

Second Nature

ON THEIR JOURNEY FROM THE OUDOLF FIELD TO 42 ACRES, WE TALK TO **URQUHART & HUNT**, THE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS WITH A FORWARD-THINKING ATTITUDE THAT OWES A LOT TO THE PAST.

Words: **Robin Savill**

Photos: **Magnus Dennis**



SOME
SUCH
FOLK

To many, the real triumph of gardening is succeeding where success is not necessarily the most likely outcome. For centuries, gardeners have attempted to contrive landscapes by introducing plants to inhospitable conditions – battling with nature and often winning. This quest to create the seemingly impossible continues to this day, and a perfect example is the Oudolf Field at Hauser & Wirth in Bruton. What was once a waterlogged field, now supports a breathtaking, free-draining, prairie inspired garden – surely, living proof that anything is possible.

I was intrigued by the process behind this garden and by the people who collaborated with renowned garden designer, Piet Oudolf to turn his vision into reality. I tracked down these intrepid doers of the impossible, determined to find out what makes Frome-based landscape architects, Urquhart & Hunt tick.

From their Silk Mill studio, Lulu Urquhart and Adam Hunt head a talented and passionate team of landscape architects. You couldn't hope to meet a nicer bunch of people, and the longer I spent in their company, the more I suspected that there is more to these folks than initially meets the eye.

On the Hauser & Wirth project, they were the interface designers, project managers and landscapers who transformed the site, in what amounts to a major civil engineering project, before planting the 26,000 herbaceous perennials needed to realise Piet Oudolf's plan. The result is a classic Oudolf garden with large swathes of matrix planting, providing a visual feast of form and flower. The garden is now well established and is the perfect complement to Hauser & Wirth's indoor gallery spaces and a real treat for the 130,000 visitors who flock to the site each year.

Being familiar with the Oudolf Field, and having seen some of the private projects in their portfolio, I could easily have fallen into the trap of thinking that Urquhart & Hunt specialise purely in creating high-impact 'statement' gardens. But then I heard about another of their projects, near Witham Friary, that made me think a little harder about who Urquhart & Hunt are, and what it is, exactly, that they do. ▶▶



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42 Acres is an idyllic retreat, centred around a 19th century farmhouse, just a few miles from Frome and the A303, yet giving the impression of complete and utter peace and isolation. It was founded by brother and sister team, Seth and Lara Tabatznik with a mission to: “provide a space for individuals to experience inner transformation, practitioners and healers to share their wisdom, leaders to create global change, and true purpose to grow.” Luxurious accommodation is available for up to 24 people, with communal space and bedrooms in the farmhouse, and three additional en-suite rooms in nearby Deer Cottages. The house is encircled by 42 acres of former agricultural land, in turn surrounded by 700 acres of ancient woodland, providing endless scope for exploration and discovery.

The first thing that grabs you, as you drive down the long track that leads to 42 Acres, is the beauty of the surrounding countryside. I can still remember the first time I visited. As I drove down the lane, I was thinking how disappointing it would be to learn that a team of landscape architects had been drafted in to change the character of this beautiful piece of Somerset countryside. Luckily, I had already spoken to James Hamilton, Urquhart & Hunt’s Senior Landscape Architect, who had given me an overview of the project, ahead of my meeting with partners, Lulu and Adam. “42 Acres is a naturally beautiful place,” said James. “Usually, we deliver projects that look accomplished and readable, like at Hauser & Wirth. The Oudolf Field is more like an installation or sculpture, but at 42 Acres it’s more about management than design.

