

## Gardening

# A duchess, her gardener and work that never ends

The head gardener at Belvoir Castle needs military-style organisational skills to keep the formal rose garden and historic rolling acres looking immaculate



**Bunny Guinness**

**I**f you are on top of your garden this year you are doing well - and if you are doing it all yourself, then you are doing exceptionally well.

Emma, Duchess of Rutland, has been making huge strides at Belvoir Castle where, apart from the ongoing maintenance, she has also been developing and restoring large sections of the



garden. She has radically changed the way the gardens are managed, too. Instead of employing in-house gardeners she has outsourced the work to Nikki Applewhite of Applewhite Garden Design who looks after the garden on just two man days a fortnight plus volunteer labour. The garden amounts to about three acres but this does not include mowing and hedge cutting. My first impressions of

Nikki are that she is extremely well organised, hard working, knowledgeable and passionate - four essential qualities for a gardener. Each year the Duchess tells Nikki which areas she wants planted and Nikki draws up the annual maintenance plan.

They try to meet fortnightly to keep up with successes, failures and developments. The Dynamic Duchess does not stand still.

There are always new areas to develop and existing areas to maintain, so Nikki prioritises. The Rose Garden gets top billing. It is the only formal area and was designed by Harold Peto in 1906. It includes two parterres, a formal pond with climbing roses and a laburnum arch.

Organising and working with the four-strong team of volunteers is integral to keeping on top of the



ANDREW FOX

**It's busy... the Dynamic Duchess does not stand still**

work. Belvoir is steeped in history with stunning panoramic views (hence *bel voir*). The magnificent Regency castle is the crowning glory that dominates the Vale of Belvoir. Ospreys, red kites and nuthatches animate the striking

vistas. More volunteers are desperately needed though, especially this summer.

### Tough workload

In order to add colour for late summer, Nikki added a range of

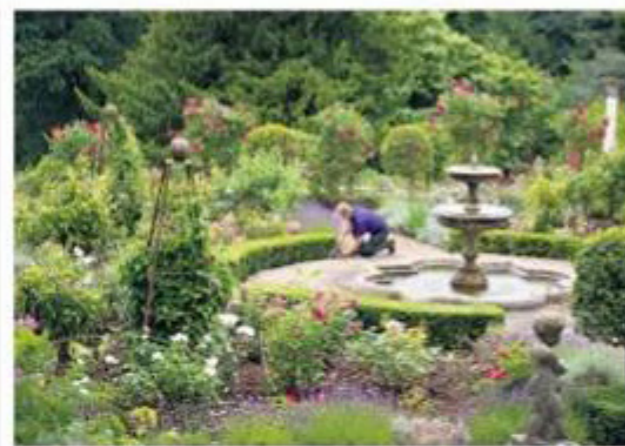
clematis to twine up the 30-odd obelisks that punctuate the sea of roses. But because maintenance must be straightforward, she limited her choice to Group Three clematis. These bloom from mid-to-late summer and give colour after the first main flush of roses. More importantly, they are easy for volunteers to prune, as they just require cutting back to within 1ft (30cm) of the ground in February.

Another top priority are the 450 shrubs and trees that were planted last winter. These must be kept weed-free to prevent competition from weeds that would scupper their chances of establishment.

In order to cope with the workload, Nikki and the Duchess have rationalised the planting on the top terrace - a private space used for entertaining. This is windswept, blisteringly hot in summer and icy in winter.

Watering is a problem due to a lack of water pressure (the castle is 400ft above sea level). The previous scheme was "full of onesies" - many different individual plants - difficult to manage with time constraints.

Now block planting of one or two different types using good, easy plants such as *Rosa* 'The Fairy' with its non-stop pink flowers and *Nepeta* 'Walkers Low' thrive. They are surrounded by low box hedging to add interest in winter. Alliums and tulips



By any other name: from top, clockwise, Nikki at work; the Rose Garden; Emma, the Dynamic Duchess of Rutland



spice up spring. Nikki and her team are also tackling the Rockery Border, three-tiered and 50m long. Unwanted guests include bindweed, ground elder and the dreaded Japanese knotweed. Nikki's preferred

treatment for bindweed is to entice it to grow up canes before zapping with glyphosate.

Everywhere springs burst out of the ground, providing great opportunities for plants that relish the damp. Nikki has brought together a river of bog plants, including rogersias, *Darmera peltata*, gunnera and primulas, salvaged from other places and they highlight a wet hollow beneath the pet cemetery in the Japanese woodland.

Work in the gardens here gets you fit. Much of the time is spent negotiating steep slopes, as no barrows or vehicles can mount them. If you get to the rockery and find you have left your secateurs behind, you have a half-mile walk back to fetch them.

But as Nikki says, "I love Belvoir and enjoy working with the Duchess, who is an 'ideas woman'. It is all a tremendous and highly rewarding challenge".

As the garden is being reincarnated, other developments are coming into play. A new retail village is planned, "the engine yard", and in a year or two visitors will not only be able to see the extraordinary gardens and castle but visit the farm shop, plant centre and buy local produce.

For more, visit [belvoircastle.com](http://belvoircastle.com) and [applewhitegardendesign.co.uk](http://applewhitegardendesign.co.uk)