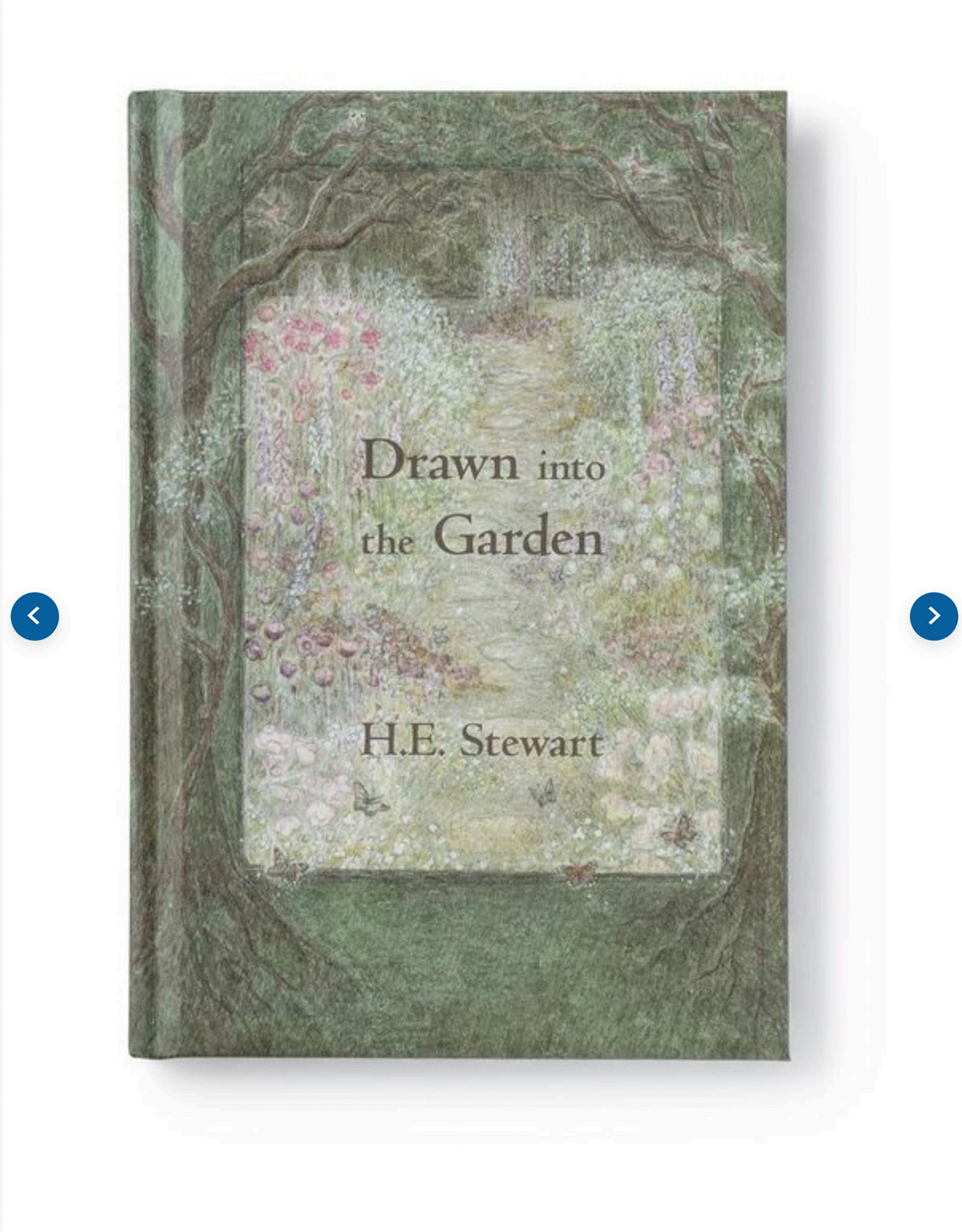


BOOKS REVIEW

For the love of gardening: 4 books to make you want to get your hands dirty

By Peter Goddard Special to the Star Tue., May 11, 2021 | 3 min. read



Gardens have captured the imaginations — and the pens — of some great writers. Vita Sackville-West, for example, is famed for her painterly flower beds around the Sissinghurst Castle grounds, a must-visit on any English gardens tour.