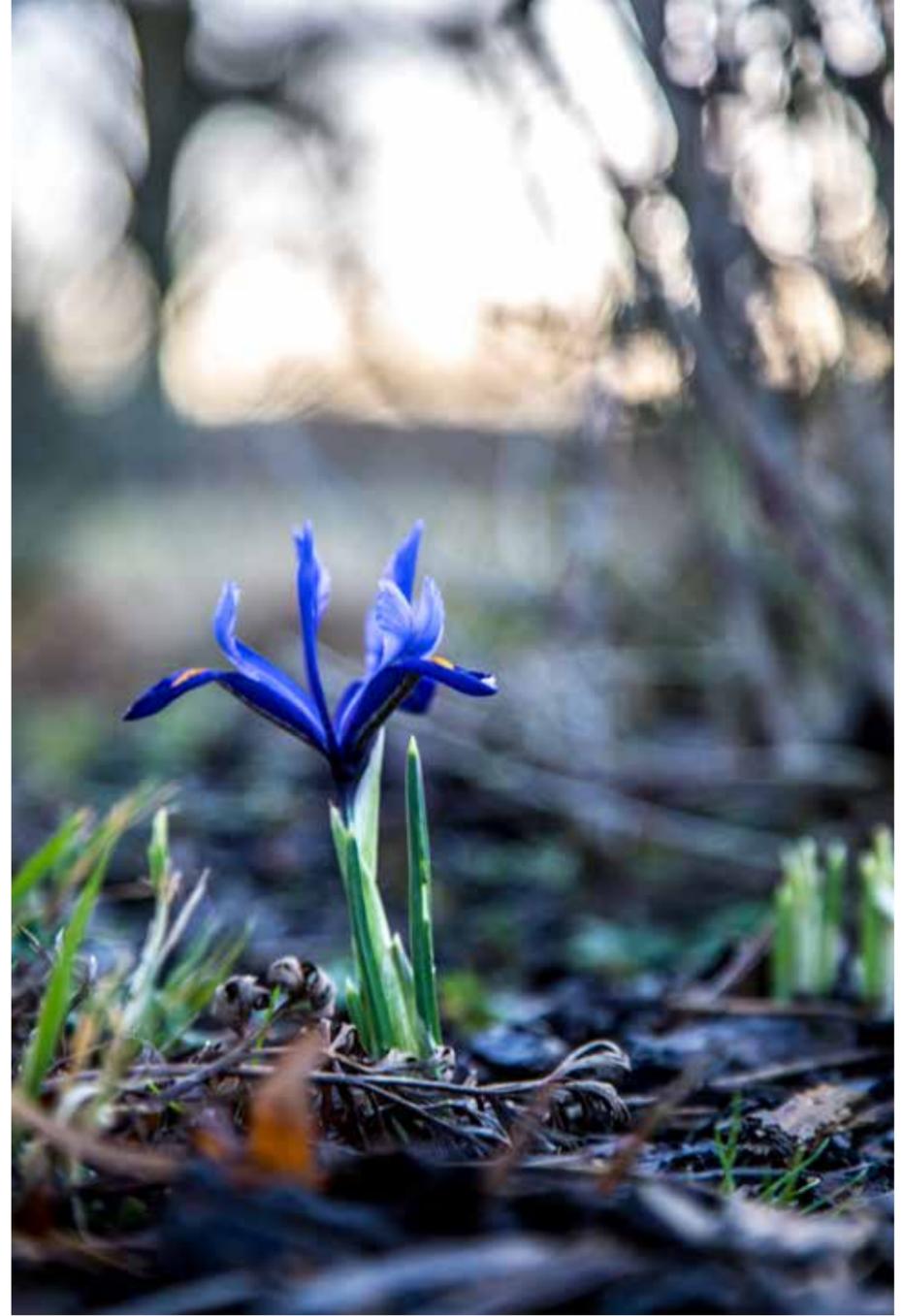
We are acting as stewards, managing the landscape, moving things in the right direction whilst leaving the lightest of footprints. It’s a project that will never really be finished as there will always be tweaks to make and happy accidents caused by nature taking over, which is exactly what we are aiming for. We want it to look like we were never there.”

