

Emsworth garden open

Lucy Doherty

July 2009 - a large glass of wine, a self-congratulatory pat on the back and a huge sigh of relief ends the debut opening of the Emsworth gardens for the National Garden Scheme. Still basking in the adulation of visitors, I decide straightaway I will open again next year. January 2010 - a thick blanket of snow covers the garden, I'm not able to get outside as the patio door has a 3ft drift resting against it. Eventually manage to struggle out of a conservatory window and clear it away. Resting on the shovel afterwards, I look at the garden - or rather the fluffy white outline of the garden - and wonder how on earth it will recover in time for opening on July 18th? A quick shake of the shrubs to unsettle the snow and then it's back indoors again with a mind set very firmly on a cup of tea and NOT the open day...

Spring slowly comes and bulbs struggle through. Herbaceous perennials begin to show their heads until six inches of organic manure lands on their heads in preparation for the year ahead. The bulbs go over and the perennials' new leaves cover up their debris in time for me to carry out a 'Chelsea chop' at the end of May - a testing time, as you are cutting back such verdant growth - it seems unbelievable the plants will forgive you and re-grow a few weeks later.

In June the garden tidying begins in earnest. Replanting, dead-heading, adding annuals to fill any gaps and hedge trimming. Fortunately my habit of over-planting means there are very few weeds and the only pernicious ones I have to deal with are next door's brambles that have decided they will be

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July - open day is now only 17 days away and counting. Deadhead frantically and worry that things won't re-flower to order on the 18th. Trawl the plant centres and nurseries for bedding to add to containers and to fill any possible gaps. Tidy up the hard landscaped areas, trim the lawn back from stepping stones, scrub the decking, tidy the greenhouse, top up the ponds and water features. Pot up, tidy up and label sale plants. Poor things have been languishing in the front garden since spring, a sorry assortment whose saving grace is that they have hung onto life, despite coming bottom of my list of priorities for the garden opening. A little water and attention reap great rewards and by the 18th, they are verdant and healthy looking, awaiting new homes.

A week before opening; cakes to be baked, helpers to be organised, floats to collect from the bank (all monies have to be kept separate - entrance money, tea money, plant money), tables and chairs dug out of sheds and wiped down. Signs to be put up in the local area for directions, and safety notices put up around the garden (God bless health and safety not...). The night before. A last rush around the garden tidying up, looking for that one, monster, elusive weed I've yet to find but is bound to be spotted immediately by the first visitor...

3am - wake up in a panic. Haven't re-wound the hose which is leaving a nice impressed snake trail all down the lawn. Rush out in nightdress with torch to rewind and put away, hoping that the dew, if I am lucky enough to have any, will raise the grass for me before 12 o'clock.

6am - Jump out of bed. Rush around like a headless chicken looking for things to do only to find they've already been done the day before. Slowly calm down and take things more sedately. Even manage to have some breakfast. 10am and the tables and chairs are put up in the front garden, the sale plants laid out, cakes and teas prepared.

11.30 am visitors begin to queue outside. The book quite clearly says 12 o'clock. There's no way I'm letting them in yet - my helpers haven't

even arrived! 11.45am, helpers arrive. Settle them in and explain what they need to do. Queue growing longer and more agitated...

Finally, 12 o'clock, and the gates open. Visitors flood in as if their lives depend on it. What is the rush? I'm open till 5pm and they've only got one other garden to visit apart from mine! I gravitate towards the garden and try to keep incognito which is the best way of hearing what people really think of your garden. Am soon discovered though and the rest of the afternoon passes in a blur of people asking questions and offering praise.

5pm and the final visitor departs. Helpers leave with a bottle of wine and a plant as a thank you. I grab a glass of wine, take a big gulp, and then begin the tidy up. Time for reflection afterwards, when the garden is back to being 'mine' again without signs and extra tables and chairs. Sitting on a bench on the patio with the night drawing in; the only sound is that of evening insects buzzing and the air is full of dusk fragrance. And it's quiet. While I enjoy opening the garden and sharing it with others in the hope of encouraging them with their own gardens, it is this time that I treasure the most. But I will be opening again next year!

Lucy Doherty is opening her garden again this year on Sunday July 10th, 1-5pm. Entrance fee £5 (includes one other open garden down the road). Teas and plants for sale.

Illustration/Tom Boulton

