

# The art of gardening

Renowned artist, gardener and botanist **Emma Tennant** will visit VBG in March. She talks to Roz Whistance



*Auriculas*

There are botanical paintings that are admirable for their detailed, near-photographic portrayal of a flower. Then there are the watercolours of Emma Tennant, who captures not only the accuracy of her subject but its movement, its freedom, somehow its soul.

“Because I know plants so well, I know they grow at different angles,” she says. “They’re not neat and tidy like they are in illustrations, they go all over the place.”

Emma Tennant is a gardener, an amateur botanist and an artist, and the combination of the three forms the essence of her

botanical watercolours. “I started as a gardener and have been drawing flowers since I was five,” she says. “It’s a bit like horse artists. The best ones are those who ride and really know horses’ moods and how their muscles work.”

The film, *Emma Tennant, Artist and Gardener*, made by Island photographer Ben Wood, to be shown at VBG in March, follows her painting year and her early and ongoing influences. The film draws out contrasts – the exquisite praise heaped on her work with her down-to-earth approach to her subject matter; and not least her love of vibrant



*Telling the story: Emma Tennant at work*

colour in the often grey climate of the Scottish Borders, where she lives. "Ben wanted to subtitle the film 'A film About Rain,'" she laughs.

Emma barely remembers a time before she began gardening. She and her brother grew up near to the family estate of Chatsworth, where, under the guidance of an inspiring nanny who took them out in all weathers, they were largely home educated using the Parents' National Education Union syllabus. "It was a remarkably good system, developed in the 1920s originally for children whose parents worked abroad in the old Empire. Exams were posted back to London and properly marked. What it did was encourage you to get out and observe for yourself, and for someone like me, who liked working with my hands, and drawing, it was brilliant."

Emma studied history at Oxford where she met her husband, Toby, and in the film he describes walks to find plants that he'd never even heard of. Indeed the desire to find out everything about a plant is all part of Emma's art. The catalogues for her exhibitions are far from the usual name, date and number: Emma's are mini botany lessons, written with the infectious enthusiasm that is at the very heart of what she does.

Most of what she paints she grows herself in a particularly weather-resistant greenhouse. ("I splashed out and got a sturdy one made by Alitex. I love it!") She laughs when asked if she doesn't find Scotland a bit of a challenge: "Yes, and I've long since given up struggling to grow things that aren't happy here. Lots of things *are* happy here but it is difficult with a very short growing season. It's a small price to pay for living in a beautiful place."

When Emma and Toby first married they lived in the tropics. She didn't enjoy the predictability of the light. "There were no real seasons. Seasonal progression – spring colours, fruit to taste in summer, autumn colours and fungi – is very stimulating to an artist."

Now farming in the Scottish Borders, he breeds cattle and she grows flowers and vegetables. "I grow a lot of peas and broad beans," she says, "partly because I like eating them but they often fruit and flower at the same time, and when the flowers and pod all twist round a bit of hazel stick that really does appeal to me."

There is no rhyme or reason as to what she chooses to paint, just things that take her fancy. "I sometimes put the bulb in my pictures, or the seed." She admits the seedpod of a magnolia isn't strictly beautiful – but an intriguing, twisted pod would be the thing she might choose to paint from a particular garden.

"My subject matter is everything from a wildflower 200 yards from my house to exotic things I've found on some trip to the other side of the world – or sometimes in my own greenhouse."

For that reason she doesn't paint flowers from flower shops. "I like the story of the flower – who grew it, where they grew it, why, whether they brought it back from holiday, or grew it from seed, or was it a special plant that has been growing for hundreds of years in the same place like the orchids at Chatsworth.



*Acacia dealbata*



*Tulip*

If you buy something from a shop the story is it was grown in a factory greenhouse in Holland – and that's not much of a story."

It is that need to tell the whole story, from the colour, the shape, the very life of a plant, that has shaped and honed her method.

Wishy-washy colours are what give watercolour painting a bad name, she says. Emma uses a highly absorbent Japanese paper, enabling great depth of hue: "The other day I painted a chanterelle mushroom and thought I'd finished it but when it dried it was less vibrant. I thought crikey, that looks like the ghost of a chanterelle! So I put on more orangey-yellow paint."

Her paper also enables colour to flow beyond the boundary of the line, so capturing the wonderful freedom that distinguishes her art. "There is a lot of tightly controlled, rather pedantic botanical illustration around. I knew I could do that, but it was boring," she says.

Seeing the work of Scottish artist Elizabeth Blackadder was a turning point. "She paints big, bold life-size flowers. Illustrating for a book, you have to make the flowers smaller than life size to fit the paper. But she does big splashy things, and doesn't mind making mistakes. That was an inspiration to me."

So Emma's flowers "wander about, they're not tied to the traditional page with all its restrictions." She works in natural, never artificial, light, by a window. Nor can she work with photographs, but sits at her desk often holding the subject in her free hand. "I have worked in all sorts of places such as airports – but I like silence best."



*Gentiana sino-ornata*

When she comes to the Botanic Garden in March Emma Tennant is hoping to paint something that flowers because of our micro-climate. "Ventnor is super sheltered with the Undercliff, like somewhere in France. It's a fascinating place. If the citrus are in flower I shall certainly want to paint them."

To view more paintings visit [www.katiepertwee.com](http://www.katiepertwee.com)

## Emma Tennant on film

**Ben Wood has been photographing Emma Tennant's art work for 15 or 20 years, but it was when her put dealer/agent, Katie Pertwee, saw a film Ben had made that the idea of a documentary about Emma came into being. The result is *Emma Tennant, Artist and Gardener*, and the film was launched in London last year.**

**"It was a good idea because she's an interesting woman," says Ben. "It was photographed in the Scottish Borders, where she lives; in Chatsworth in Derbyshire where she was brought up; and in a place called Great Glemham in Suffolk where she goes to paint every year in this amazing walled garden. We also did some work in London and on the Isle of Wight."**

**It took three years to film, though the illusion is that it covers a year of her life.**

**"The point of the film is to give an insight into Emma's life as a gardener and a painter. She's an experienced gardener, as well as an extraordinary painter. It's a potent combination," says Ben.**