I found myself increasingly intrigued at the concept of offering Mother Nature a helping hand in returning the landscape to how it might have looked with a little less interference from mankind. I was looking forward to meeting with Lulu to hear her take on 42 Acres and the Urquhart & Hunt story.

It was a damp, murky morning in Witham Friary when that day finally came, but even shrouded in rainclouds, 42 Acres still looked

absolutely stunning. As we set off to tour the site, I asked Lulu to fill me in on the project so far. “Seth is unbelievably patient,” she told me. “This project is about the journey. Seth has chosen to keep one step back from everything, giving the land time to grow at its own pace and giving us the freedom to decide how we work on, and with, the land. When we first arrived, Seth said, ‘You are the experts, just tell me what I need to do.’ It was totally liberating, and for that reason it’s a very special project for us.”

As we circle around the farmhouse, Lulu explains that this is the only area to receive a dose of ‘traditional gardening’, courtesy of some perennial beds that soften the hard lines of the house, which is built from local stone with red brick quoins – a classic Somerset combination. ►►



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We head over to a nearby paddock where a couple of pigs are busy turning over the ground in preparation for some rather specialised planting. “Around the house, we are moving away from the native,” says Lulu, “in order to extend the variety and season of home-grown produce for the kitchen. These plans include a productive forest garden, with Nepalese raspberries for ground cover and masses of daylilies grown for their edible flowers. We also plan to grow edible bamboo here, harvesting regularly to keep it under control.”

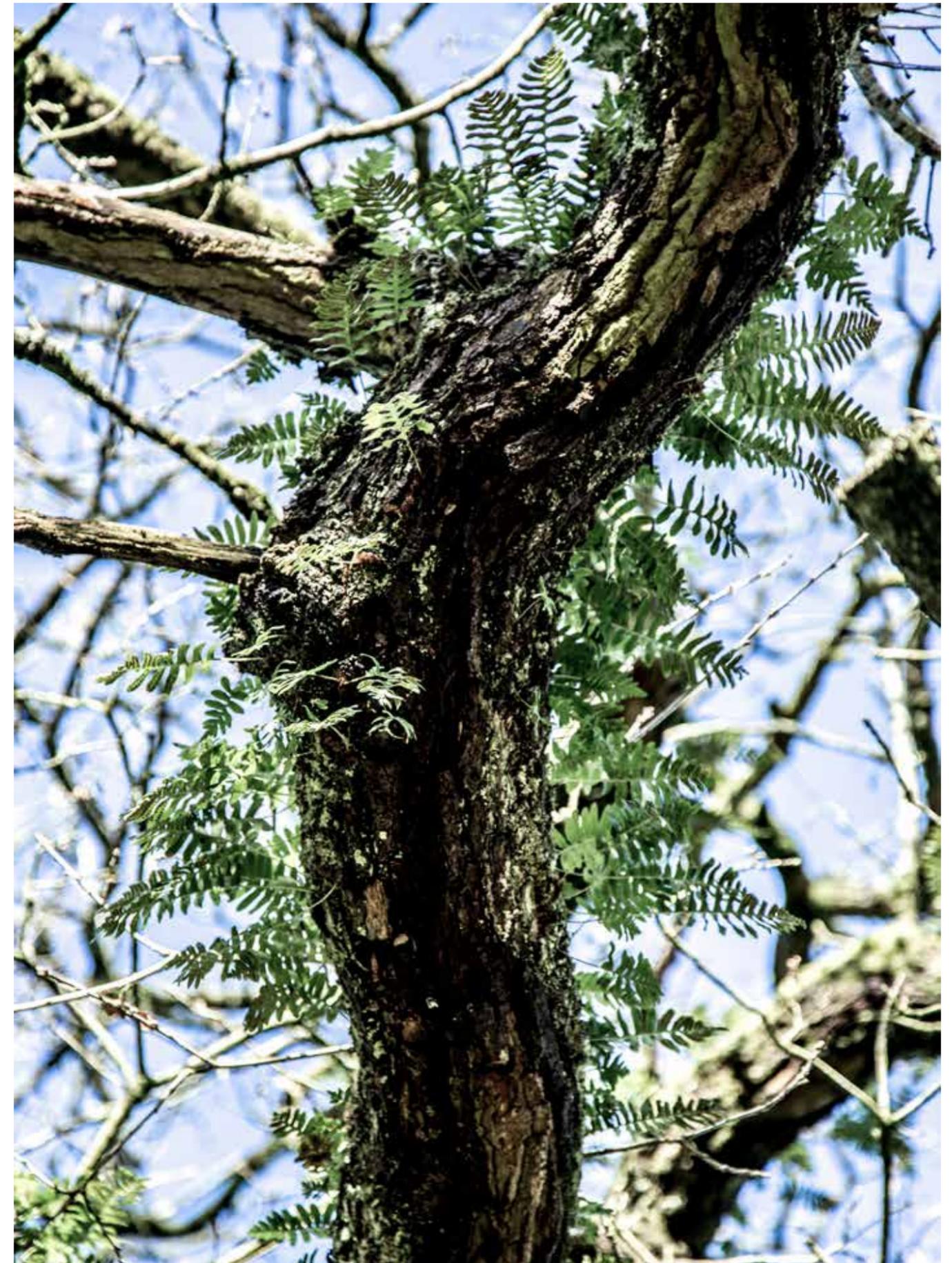
As we venture away from the house, native species are at the forefront of the new planting, which features a host of young trees including alders, oaks and bird cherries. The familiar sight of huge specimen trees, grown on the other side of Europe, being craned into place to provide instant height and impact, has been replaced here by tree planting on a more honest scale.

