

Romke van de Kaa

The accidental gardener who worked at Great Dixter, ran a nursery with Piet Oudolf and is now one of the Netherlands' most respected garden journalists

WORDS JOHN HOYLAND PORTRAIT CHARLIE HOPKINSON

Nothing in my career has been planned," says Romke van de Kaa. "My life has been a series of chance encounters and lucky twists of fortune. Like in a garden, it is sometimes better not to plan too much, to learn how to just let things happen."

Serendipity has taken Romke into beautiful gardens and to work with the great gardening personalities of the past 50 years. He is now a journalist in the Netherlands, and many Dutch gardeners will tell you that they get their gardening advice from Romke's articles.

Although as a child he had a small garden plot of his own Romke was more interested in the wild flora and fauna around the dunes near his home in the Netherlands. He went to university to study marine biology and imagined a life investigating the seas. Love intervened and when his English girlfriend was feeling homesick Romke decided that he should move to Britain.

"This was before the Common Market and I didn't know how I would earn a living," he explains. Since the age of 11, though, he had worked every school holiday in the bulb fields of the Van Tubergen company, so gardening seemed a possibility. "I knew about bulbs and thought maybe I could get work as a gardener so I asked the nurseryman Michael Hoog to give me a letter of recommendation."

Armed with his letter, Romke went to the RHS garden at Wisley and there, by one of the many twists of fate that have marked his career, he met Chris Brickell, a bulb expert who knew Hoog. "I was offered a job to start a few days later working under Ken Aslet, on the rock garden." Aslet was an alpine expert and a great teacher. "Most days after work he walked around the gardens with me until dark, talking about the plants – I was very eager to learn about everything."

A day off from work to visit a village pub in East Sussex that served real ale provided another lucky encounter. "In those days pubs closed during the afternoon so we went to visit a local garden." The village was Northiam and the garden Great Dixter.

"On his hands and knees in the border, with dachshunds sleeping on a tweed jacket on the path, was a gardener. We talked, and I learned that he was a Mr Christopher Lloyd, the owner. Before I left I gave him my address and a few days later I received a letter asking if I would be his head gardener.

"I asked around my colleagues at Wisley about this Mr Lloyd and the only person who had heard of him was Ursula Buchan

who had read a book he had written about clematis. Almost on a whim, I went to work at Dixter."

This was the long, hot summer of 1976. "It was difficult in the garden, all the plants were wilting and on my very first day we had our first clash. Christopher Lloyd loved an argument and so do I, so we were forever arguing and enjoying it. Of course, he had the advantage of being the boss."

During summers of working in the garden and winter nights spent talking plants and playing chess, their working relationship developed into friendship. "We moved from Mr Lloyd, to Mr Christopher to, finally, Christo." While at Great Dixter, Romke became gardening friends with Beth Chatto, Elizabeth Strangman and other luminaries of the plant world. On his days off he visited plant experts David Scott and Valerie Finnis, and talked plants with the horticulturist Martyn Rix. "Yes, I was happy at Dixter but I had my own dreams to pursue and we were both sad when I left."

After a short period working in Ireland, Romke's roots drew him back to the Netherlands. "I missed the language, I missed the intellectual challenge of using a language well and I wanted to write." Romke had started writing articles for *Amateur Gardening* and now back in the Netherlands became a full-time garden writer, offering gardening advice.

In the 1980s an encounter with a young garden architect, Piet Oudolf, resulted in the pair setting up a plant nursery, which soon led the rising interest in grasses and herbaceous perennials, becoming a Mecca for gardeners. The nursery could not contain two strong-headed, larger-than-life personalities, so the pair parted company and Romke set up his own nursery and began to focus on his journalism.

"Writing can be lonely, but what I miss are not the plants or the gardens but the people," he says. My work with plants has brought me into contact with wonderful, interesting people, many of whom are now friends. And it is their friendships that I am most happy about." □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Romke's writing at romkevandekaa.nl and turn the page to read his feature on the Goldhoorn Gardens in the Netherlands.

NEXT MONTH Chilean landscape designer Juan Grimm.

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