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The Casual Gardener

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Save money by making your own festive decorations

MONEY tight this Christmas? You don't have to spend a fortune on ready-made festive decorations – materials from your garden, and a bit of creativity, might be all you need...

Which plants to use: "Dogwood (cornus) has brilliantly adaptable and strikingly coloured stems, perfect to add structure to a display or create a simple wreath base," says Sarah Squire, chair of Squire's Garden Centres (squiresgardencentres.co.uk).

Forage for foliage: There are many options when it comes to foliage, says Squire, including variegated holly, Ilex aquifolium 'Variegata', which provides a wonderful blend of colour. "Variegated ivy with green and white/cream-coloured leaves may be found in abundance at this time of year and, when it carries berries, it lends added interest to a display," she adds.

Craft a super centrepiece: If you don't have access to outside space but are planning on having a real Christmas tree, keep hold of the bottom branches that you trim to fit it in the stand. Or if you have Christmas bouquets, the greenery such as eucalyptus or pine usually survives longer than flowers and can be kept for tablescaping, suggests flower expert Caroline Grimble of Bloom & Wild (bloomandwild.com). "Pine cones too can add interest to a table and if you're feeling crafty, they can be sprayed in gold, silver or bright colours to pop among the green foliage. Foliage down the middle of a rectangular table or the centre of a circular or square table is going to elevate your tablescape from familiar to festive in moments," she says.

Include floral baubles: Put dried flowers in clear glass open mouth baubles for stunning tree decorations, which will cost less than anything in stores, says Mary-Anne Da'marzo, founder of Soho-based preserved flower shop The Last Bunch (thelastbunch.com). "Instead of putting tea lights in them, add in festive dried flowers and branches. You can keep them loose or use a glue gun to create designs and fix in place."

Create a festive look with tiny bouquets: Creating tiny dried bouquets is a great way to add versatility to your festive theme and can easily be made using cut flowers from your garden, says Da'marzo. "Thread twine through the stems and hang them on your Christmas tree, intersperse them throughout wreaths, or mantel decorations, or just dot them around your Christmas table – these also make stunning gifts and you can make miniature Christmas cards to go alongside them."

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Dare to be Wild

John Manley

A new book from a Chelsea gold medal winner aims to put nature at the heart of our gardens...

WEXFORD-BORN garden designer Mary Reynolds was a mere 28 years old in 2002 when she was awarded a gold medal at the Chelsea Flower Show for her garden, Tearmann Sí - A Celtic Sanctuary.

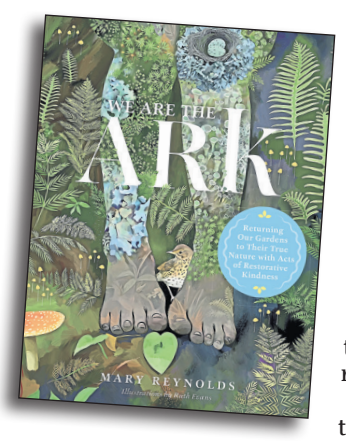
Her naturalistic creation, enclosed by a weathered drystone wall, drew its inspiration from, among other things, the Hill of Tara and elements of Celtic mythology.

The story of her award-winning garden and Mary's subsequent campaigning was the subject of the 2016 film, *Dare to be Wild*, which by her own admission didn't merit any Oscar nominations.

The film, described by one critic as "sappy in every sense", casts our heroine as an outsider who succeeds against all odds to convince Chelsea's conservative judges that a wild garden can match and even surpass the more conventional designs that normally win the plaudits. In recent years, the style Mary pioneered two decades ago has become fashionable but if anything she is now even more of an outsider.

She tells *The Irish News* how she's "been talking myself out of a job for years" by spurning the corporate sponsorship and big money deals enjoyed by many of her contemporaries and instead focussing on a style of gardening that jettisons the usual rules about controlling nature.

In her latest book, Mary explains the epiphany she underwent one day after watching wildlife being displaced from a nearby building site that was being cleared by a digger.



"I had done this myself so many times, in so many places," she writes.

"For more than 20 years I had been working all over the world as a garden designer, carrying out similar unconscious devastation everywhere I worked."

In response, she founded 'We are the ARK', a movement whose message about restoring nature's place at the heart of every garden now has global reach – "from a window box in Norway to a thousand-acre ranch in Texas".

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"So many people feel kind of hopeless and overwhelmed by the mess we've made of the planet and our very simple message is to start with your own patch."

Mary no longer has time for cultivars and non-natives, and instead advocates gardening using solely indigenous flora.

It's a radical idea but one that doesn't rely on compromise in the way many gardens and gardeners who claim green credentials do.

"They've tried their hardest to get me to be part of the greenwash," she says of the horticulture companies who've sought her endorsement. "I don't know how much money I've been offered to be a corporate puppet, but I refuse to take it because I know how much trouble we're in."

Her new book – also called *We Are The ARK* – is a beautifully illustrated (by Ruth Evans) guide to what vital steps you must take if you are to embrace the group's restorative ideals.

Whether it's a private garden or a public park, any patch can be transformed into a sanctuary, which when combined with others in the network has the potential to stretch right around the world.

"People really love their gardens, and I don't want them to feel like I'm attacking them," says Mary.

"I'm just offering an alternative – and if you want to be part of the solution, this is the alternative."

■ **We Are The Ark by Mary Reynolds is published by Timber Press.**