

I am a volunteer at the David Parr House where I put myself forward to help maintain the back garden through the first year of the project.

It was easy at first — I inherited a beautiful planting plan and roses, lilies, geraniums, lavender and many more plants carefully labeled, interred and spaced. It was clear what to keep and what to eject so I set to, weeding out the ground elder and alkanet, both of which aspire to world domination. But as the garden exploded into life decisions became more difficult. The scattered seeds of poppies and marigolds promised to produce a grand and colourful show if they were left to get on with it and I was charmed by the ragamuffin little oxalis, toadflax, selfheal and herb robert that started to scamper about between the plants. As the season advanced, I became increasingly harassed by the problem of every liberal-minded parent: at what point does one put ones foot down? Yes, I know, too late.

And then there was the mystery plant. Leafing through gardening books or sending whatsapp photos of it to plant freaks just brought useless replies like 'Well It could be a Lovely Thisia but, on the other hand, it looks a bit like a Noxious Thatia'. I even had an unsettling dream in which the plant became a malevolent pineapple.

Nevertheless, guests and house guides were charmed by the garden and I got a lot of undeserved credit which should have gone to the designer and to the plants themselves who were doing all the work. I was just trying to keep control in an escalating behaviour management situation.

I really enjoyed talking to visitors about the ideas behind the planting: how the garden was intended to reflect the life of David Parr's grand daughter Elsie Palmer and her husband Alfred and their occupation of the house in the second half of the twentieth century. Just occasionally though, the gig did not come off so well. There was the day when a large, waggy-tailed Golden Retriever appeared in the next door garden. It grinned amiably through the railings and all went well till I started to speak to the visitors assembled on the garden path, their heads tilted politely in my direction,

"And here we have planted —" I began with a confident wave of the hand.

"Arf! Arf! Arf!" the dog interrupted loudly, as if I'd said something hilarious.

I took a deep breath and started again but every time I tried to grasp my five minutes in the limelight and begin my speech, the wretched hound barked in derision. Only when I stopped talking did it stop barking. It was hard not to feel mocked. I spoke louder and louder in a contest which I'm afraid Fido won, paws down.

There was another day when, confident that the house was closed to visitors, I had put on what my dapper father would have called my 'ratting clothes': that awful old top (a bad idea even back then when it was fashionable) and a pair of my son's old trousers; men's trousers have proper pockets for string, scissors, pencil, plant labels etc. It was a moist, muddy day and I was cracking on making a mess when oh no! there came the sound of visitors emerging into the garden. It could only be one of

those extra groups who are vital for raising funds and to whom it would be advantageous to give a good impression. In a panic I grabbed my windjammer, thinking to throw it on over the worst. Unfortunately, as I was capering about trying to find the arm holes, the pocket velcro caught on the hood velcro and I found myself imprisoned inside a malfunctioning waterproof. For a mad moment I considered hiding inside the the coal bunker but, too late, the group had rounded the corner of the house and were stood gazing at what must have appeared like a scarecrow trying to escape from a bin liner. The visitors got a few muffled snorts and a foolish smile from the garden guide that time.

So perhaps some of my best times have been after hours, when I have slipped round on a summer evening just to check that all looks well for the opening the next day. Despite the sound of traffic and voices in the surrounding streets, the garden is deeply peaceful, the stillness enhanced by the scuffling blackbirds. Flowers glow in the late light and there is a soft scent of vanilla. The mystery plant turns out to be an Evening Primrose, opening now the lovely yellow flowers only I will see. This is the time I give a thought to those who once lived here and take a moment to feel the imprint of their lives on the quiet air of the garden.
