

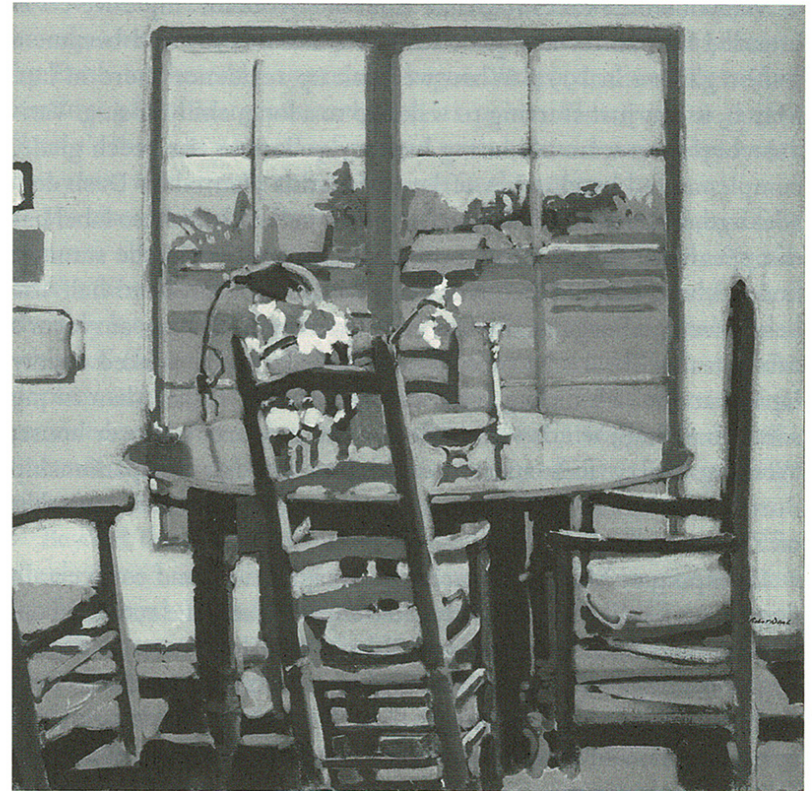
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Nine Months at Madoo

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On 26 March 2020 I should have been touring the Vatican museums, part of a nine-day trip to see the gardens of Rome and Lazio. Instead, my partner Kendell and I moved to the headquarters of the trip's sponsor, the Madoo Conservancy in Sagaponack, Long Island, New York, after quickly renting out our nearby house in the early days of the pandemic. Kendell had been furloughed from his job, and it was uncertain whether public gardens such as Madoo, where I have been director for eleven years, would be deemed non-essential,

not to mention where our next donation might come from. At the very least, I thought, I could keep the two-acre garden going myself if I worked on it a few hours every day. And so we packed our bags for an unplanned adventure.

Madoo, which takes its name from old Scots for ‘my dove’, was founded by painter and poet Robert Dash in 1967 and became a public garden in 1994. When we took up residence there in late March, it was just starting to wake up to a long, chilly spring. Various corylopsis were blooming buttery yellow in the beech glade, complemented by clutches of large daffodils planted by Dash decades ago, along with my favourite yellow hellebore, whose label has disappeared (‘Yellow Lady’ perhaps). Our routine in the summer house where Dash, a frequent HORTUS contributor, lived half the year developed organically. An early twentieth-century surveyor’s table in the library became Kendell’s desk, and I worked on my laptop at the oak dining table in Dash’s chair, rather than in my somewhat drab, windowless office in the property’s winter house. Working thirty feet apart created just enough companionship during the workday, but also privacy for an ever-increasing number of Zoom meetings.

Glamping at Madoo captured our imagination, and to a certain degree, we felt like the castaways on *Gilligan’s Island*, the 1960s sitcom that we had both watched as children. Marilee Foster, a farmer whose land lies adjacent to the garden, opened her produce stand early to accommodate demand from New York City’s Covid-19 refugees, who had descended on the Hamptons in droves. We stockpiled enough potatoes to end the Irish famine and made dinners from a *New York Times* recipe supplement clunkily titled ‘One Pot Pan Skillet’, including the now-trendy shakshouka (we used home-made oven-roasted-tomato sauce that I had frozen the previous September). Printed only a month before the pandemic hit, the supplement became our gastronomic bible, as we had left all our cookery books at home.

Between cooking and searching for lavatory paper in local shops, I recast the budget that our board had approved several months earlier. Out went revenues from programming and our annual sum-

mer benefit, and I reluctantly furloughed our two part-time employees. With enough belt-tightening, I predicted we could survive into the fourth quarter of 2021. And then a large donation in support of our hedge rebuild, two years in the works, magically arrived. A few design tweaks resulted in savings that we could apply to an adjacent project in the quincunx beds, which had been planned by Dash in the early 1990s and begun a slow decline. Cleared of random plant materials and past-its-prime *Chamaecyparis pisifera* ‘Aurea’, they are now crisply edged with box and punctuated with five yews, one at each corner and one in the centre.

We also decided to renovate the long border, a two hundred foot expanse that runs next to the quincunx beds and overlooks the Foster farm. Knowing that the poplars he had planted wouldn’t last terribly long on the windswept east end of Long Island, Dash added whips of *Fagus sylvatica* ‘Dawyck Gold’ for posterity. The last of the poplars went down about three years ago, and shortly thereafter we removed an Italian alder that was shading out a *Magnolia campbellii*. Some of the lesser beech have been transferred into the new hedge planting across the way.

