



Arabella Lennox-Boyd

Week ten: Garden wonders

Arabella Lennox-Boyd and Jonathan Self focus on follies, mazes, tree houses, grottos and other garden wonders at our fantasy estate

'CAVES, GROTTOS, MOUNTS, and irregular ornaments of Gardens,' stated no less an authority on garden design than John Evelyn, 'do contribute to contemplative and philosophical Enthusiasme.'

Whether you indulge yourself in a cave, grotto, mount or other ornament, there is no doubt that an estate can be much improved by the addition of an element a little out of the ordinary.

But how out of the ordinary? For centuries, British landowners have indulged themselves with all sorts of wild and wonderful fantasies. Viscount Cobham installed 40 temples at Stowe, the Earl of Donegal reputedly spent £10,000 in 1788 (close to \$1 million at today's prices) on shells for his grotto, and, more recently, the Duke of Marlborough built the world's second-largest maze at Blenheim.

I spent much of my youth in a house that



'Consult the genius of the place, in all'

Alexander Pope

had, in its grounds, possibly the country's last working hermitage. The hermit there conformed to the 18th-century ideal. He wrote philosophical works, grew a long beard and slept on the floor.

An unexpected element in your grounds can serve several functions. It could, for instance, provide a visual focus point, as the Steeple Aston Eyecatcher does on the Rousham estate in Oxfordshire. It may amuse and

delight visitors, as the Garden of Cosmic Speculation does at Dumfries. It could offer philosophical messages, as does Ronnie Duncan's sculpture garden in North Yorkshire. Or it could mask some practical function, as it does at Dream Acres, by incorporating the swimming pool's changing room into a folly (see June 24). If nothing else, it's a well-established, discreet and relatively inexpensive way of displaying one's taste. ➤

My wonder: Jessica Douglas-Home, Gloucestershire

'Inspiration for the design of my House in the Trees came from the Czech Secret Police towers I saw in the 1980s—rather squat boxes on stilts, placed to spy on the dissident, subsequently president, Václav Havel in his country farmhouse near Prague. But I wanted mine to be more elegant and much, much taller, so as to sit among the highest branches. In the end, I raised my tower to 25ft, so as to be among the birds and nests of neighbouring trees. I installed a cylindrical steel stove, once owned by gypsies and bought years ago at Stow Fair, in a corner of the oblong room, and added a narrow chimney. Outside, I fixed a hook and pulley with basket attached to lift provisions too cumbersome to take up the ladder. Now, I could live and work in my hut for days on end.'



➔ **Stepping into the Shell House at Ballymaloe Cookery School, Ireland, built in 1995 by Blott Kerr-Wilson from the shells of seafood used in the school, is like wandering into a mermaid's parlour**





Follies

'THE GREAT POINT of the tower,' claimed Lord Berners of the Faringdon Folly, Oxfordshire, which was completed in 1935, 'is that it is entirely useless.' There are two theories about the origins of the word 'folly'. The more generally held belief is that it refers to the builder's folly for creating something that has no real role. I prefer the alternative hypothesis, however, that it comes from the French *folie*, which means madness or whimsy.

In the 400 or 500 years since the idea of follies first gripped the British imagination, thousands have been constructed all over the country, and their popularity has, by no means, waned. A quick search online reveals plenty of recent examples, such as the thatched Millennium Tower at Cadmore Lodge, Worcestershire, which sits in the middle of a lake and has a drawbridge; the Hermitage, Elton Hall, Herefordshire, home to a human skeleton; the wooden Samphire Tower on the Kent coast near Dover; and the Stumpery, a driftwood cave exhibited at Chelsea and now owned by Ringo Starr.

The Dream Acres folly, a changing room for the swimming pool, was designed by Adam Richards. It was featured in Week eight (June 24) of the Dream Acres series.

Arabella's advice for a striking folly

↳ Scale is vital. If you have a relatively enclosed and limited setting, then your folly should not be too large. Major structures should be saved for majestic open spaces.

Where you site the folly is also crucial. The best examples often have an element of surprise: one comes around a corner and there it is in the distance, at the end of an avenue or on the other side of a lake.

Commission an architect to produce the plans. Whether you want something traditional or contemporary, follies sit better in the landscape if they are built with local materials.