“The whole studio is dedicated to planting young,” Lulu told me, “and we know that patience is very soon rewarded by the quick establishment of young trees, compared to larger, more mature container grown specimens.” Lulu is full of enthusiasm for what Urquhart & Hunt stands for – not just in isolation, but as part of an industry striving to fly the flag for British horticulture. “We need to bring British horticulture back. We are all such passionate gardeners because Britain has always led this. It is an exciting movement to be part of.”

As we head further into a lush meadow, the conversation turns from trees to wildlife. “The land is calling to have a mass of water. These straight agricultural drainage ditches may well give way to the development of a wetland area, calling in the birds and mammals and allowing them to discover how much food there is for them here. Even plants like nettles provide a vital habitat and have amazing healing powers that we can harness too.”

Rewilding is a massive part of this project – “letting the fringes in,” as Lulu describes it. Whilst gardening often involves taking steps to protect new plantings from the local wildlife, here at 42 Acres, efforts are made to provide an environment where flora and fauna find their natural balance. Lulu is passionate about balance; it’s a recurring topic in our conversation and soon I start to learn of a more spiritual connection between Lulu and the land she works. “Last year, I did a course on geomancy and it was life-changing,” says Lulu. For the uninitiated, geomancy is a form of dousing that connects the geomancer with beneficial energies that exist within the earth – what the Arabs call the ‘science of the sand’. “It slowed me right down,” continues Lulu, “and took me into a new conversation with the planet. The designer side of me is dedicated to working with plants as a kind of living art, but the other half is fascinated by earth energies; it’s like developing a new sense.” As Lulu gave me a beginner’s guide to geomancy, I found myself fascinated and surprised in equal measure. Fascinated, as this was something I had never associated with gardening, and surprised by this side to Lulu that I hadn’t been expecting.