She was also able to put her finger on what makes the best writing when one inevitably turns to their garden, to avoid the temptation of sentimental language to describe these earthly delights. “The short phrase,” Sackville-West insisted, “ought to be evocative enough, without amplification.”

Graham Stuart Thomas, master cultivator of English roses, claimed his deep understanding of the horticultural arts started with reading the “simple but expressive prose” of gardener and writer Gertrude Jekyll.

Following are four books with gardening as a theme that keep those principles in mind.

“Seed to Dust: Life, Nature, and a Country Garden”

Marc Hamer, Greystone Books, 416 pages, \$34.95

“Seed to Dust” is a seasonal account by a gardener working at a somewhat mysterious Welsh estate for a woman he calls Miss Cashmere. Forget any “Lady Chatterley’s Lover” intimation. Passion here is mostly of the intellectual variety.

Hamer’s plant wisdom is his way of understanding culture at large. So we’re barely into early January and Hamer’s thinking has already swooped us over tribal number systems in the Amazon and into Zen Buddhism.

More than a book about gardening, “Seed to Dust” is a book affirming gardening and its particular place in the life of the author. Leaving school at 15, tossed out of the family home at 17 by his father, he was a vagrant for part of his life. No wonder life’s affirmation is to be found everywhere in the book. A moment of warmth in March leaves him with a delicious feeling: “I am like a child catching moths,” he writes.

“The Way of the Gardener: Lost in the Weeds Along the Camino de Santiago”

Lyndon Penner, University of Regina Press, 158 pages, \$24.95

“Plants reveal things to me about myself,” writes Saskatoon-based gardener Lyndon Penner in “The Way of the Gardener.” Plants we get galore in his writing. Almond trees. Chestnuts. And figs — Penner’s reaction to the fig is as close to sensual as it gets in the way of this gardener.

“The Way” is a meant to be comforting book; the period plant drawings are culled from various centuries-old sources and the text is set in Renaissance type.

On occasion the author allows something of himself in driving the book forward, “If there was anything that moved me on this journey, it was the olive groves,” he says. “There is a holiness to olives.” Such unfiltered plain-spoken reaction to the plants suggests they’re Penner’s real pals, on the journey or off.

“The Dog’s Gardener”

Patricia Storms, drawings by Nathalie Dion, Greenwood Books/House of Anansi, 36 pages, \$18.95

Longevity in a children’s book is rarely about how it reads on the page but how it sounds when read by an adult, and looks when shown to a child. “The Dog’s Gardener” understands that off-to-sleep moment perfectly and fills it, sumptuously, with Patricia Storms’ story of a radiant day of gardening with a dog named Dutch. Dutch pretends to sleep until his mistress, a gangly young woman in red shorts, wakes him to make their daily rounds in a bit of prime Ontario real estate.

The luxuriant, stillness found throughout “The Dog’s Gardener” comes from Nathalie Dio’s subdued drawings.

So what about gardening, you ask? Try to keep a child away from a garden after being introduced to its delights by Dutch.

“Drawn Into the Garden”

H.E. Stewart, Tudor House Press, 108 pages, \$27

Early on in “Drawn Into the Garden,” Victoria, B.C.-based writer/illustrator Helen Stewart offers a succinct well-informed survey of children’s books. “Children of the not-too-distant-past spent much of their time outdoors: they learned about nature by being part of it,” is her reasoning.

And her own illustrations certainly have a free-flowing, boundary-defying feel kids like and turn to themselves. Stewart clearly wouldn’t mind attracting fans of Beatrix Potter or Ernest Shepard’s finely spun line drawings for “Winnie the Pooh.”

Stewart, who comes from a long line of gardeners and horticulturalists — and herself with a famous acre-garden in Victoria — knows that the soil is fragile and that the dreamy quality in her book is not the only way gardens are experienced, or remembered.

PG Peter Goddard is the author of “The Great Gould” (“Gould le magnifique” in France and Belgium).

SHARE: f t e in

REPORT AN ERROR

JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS

ABOUT THE STAR