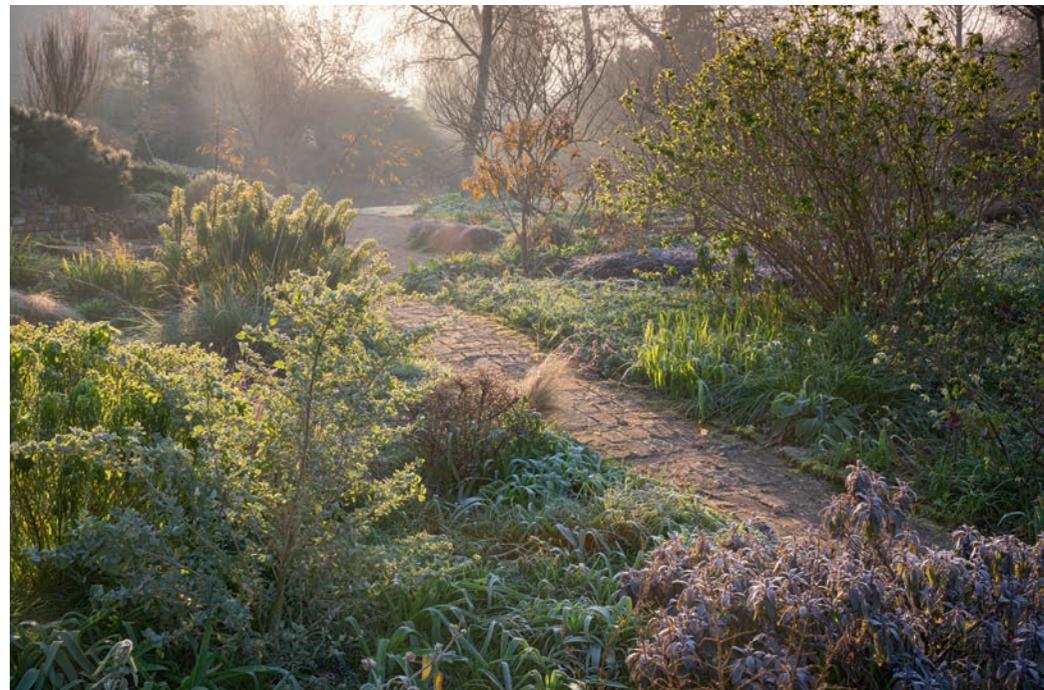
Horticultural excellence is the aim at all three gardens, which help to fund Perennial's vital work helping people in horticulture in times of need. Each garden is maintained by a garden team and volunteers, its management evolving in conversation with individual Garden Committees, consisting of professional and practical horticulturists, working to the remit of Perennial's trustees.

Since Bernard's death in 2017, the Fullers Mill Garden Committee has been involved, along with Annie and her team, in refurbishing and developing many areas of the garden, working to the agreed conservation management plan while keeping in mind Bernard's views about his garden.

One of the most imposing and statuesque plantings is at the furthest reach of the area known as the Top Garden, between the entrance drive and the River Lark. It's formed from a stand of 12 birch trees, *Betula pendula* subsp. *pendula* 'Silver Grace', originally discovered by Bernard near to the lake. Planted around the birch, the silver foliage of *Elaeagnus* 'Quicksilver' begins to add colour in spring, before *Tulipa sprengeri* shows up en masse in May. Near the birch grove, rising out of the shingle, are massed groups of self-sown *Euphorbia characias* and mounds of *Ferula communis*, whose stately flower stems stand tall in summer.

In the Low Garden, across the river and to the west of the Mill Pond, spring carpets of *Crocus tommasinianus* are followed by *Anemone blanda*, and later the shuttlecock fern begins to unfurl its iconic shepherds' crook fronds. The Mill Pond itself was rescued early on in Bernard's tenure, after it had more or less sunk into the Culford Stream. One of the first garden interventions by Perennial was





to arrange for it to be de-silted and to build a new, safer bridge and walkway at its south side. In spring, candelabra primula, darmera and skunk cabbage are among the early waterside performers.

Also south of the Lark are two areas known quirkily as The Inner and Outer Quandaries, where massed snowdrops are followed by the delicate, soft pink flowers of *Euonymus oxyphyllus* and the foliage of emerging herbaceous perennials. Two stands of bamboo, one green and the other yellow, dominate the stream bank. Running alongside the Culford Stream, The Strip separates the garden from the Lake. There are future plans to open a walk around the lakes to visitors, but for the moment the view across the lake to the island and weeping willow is tantalisingly out of reach.

The daily life of the garden goes on whether open for visitors or not and Annie and her garden team are fortunate to have additional help from a bevy of 30 garden volunteers. “We also have several

Above left Statuesque trunks of ‘Silver Grace’ birch in the Top Garden.

Top middle *Libertia peregrinans* adds strong foliage shape and colour.

Top right Rare species tulip *Tulipa kurdica* flowers in April.

Above right A brick path through the Low Garden.

horticultural apprentices training here and I so enjoy passing on knowledge to the next generation of gardeners,” Annie enthuses. “I have a sense of pride that Fullers Mill and Perennial are producing well-rounded, good horticulturists for the future.”

Special snowdrop open days usually take place throughout February, which give visitors a glimpse of the re-awakening spring scene. “And then,” says Annie, “By the time the garden fully re-opens in April, the garden will be in full swing.” ■

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Fullers Mill, West Stow, Suffolk IP28 6HD.

Snowdrop open days are due to take place every Wednesday in February, 11am to 3pm. Booking is essential. The garden opens from 2 April to 31 October on Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays and for the National Garden Scheme on Sunday 9 May and Sunday 3 October. Check the website before visiting for updates on opening. Tel: 01284 334 396; fullersmillgarden.org.uk