



Native intelligence

USUALLY, a site speaks to you,' says landscape designer Marie-Louise Agius. 'This one seemed unhelpful at first, but then it gave us a clue. A guelder rose was thriving despite a wind tunnel and the surrounding hospital. Seeing it cope so well, we decided to use only plants native to Britain or long-naturalised here and in plantings that were about bringing a sense of natural habitat back into the heart of Leeds.'

The result, I believe, is one of the most important public landscapes to be created in decades. It's at Maggie's Yorkshire, a branch of the charity that supports people affected by cancer, opening this year at St James's University Hospital. It embodies an idea that's key to the work of Maggie's: gardens and green spaces are healing places where calm, contemplation, solace and elation are all to be found.

The building, by Heatherwick Studio, appears to surge from the earth, its wooden rib-vaulted sides and ceilings recalling the trunks and canopy of a grove.

Designed by Miss Agius and Michael Balston, the landscaping flourishes around, amid and upon this sanctuary—'upon' because the flat roofs are planted in the same style as the building's surrounds, so the centre seems to lift skywards and sustain the greenery from which it has sprung.

'The great gift of our wild flora,' says Miss Agius, 'is that it's always changing, always progressing through phases to its goals.'



Garden of healing: our native plants are being used in groundbreaking fashion at Maggie's Yorkshire

This is the extraordinary joy of the English seasons and it can bring vital support to people going through serious life changes.'

The flora includes snowdrops, celandines, windflowers, bluebells, cow parsley, dogwoods, blackthorn, hawthorn, oak, pine, birch, rowan 'and don't forget guelder rose—that pointed the way'.

Close-up, the plantings evoke rural habitats and features; overall, they cohere in a landscape that's astonishingly picturesque and high-performance. As the site is small, its effect is one of a world apart, seemingly spontaneous or blessed, as if, by some miracle, a microcosm of English Nature at her bravest and most beautiful had materialised in the city.

Horticulturally, this is groundbreaking. It shows that one can garden with native plants naturally, intensively and captivatingly if one uses the arts of

design, cultivation and plant connoisseurship rather than spurning them as 'non-Green'.

Not that the landscape at Maggie's Yorkshire is anything other than eco-friendly. 'I even have a budget for earthworms,' Miss Agius declares, 'from Yorkshire Worms, of course.'

A microcosm of English Nature at her bravest has materialised

Native species are merely one aspect of her boundless love of flora: 'I'm like a kid in a sweetshop when it comes to plants. I can't get enough, or learn enough about them.' She traces this passion's roots to her childhood and Exbury, the 200-acre Hampshire paradise created by her great-grandfather Lionel de Rothschild, where she's a very active director: 'I've always known it as the family's garden and it has always seemed magical to me.'

She pays tribute to her father, Marcus Agius, a lifelong devotee of horticulture, whom she joins, on their rare free days, to work in an outstanding private woodland garden they're developing: 'You see, it was in my DNA, the plant thing, on both sides of the

family, and that's a great help because it isn't something everyone can relate to. It's wonderful to be among kindred spirits.'

Which brings us to Mr Balston, maestro and virtuoso of British garden design. She began working for him in 2006 after a Masters in sociology at Edinburgh University, professional training in landscaping at KLC and a spell as manager in Clifton Nurseries' landscape department.

In 2010, Balston & Company became Balston Agius. In 2013, they jointly won a Gold Medal at Chelsea (Miss Agius's first, one of many for Mr Balston). The practice is expanding and exciting.

'Michael is a brilliant mentor and collaborator,' she tells me. 'I used to think it was a problem that I couldn't limit myself to a narrow plant palette and design approach. He taught me this was nonsense and to turn my range into an asset: versatility. He'd say there's only one approach worth having: find the right plants for the site, the brief and the client. Everything else will follow.'

Looking at their design for Maggie's Yorkshire, I'd say Mr Balston was right.

Mark Griffiths is editor of the *New Royal Horticultural Society Dictionary of Gardening*

Next week Beans

Horticultural aide memoire

Sow parsnips

It is a counsel of perfection to sow anything outdoors in February, but we may be fortunate and parsnips should be started early. Make a seedbed by forking through, raking and leveling to a fine tilth. Set a cane at each end of the row and draw out a shallow drill with the corner of a hoe. Sow the big, flat seeds individually: it takes time, but saves trouble later. Sprinkle a catch crop of radishes, which will soon mark the rows, as parsnips are slow to germinate. Shuffle along the row to firm and rake to remove the footprints. **SCD**

