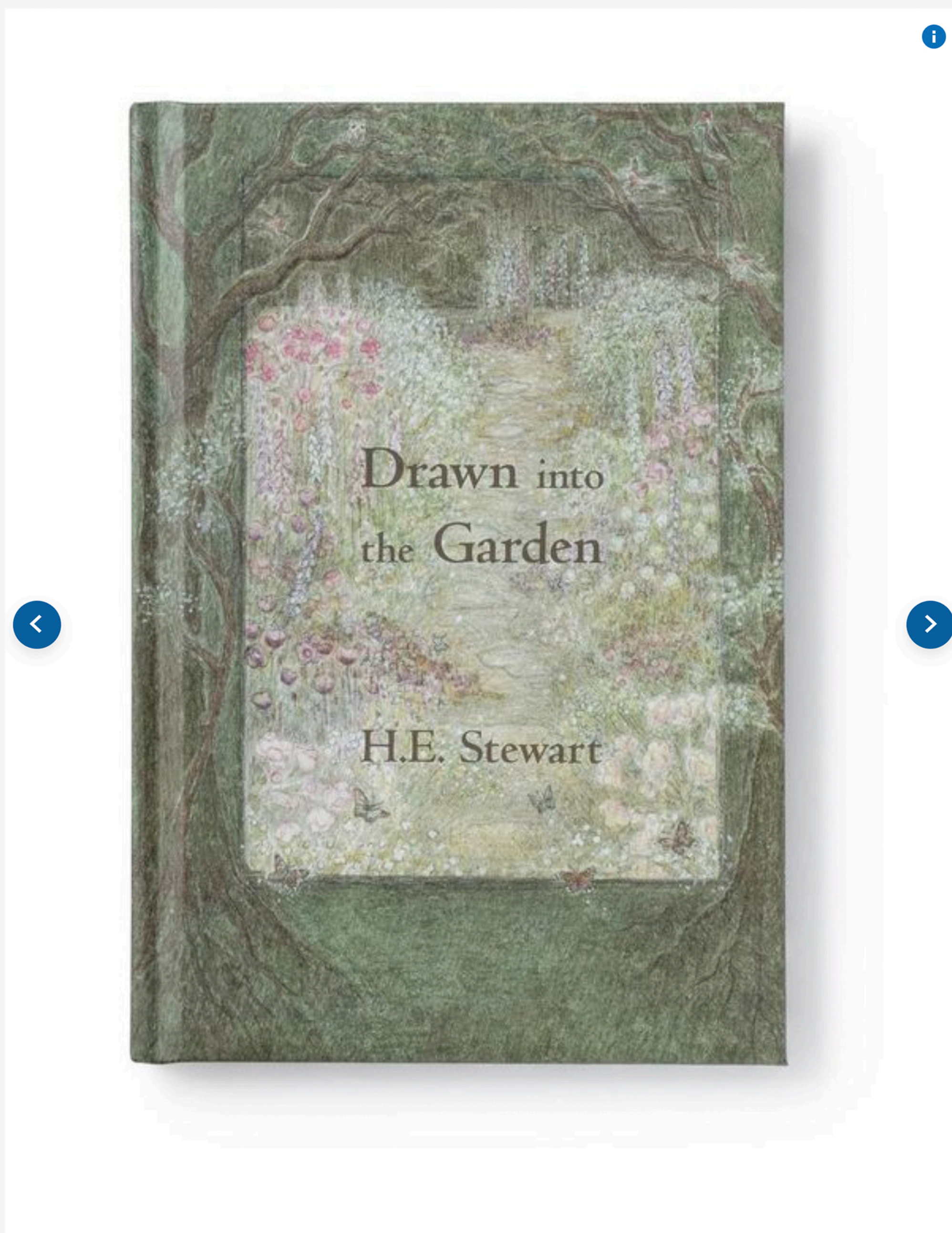


BOOKS

Helen Stewart's fantasy garden is really a 'call-to-trowels' for soil conservation

By **Peter Goddard** Special to the Star
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Visitors to Helen Stewart's lush Victoria, B.C., garden feel they've reached a painterly paradise; an acre with pathways leading past sprays of flowers to quiet hidden spots.

The 70-something artist/gardener understands that gardens are seen as shelters from the storm; that gardening's return to everyday importance (planting is the new playtime for home-schooling children) is due to the psychological pounding from COVID-19 pandemic stress and deprivation. Her illustrated book "[Drawn into the Garden](#)" further distils this garden-as-fantasy idea.

You'd be forgiven for buying into the fantasy, but that's not where she began in her journey, only where she's ended up.

"Gardening," she says in an interview, "encourages a growing respect and concern for the land."

It's something she learned during a more hardscrabble relationship with the land earlier in her life, during 15 years spent sheep ranching in northern B.C., with her husband and their five kids, starting in 1965.

"I married young and we moved to the northern sheep farm with a small baby," she continues. "This was a huge change for me. I was alone with five children and the animals, plus every other animal that ate sheep: coyotes in abundance, bears and cougars. Although the Rocky Mountains are beautiful beyond words, the winters were long, cold and dark, and the workload huge. My life in Victoria with my beautiful garden is like paradise in comparison."

But this same garden is Stewart's call-to-trowels for soil conservation. "Before I started reading about gardens I read about the environment," she says. "We have to remember that one-third of the world lives underground and, over the last 10 years, one-third of the top soil has been lost due to erosion."

Further reasons to cultivate our gardens carefully.



Peter Goddard

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