

HILARY ROSE

The joy of a garden centre and the lessons it teaches

I don't have the patience to wait for spring bulbs — so a topiary animal is probably out of the question



Hilary Rose wonders whether she should add topiary animals to her garden

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Hilary Rose

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I should know by now that if I think, “How hard can it be?”, the answer will be “very”. The list of hard things at which I proved terrible includes driving, drawing and mastering conversational Italian. To that list I can now add gardening.

The difference is that with gardening I doubled down, determined to be good at it. (Thinking about it, I didn't actually give up driving; I carried on doing it, badly.) Having acquired my first garden, gardening was going to be my new thing. You put stuff in the ground and it grows. Easy. Although watching [Monty Don](#) on TV one night, I began to suspect it might not be. He planted three layers of bulbs on top of each other in a planter. Instead of bumping into

each other underground, in a silent subterranean car crash, as I assumed, he said they would flower in a glorious succession of snowdrops, then daffodils, then tulips. He had an infinite collection of planters, and flowerbeds so wide you would need a cable car to get across.

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My collection of planters isn't so much infinite as single digit. I don't have herbaceous borders; I have an L-shaped trench of sodden earth with nothing in it. Not for the first time, it dawned on me that the problem was me. I dream big. But sitting indoors googling "cottage garden flowers" would only get me so far, and it wasn't as far as an actual cottage garden with actual flowers.

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I went to see [Arabella Lennox-Boyd](#), a gardener so grand she has her own arboretum. Lennox-Boyd designed the 88 acres of the [Duke of Westminster](#)'s seat, Eaton Hall in Cheshire. She spoke enticingly of drifts of snowdrops and arbours of roses. She stressed the role of topiary in providing winter interest, and I pictured my little backyard with a neatly shaped peacock or a giant box squirrel. She gave some excellent advice — never follow trends or believe what you see on Instagram — and so began my journey to gardening greatness.

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I planted snowdrop bulbs and waited for drifts that never arrived. Squirrels dug up the daffodils. A single mini iris pushed its way into the light, and if an iris can feel dejected, it surely did. I went to Petersham Nurseries, the prettiest, smartest little nursery you ever did see, and told Byron Thomas, their head of horticulture, that I was a rubbish gardener. They have a seasonal planting service, where they will come and plant your pots for you, and I'm sorely tempted, except it doesn't solve the problem of the flowerbed. He talked about geraniums and penstemons, delphiniums and verbena, of how honeysuckle might look mixed with jasmine, and foxgloves among ferns.

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Having arrived feeling like my mini iris, I left with new hope and the dawning realisation that the main thing I need to acquire isn't knowledge but patience, of which I have none. How long do seeds take to grow? Months? Years? Can patience be learnt or would a topiary squirrel be quicker? Because, really, how hard can it be?

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