

THE TIMES

# LUXXX

The fashion issue

# Chatsworth's secret weapon

Charlie McCormick meets the woman who brought a riot of colour to the fabled formal gardens



BECKY CROWLEY IS taking a rare moment to sit down and enjoy the view. We're on a bench painted in Chatsworth blue, the estate's traditional colour, amid the three-acre kitchen garden – just one small part of the impressive 105-acre gardens at Chatsworth, the fabled Derbyshire home of the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire. Crowley, a happy and humble practitioner who is modest and yet bang on trend, runs the Chatsworth flower-cutting garden. In the few short years since she arrived it has become one of the most talked-about flower-growing gardens in Britain.

Crowley arrived at Chatsworth with no particular plan in mind. She studied art at Sheffield Hallam University and went on to study horticulture and landscape design, before the lack of outdoor life made her want to get her hands back into the soil. "There was just no green," she says. "So I came here six years ago, starting as a student and working in all the departments, then four years ago I became the flower grower, working alongside Stefan Homerski and Glenn Facer in the kitchen garden." Impressively, she runs the flower garden largely alone, with the help of a volunteer once or twice each week.

## A CUT ABOVE

Becky Crowley, above right, is in sole charge of the flower-cutting garden

Of the three acres of kitchen garden, one acre is Crowley's territory: a long strip made up of four large rectangular beds and four smaller beds placed to the east of the classical stable block, framed within espaliered fruit trees and tightly clipped yew hedging. The gardens fall gently towards the stables and stretch out to the rolling hills beyond; today, it feels as if we could be in Italy, with parched, dusty brown fields, the rich green of the trees, and a landscape dotted with grand classical buildings.

The kitchen garden was originally called the paddocks, because it was where the carriage horses were turned out for a pick of the grass. In the early 1990s the 11th Duke and Duchess (Deborah, the youngest of the Mitford sisters) set out the kitchen gardens where the four greenhouses already stood.

Crowley's approach is part of a new wave of a romantic English flower-growing style that has taken the gardening world by storm. Thousands follow her Instagram feed. Crowley is inspired by the extraordinary natural plantings just outside the kitchen garden and beyond, and has embarked on a mission to make the Chatsworth cutting gardens productive, abundant and full of life – as well as slowly restoring the richness of the earth through composting, straw and strict organic practices.

The flowers from the cutting garden go into the private apartments of the present Duke and Duchess of Devonshire. These are mixed with pots of plants, which come from a glasshouse closer to the house cared for by Marcus Goodwin. "It's all about bringing that moment of that season into the house," Crowley says. The arrangements are relaxed, natural and organic – a contrast to the grandeur of the interiors of the house. There are two house florists, who come and pick the flowers; they take what they require for that week, or for a special event, and a third florist picks and sells in the farm shop, in Pilsley, one mile away. Of course, things here are also grown for display within the

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garden itself; because the garden is open to the public, she says "it is very much a garden and not a flower farm; the public are here to enjoy it as well".

An abundance of blowsy and heavily scented flowers fill the house and farm shop each week. In early spring, bulbs are forced in the glasshouse: ranunculi, anemones, tulips, narcissi and poppies. Thousands of tulips planted in neat rows each autumn begin to push their heads through the rich soil – Crowley plants more than 70 varieties, creating a circus of colour. New bulbs are bought each year for the best heads. In the early summer months, peonies, delphiniums, regal lilies, bearded iris and lupins are followed by sweet peas, heavily scented roses and rows of vibrant jewel-like dahlias in the autumn. Annuals spill on to paths and the greenhouses groan with a joyful mix of dinner plate-sized chrysanthemums in the autumn. Although romantic and productive, Crowley's garden has become a wild, joyous riot.

Chatsworth is known for its grand and expansively classical features, such as the estate's reflecting pool and Joseph Paxton's "conservative wall", a beautiful cast-iron conservatory. Crowley's creation is very different, and represents one of the most exciting new directions in a country house garden. Above all, hers is a philosophy that you can take home to your own plot, however modest, based on the home grown and the seasonal, and focused on the health of the soil as the source of all great gardening.



### FULL BLOOM

The flowers fill the rooms of the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire's private apartments and are sold in the Chatsworth farm shop