Follies can prove to be surprisingly inexpensive to build. ↴



↑ If you want to be alone, the centre of your own maze can be a perfect place to hide. The Glendurgan Laurel Maze, Cornwall, dates from 1833. ↵ Or head up to a secluded tree house, such as this one shown at the Chelsea Flower Show

Tree houses

IF YOU WANT to add something romantic, fantastic, yet practical to your estate, why not build a tree house? Not the common-or-garden tree house of my youth—which was a simple platform precariously perched in an old oak—but something more elaborate with a roof, walls, windows, a terrace, power and, perhaps, even plumbing. It could be designed simply as an outdoor playroom for your children or grandchildren, or it could serve as a place for you to entertain, relax, work or accommodate guests.



Shell houses

THERE IS A WIDE, 300ft-long grass path in the garden of some friends of ours, flanked by herbaceous borders and culminating in a modest Gothic building that, when you step inside, turns out to be a magnificent shell house, complete with hidden lights, a pool and running water. It was created in four months by Blott Kerr-Wilson, and my wife claims that, after horses, it's one of the few things in the world she covets. She's in surprisingly good company, as it turns out that the essentially 16th-, 17th- and 18th-century passion for shell houses is still alive and well today.

Mazes

ONE OF THE HAPPIEST moments of my life was in 1965, when it became clear that my four-year-old younger brother, Will, had managed to get himself lost in the great maze at Hampton Court. One of the most bitterly disappointing moments came soon after, when a man in a brown uniform successfully retrieved him. Nevertheless, the experience left me with a great respect for mazes. It isn't only that they entertain and confound us, they possess the magical power of being able to make people disappear.

Perhaps it isn't surprising, therefore, that the earliest British mazes were cut in turf

next to ancient religious monuments such as burial grounds; that in Christianity, they can symbolise the path of an errant soul towards salvation; or that in Eastern religions, the equivalent patterns, known as *mandalas*, are used in meditation.

At Dream Acres, we imagine building a maze on one of the flat areas away from the house. It will be multicursal (have multiple routes) as opposed to unicursal (with only one route), and will be constructed from hornbeam, grown to 6ft. In other words, tall enough for me to lose my brother in, even now. 🐦

What shape would your maze be? Email countrylife_letters@ipcmedia.com

COUNTRY LIFE recommends **accessories for garden wonders**



← Cheeky Monkey Tree Houses designs bespoke, Swiss-style log cabins with decking, all fully insulated and furnished to your own requirements (01403 732452; www.cheekymonkeytreehouses.co.uk)



↓ Bespoke willow tree houses made by family firm Brampton Willows in East Anglia (01502 575891; www.bramptonwillows.co.uk)



↓ Arabella Lennox-Boyd's Gresgarth Finials were first made for the Chinoiserie bridge at Gresgarth. They have elegant onion domes and tapered collars, and come unpainted or in Gresgarth Red. Price on application (020-7931 9995; www.arabellalennoxboyd.com)



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Recommendation

↑ Maggy Howarth's cobblestones come in a variety of materials. Design time: £200 per day; fabrication costs: £1,100 per square metre. (01524 274264; www.maggyhowarth.co.uk)



↑ Cedar Tower and Ireland tree houses (07968 207310; www.heartwoodtreehouses.co.uk)

Our favourite follies

- (1) The ruined abbey, Painshill Park, Surrey
- (2) The sham castle, Stowe, Buckinghamshire
- (3) The eye-catcher, Wimpole Hall, Cambridgeshire
- (4) The pagoda at Kew Gardens, London
- (5) McCaig's Colosseum, Oban, Scotland

Our favourite mazes

- (1) Great Maze, Hampton Court, Middlesex
- (2) Water Maze and Yew Maze, Hever Castle, Kent
- (3) Laurel Maze, Glendurgan House, Cornwall
- (4) Yew Maze, Somerleyton Hall, Suffolk
- (5) Foot-shaped maze, Conholt Park, Wiltshire

Helpful books

- Mazes & Follies** by Adrian Fisher (Pitkin Unichrome, 2004)
- Shell Houses and Grottoes** by Hazelle Jackson (Shire Publications, 2001)

Follies by Jeffrey W. Whitelaw (Shire Publications, 2005)

Tree Houses You Can Actually Build by David Stiles (Houghton Mifflin, 1999)

Designing Gardens by Arabella Lennox-Boyd (Frances Lincoln, 2002)

Useful websites

- List of British follies** (www.follytowers.com)
- The Folly Fellowship** (www.follies.org.uk)

Next week The pleasure ground

The full-sized plan and drawing of Dream Acres appeared in the April 29 issue of COUNTRY LIFE. For back numbers, telephone 01733 385170

For the Dream Acres directory, see page 94; www.countrylife.co.uk/dreamacres; www.arabellalennoxboyd.com