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Princess Sturdza

Visitors to the Normandy garden of Norwegian-born Princess Greta Sturdza all testify to the rigorous standards she sets herself. "I like things to be done well," says the 94-year-old. "I hate half-done." In fact she expects the same of us all. If you don't pay close attention to what she says during one of her legendary practical demonstrations, or – God forbid! – step on a flowerbed, you can expect a smack on the back of the legs with the formidable long-handled gardening tool she carries.

Roy Lancaster, her friend and fellow vice-president of the Royal Horticultural Society, believes Princess Sturdza sets a fine example. Instead of

Diana Ross meets the formidable creator of one of Europe's most remarkable gardens. Photograph Charlie Hopkinson

Neither was her Romanian husband, Prince George Sturdza, "a man of the forests and the fields", whom she married in 1936. The family settled in Normandy for good in 1955, after fleeing Romania in the aftermath of the Second World War, as the Communists took over.

Her late husband's long-standing friendship with the neighbouring Mallet family proved useful. The Mallets owned the acclaimed garden Les Moutiers, designed by Edwin Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll, and soon

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“standing around pontificating while someone else does the work”, she is not afraid to get her hands dirty.

More than 50 years ago the princess began creating the woodland garden at Le Vasterival on the coast near Dieppe in France. Transforming 12 hectares of swampy forest on the edge of a windswept cliff top proved to be an almost Sisyphean task. She set herself a stiff target: to clear the brambles and bracken for two and a half hours a day, every day. And for five hours, if she missed a day.

Her athletic physique helped: in her youth she was Norwegian junior tennis champion and an Olympic-standard skier. She believes she inherited her strength, along with her character and love of nature, from her father. "My mother was soft and feminine and I wasn't," she says. "My father took me on skis into the woods when I was three, showed me the tracks of wild creatures and said: 'Look at the trees. That's the way to see the birds and animals.'" But he wasn't a gardener.

introduced the princess to Lionel Fortescue, whom she describes as "the greatest gardener and plantsman I have known". He became her lifelong friend and mentor and introduced her to all the great English gardeners of the day. A perfectionist himself, Fortescue taught her – among much else – to look out for improved forms of any plant she grew, and to go straight home and dig out her own inferior version if she ever found one.

Fifty years on, the princess is still combing nurseries on both sides of the English Channel for interesting new cultivars – "I want a plant for the beauty it will bestow on my garden", she says. She plants her discoveries alongside the horticultural treasures that friends send her from around the world. For example, she enjoys using variations of the common foxglove and the familiar purple elder (*Sambucus nigra* 'Eva') to complement the pink bark of the Japanese acers in her collection, which the purist collector would plant in isolation.

According to an ancient Taoist maxim, the spaces between the spokes of a wheel are as important as the spokes. This is fully realised at Le Vasterival, where the princess prunes all her trees for what she calls "transparency". She says: "My aim has always been to be able to put myself in the garden, look right, look left, south and north, and everywhere find something. I don't think we have a tree or shrub in the garden that hasn't been pruned."

The princess has always welcomed visitors to Le Vasterival, but strictly by appointment only: "I enjoy taking people around who are keen, but I couldn't bear to have people walking around alone. Non, never!" And this arrangement is set to continue. One of her three sons, a banker, plans to return to Normandy from his present home in Switzerland, and will maintain the garden as a fitting memorial to his mother. He will have the inestimable help of the princess's advisor, amanuensis and sometime student, the garden writer Didier Willery. Didier will train future gardeners (a team of four) in the princess's exacting methods, and be on hand to supervise the tours.

For now, however, the princess remains very much in charge of her own creation, which she describes poignantly as "my garden of memories. I think that's wonderful – to go round the garden and feel my friends around me." Long may she continue to do so. □ Guided tours of Le Vasterival by appointment only. Groups of between 15 and 25 people. €26 per person. Write to Jardin du Vasterival, Allée Albert Roussel, Route du Phare d'Ailly, 76119 Ste-Marguerite-Sur-Mer, France. Tel +33 (0)2-35-85-12-05. NEXT MONTH: Andrew Wilson

