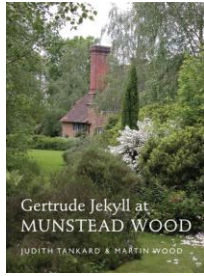


Book Review: Gertrude Jekyll at Munstead Wood



By Judith Tankard & Martin Wood
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Reviewed by Patrice Todisco

Within the canon of landscape history a collection of gardens exists that has revolutionized the profession shaping, and shaped by, genius and sense of place.

Munstead Wood, the home of Gertrude Jekyll, stands at the apex of this collection. It was here that the woman described by eminent historian Christopher Hussey as the "greatest artist in horticulture and garden planting that England has produced," collaborated with architect Sir Edwin Lutyens to build a house and garden.

Jekyll's ideals were deeply rooted in a love of the Surrey countryside, cottage gardens, vernacular building traditions, the Arts and Crafts Movement and her training as a fine artist. The creation of Munstead Wood embodied the perfect expression of her ideals, providing a canvas for Jekyll's craftsmanship and experimentation with garden design.

I. A WALK IN THE GARDEN

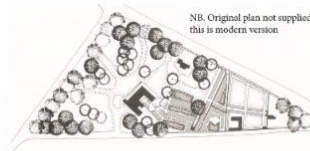


4 GERTRUDE JEKILL AT MUNSTEAD WOOD

After climbing the hill towards Hascombe from Godalming and walking on a sandy track, a visitor to Munstead Wood eventually comes to a brick gate in an oak paling fence. There was no carriage drive sweeping up to the front door, as one might have expected, merely a simple footpath, generously planted with shrubs to allow tantalizing glimpses far into the woodland. An essential sense of mystery was conveyed as the path abruptly disappeared into a tunnel of hedges leading to the porch, with its timber arches framing views across the lawn. All was simplicity and restraint. Like the entrance to an open preparing the visitor for the 'realisation and beauty of the garden.' Such modesty gave the impression that Munstead Wood was merely a cottage set in a wooded clearing. This was, of course, all deliberate, for an illusion which had taken more than forty years to create.

In her book *Gardens for Small Country Houses* Gertrude Jekyll described Munstead Wood as 'the finest acres of the poorest possible soil, sloping a little down towards the north, roughly triangular in shape. The northern portion (the widest part) had once been a plantation of Scots pine which, killed in the early 1870s after some seventy years' growth, had been replaced by a soft-leaved mixed stand. In the central portion, where the house eventually stood, a clearing open had been established, and the remainder, which later became the working garden, was a poor arable field. Jekyll began developing the woodland almost immediately.

LEFT: A modern colour view of Munstead Wood, which was reconstructed by a modern house set in a woodland.
RIGHT: Part of one of the gardens at Munstead Wood.



A WALK IN THE GARDEN 5

Gertrude Jekyll at Munstead Wood, by Judith Tankard and Martin Wood, is a redesigned edition of the Pimpernel Garden Classic first published in 1996. It recreates Munstead Wood as it was in Jekyll's time, introducing the reader to the "activities and enterprises" around which her daily life evolved.

Neither a biography nor an assessment of Jekyll's well documented contributions to the field of garden design, it is instead a compelling and intimate portrait of Jekyll and the home and gardens that she created for her own pleasure.

There is much to savor in this eminently readable account of the talented, paradoxical Jekyll who, if you'll pardon the expression was, in her day, the "rock star" of the gardening world. Her talents were remarkable and wide reaching: carving, modeling, painting, silversmithing, carpentry, gilding, embroidery, herb and flower knowledge. She mastered them all, laying a foundation for her acclaimed gardening career.



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While deeply rooted in her finely orchestrated country life at Munstead Wood, Jekyll was a prodigious communicator, the author of more than a dozen books and 1,000 articles. So great was Jekyll's fame, and so voluminous her fan mail, that she drafted a form letter advising that her "oculist forbids letter writing."

Jekyll seldom ventured far from home, designing more than 400 gardens during her career (although records for only 250 survive) yet rarely traveling to any of them. Instead she developed designs from site plans supplied by her clients, many of whom were wealthy industrialists whose fortunes were made at the expense of the countryside she so loved.

It is these details that delight, revealing the most extraordinary Jekyll in an ordinary light. While her fame as a garden designer and writer is widely celebrated, her management and business skills were also equally impressive.

Drawing upon Jekyll's photographs (yet another of her highly evolved talents), scrapbooks, correspondence and the recollections of her contemporaries, the authors chronicle Jekyll's many enduring personal and professional relationships. Chapters are devoted to both the design of Munstead Wood and her commissions as a professional garden designer. These are listed alphabetically and by architect and included as appendices.

Despite its fame, Gertrude Jekyll's garden at Munstead Wood lasted for only 50 years as she made no plans to preserve it after her death. While it lives on through books, articles, photographs and the recollections of those that visited it, the garden was a personal endeavor, created by and for Jekyll herself.

How fortunate then that **Gertrude Jekyll at Munstead Wood** provides a glimpse of Munstead Wood at its prime, as well as an opportunity to understand Gertrude Jekyll's garden design enterprises within the context of the practical and creative arts to which she was deeply devoted.

Patrice Todisco writes about parks, gardens and the public realm at www.landscapenotes.com.