

Andrea Wulf is fascinated by the creation of a perfect country garden

The Morville Hours: The Story of a Garden

by Katherine Swift
384pp, Bloomsbury, £17.99

When Katherine Swift arrived at Morville Hall in 1988 she suggested to its owners, the National Trust, that she make a garden. Instead of providing three-dimensional drawings or elaborate planting plans, she wrote about an imaginary garden – in the present tense – as if walking along its paths and borders. She managed to convince the National Trust by using words alone.

Swift, who lives in the Dower House of the Shropshire mansion, writes beautifully: her apples are not the flawless fruits from supermarkets but “the Quasimodos and Cyranos of the apple world, humped and bossed... with basins ribbed, puckered and russeted”. They are easy to pick, last all winter and have solid English names such as “Cornish Aromatic” or “Norfolk Beefing”. Her pears, however,

remain a mystery to her. Varieties such as “Duchesse d’Angoulême” or “Doyenne du Comice” are like “voluptuous heavy-eyed French empire beauties who demand absolute obedience”, for it is said that a classic dessert pear is only perfect for one day.

In an allusion to the monastic past of the house and grounds, Swift takes her structure from the hours of the divine office – the daily rhythm of worship followed by monks, starting with Vigils (celebrated in the night) and ending with Compline (at the close of the day before the community retires to bed). Like a medieval Book of Hours, *The Morville Hours* guides the reader through the days and seasons in Swift’s garden.

But she rarely stays for very long in the garden; she rambles through the history of the house and grounds and also through the past of Shropshire, the locals and of her family. Traditionally February’s occupations in the Books of Hours, for example, are chopping wood – and so we read about the art of stacking a log pile; the mini-ice age during the 15th century; the winter of 1946-47 when Britain ran out of coal; her father studying his Greek grammar with his overcoat on; and the different logs in her fire – tulip tree for long winter nights, sweet-scented apple wood or sputtering green holly.

The structure that she imposes is really an anti-structure, as her narrative yomps through all manner of subjects. Memories of her childhood and her difficult relationship with her parents are presented in snippets and through little associations woven into the story of the garden. But there is also much light-hearted detail. In Compline (the last of the hours and a time for reflection), for example, she describes the “seven deadly sins” of gardening, including pride, covetousness (“the inordinate longing... for the blackest of black hellebores”) or lust (“how we lust after strapping young gardeners”).

The Morville Hours could easily have been just a whimsical little book, but Swift brings profound knowledge and insight to her story. She reads the landscape like a manuscript, “a palimpsest of texts”, deciphering its history, meaning and joy. The garden itself is a journey through the past, with garden rooms that have been inspired by the story of the house and the people who lived and worked there. There is the cloister garden, in honour of the old priory that once stood at Morville, an Elizabethan knot garden laid out in “swells and washes of pink germander”, a canal garden to evoke the formal gardens of the early 18th century and an Edwardian fruit and vegetable plot. By leading the reader

through these different spaces, Swift subtly imparts her knowledge of many centuries of British horticulture, from Roman vegetable gardens to Victorian rose borders.

Swift adores the winter and the cold – “there is so much more time to look”. Stripped of leaves and blossom, the garden exposes its pure structure and the tiniest details such as the thorns of the roses. She laid out the garden during her first winter at Morville – “a garden of ruler-straight lines... of black and white paper, of moonlight and shadows”. Her vision is in monochrome, when snow, frost and moonlight cast the trees, borders and hedges in their true shapes without distractions. The winter isn’t only an end, she writes, it is also a beginning, “when the frost gets to work to purge it of disease and decay”.

There are no illustrations (except a map of the garden and of Shropshire) and there is no need for glossy photographs, because this is gardening writing at its best. Swift’s prose brings the garden alive in all its details, scents and meaning. Her style is how I imagine the garden to be – evocative, heart-felt and magical.

Andrea Wulf’s *The Brother Gardeners* is published by Heinemann. To order *The Morville Hours* for £16.99 with free UK p&p call Guardian book service on 0870 836 0875 or go to guardian.co.uk/bookshop