All too soon, it was time to leave Lulu and 42 Acres behind. It was time to meet up with Adam. I’d read somewhere that he is a great storyteller and fascinated by the connection to the land that gives us our ‘sense of place’. I was looking forward to hearing more about this and his passion for wildlife. “If you study palaeobotany, you discover that the history of the land is in the soil and that the footprint of the wolf and the bear has only just gone cold,” says Adam. “I am very interested in how we gently bring out what the soil contains and how we use the seedbank that is hiding there. Our industry is very bad at the provenance of wild flowers, when we should be thinking seriously about it.” ►►





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Demonstrating just how serious the effects of irresponsible plant sourcing can be, Adam told me about a project to plant a lake, fed by a brook containing white-clawed crayfish. “You can’t disturb their habitats but there is no law about what plants you can put there. Despite this, we were still extremely careful to source plants from a site free from red-clawed crayfish which would have put the white-clawed crayfish at risk.”

Adam is extremely knowledgeable in this field, allowing decisions to be based on fact rather than a blanket purist approach. “A lot of animal and bird species are happy to feed from non-natives,” he explains, “so perhaps we shouldn’t be scared of mixing things up a bit. The new Dutch naturalistic perennial movement represents a yearning towards nature and it’s an idea that we can take further – habitat restoration and re-creation is where we should really be going. We also have an opportunity, along with others in our trade, to make a really positive impact through the choices we make every day – whether we use glyphosate, or not; whether we buy from a UK nursery or from overseas.”

Adam was also keen to highlight the choices we have, when gardening at home, that can affect the wildlife we may not even know exists in our beds and borders. “I share my own garden with the nature that’s there. I’ve got slow-worms, grass snakes and glow-worms, and just small things like leaving some nettles for the butterflies, has a really positive effect.”

But it’s not just about the wildlife with Adam, who was keen to share another of his passions. “I was always interested in sacred geometry and this eventually led us to be involved in the landscape of the Cambridge Mosque, building an Islamic garden. We have also worked on a couple of gardens at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Jordan – all this from an interest in geometry!”

Since Hauser & Wirth, Urquhart & Hunt have worked on another garden with Piet Oudolf and I was keen to hear what’s been learnt from these collaborations. “Working with Piet has taught us to look at plant communities differently,” says Adam. “When I studied plant ecology, it was like looking at plant relationships in an almost mathematical way, but Piet looks at these relationships in terms of form, colour and behaviour.”

I could have listened to Adam for hours, but it was time to say goodbye, and time to reflect on the conversations I’d had with him and Lulu.

Getting to know Urquhart & Hunt had sent me on quite a journey. I started out thinking of them as skilled technicians and plantspeople, capable of executing miraculous transformations, as demonstrated at Hauser & Wirth. And, of course, they are.

But discovering what they were accomplishing at 42 Acres opened my eyes to an equally wondrous transformation of a totally different kind. Here, they are slowly and gently rewilding the landscape for the benefit of the local wildlife, and of mankind – at least those who have the privilege of visiting this special place.

Each member of the team brings a range of complementary skills to the mix, and it is the combination of these skills that provides the team with such strength. Lulu’s passion for geomancy runs parallel to the artistry with which she combines plants, and Adam’s ability to read landscapes in ecological terms allows him to make informed decisions about the suitability of non-native species, as replacements for their indigenous counterparts. Add to this, flower show experience, and inspiration drawn from wild landscapes from Senior Landscape Architect, James Hamilton, and the comprehensive plant knowledge and attention to detail of Landscape Architect, Petra Ulrik and you have yourself a winning formula. Forged from the contents of this melting pot, Urquhart & Hunt are the Swiss army knife of landscape architects; the capabilities of this remarkable team are seemingly endless.

After spending some time with the team, I was reassured to learn that the trend for working with Mother Nature, rather than against her, continues to gather momentum, with landscape architects like Urquhart & Hunt at the forefront of the movement. It is also reassuring that they are proving that people can still be stronger when they work together. ■

Urquhart & Hunt
 Studio 1, Silk Mill Studios, Frome BA11 1PT
 01963 351823
 f /Urquhart-Hunt... @urquhart_hunt
 urquharthunt.com

42 Acres
 Witham Friary, Frome BA11 5HL
 07476 952336
 @42acresretreat @42_Acres
 42acres.com