Beyond the kitchen window, where Cockey and Claudia the cardinals flitted at a birdfeeder every day, the garden started to grow by leaps and bounds. Memorably described by Dash as having ‘English Bones, American Flesh’ [see HORTUS 4], Madoo is a heavily planted, romantic environment. (Much of it, including the potager, laburnum arbour and a multitude of golden-hued plants, owe their inspiration to Dash’s longtime gardening cohort Rosemary Verey at Barnsley House in Gloucestershire.) Every year, I promise myself that I’ll give the *Philadelphus coronarius* ‘Aureus’ a rejuvenating prune, although the anticipation of the intense fragrance is too great. Perhaps one spring I will content myself with the intoxicating late-May perfume of the lily-of-the-valley outside Dash’s painting studio and haul out the loppers. Meanwhile, we kept trying new potato recipes to use up our stash, which prompted Kendell to seek out a vegetable-gardening book in the library and learn how to grow more. Before I knew it, he had commandeered two sections of the potager, chopped up the Foster potatoes, and planted the eyes of

the purple ones in one section and the white ones in the other. By late August, we were potato-rich again.

A patch of brick adjacent to the potager became our go-to cocktail terrace. Decorated in a loose, Provençal style with a few metal garden chairs, a vintage *bowdab*, and a square terracotta pot with a slab of bluestone on top to form a table, it served as command central for socially distanced summer entertaining. In addition to several large pots of pelargoniums, I filled the shelves of a French metal plant stand with every variety of scented-leafed pelargonium that I could find, arranging them among Dash's collection of Victorian glass cloches.

As the weather warmed, the secret garden – a courtyard dating from Madoo's earliest days – doubled as our outdoor dining room. A bright green bistro table and two shocking-yellow garden chairs felt right at home in this lushly planted corner, punctuated by a *Rosa* 'Dortmund' that snakes its way around a blue pillar topped by a yellow finial. Newly inspired by the exotic garden at Great Dixter, the secret garden now features three seven-foot-tall *Dicksonia antarctica*, Martagon lilies, a fountain planted with papyrus, filipendula, several variegated abutilons, a trio of bronzed *Ensete ventricosum* and a clump of musas between a pair of *Sambucus nigra* 'Black Lace', among other completely fantastical plantings. Indoors, viewed from the bentwood double rocker through the picture window in the red living room, the scene seems to have been painted by Rousseau – sans lion.

In June, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo started opening up businesses in stages, with cultural institutions, including Madoo, coming in last. But after self-identifying as a botanical garden, we were able to open by appointment only, with the requisite masking restrictions, Covid-19 questionnaires, and bottles of hand sanitiser at the ready. Soon I was running up to the entrance seemingly every hour of the day to greet guests, bring them inside the painting studio to see our exhibition of Robert Dash prints, and give them a brief history of Madoo before sending them off on their way into the garden. It was nice to think that people could experience Madoo all by themselves, and in return the garden made dozens of new

friends, including many local Hamptonites who had driven by our sign for twenty-five years and always wondered what Madoo was.

Those first guests saw the garden at its frothiest. The 'Paul's Himalayan Musk' rose was in full bloom, its dainty blossoms massed in heaps on a plumbing-pipe arbour painted the palest lavender. Not far away, a tangle of *Rosa* 'Golden Showers' and *Clematis* 'Étoile Violette' – a classic Dash combo – were flowering in sync (as they have for decades) and clambering over our potting shed, really a lean-to with a bright green door and two tiny windows. To celebrate our twenty-ninth anniversary, Kendell and I enjoyed our first outdoor, pandemic-era dinner at a local French bistro. During a trip to London in 2019, we had admired a painting of the walled garden at Fulham Palace at Alfies Antique Market in Lisson Grove, and it seemed an appropriate nod to the days when we could pack our bags and take off for a long weekend at a moment's notice. I had it shipped to Madoo, where we hung it in the green bathroom; it now graces our foyer at home.

During this time, the hedge rebuild began in earnest. The old hedgerow on Madoo's western flank had been ignominiously removed by new neighbours, who built a gaudy Hamptons mansion with a garage in the shape of a silo. Our first move was to install a six-foot-tall wooden fence on the property line, then plant a row of twenty-one *Tilia cordata* hard up against it. They will soon form an aerial hedge and obscure the offending edifice next door. In front of the flying hedge, four tapestry-hedged garden rooms are planned, which will echo the quincunx beds across the way. The new barrier is bookended on the south by a trio of *Fagus sylvatica* 'Dawyck Purple' and on the north by a mix of trees transplanted from other parts of the garden. Out of adversity, said our Founding Father Benjamin Franklin, comes opportunity.

As the towering native Martagon lilies (*Lilium superbum*) were putting on their show in the sunken garden, we held our first 'Madoo and You' event. No longer able to raise funds from large gatherings, we had devised a programme of small, private parties for two to twenty-five people, each for a reasonable rental fee and not nearly as much of a headache as big June weddings. The kickoff:

a seventieth-birthday party for a neighbour's mother in the magnolia bosque, a dreamy space where nine different varieties of magnolias encircle a huge Marc Newsom-designed marble table on a carpet of crushed granite. Around the same time, we also started broadcasting an informal series of two-minute *Madoo Moments* videos on IGTV, which chronicle my activities in the garden and have commanded a following on the 'gram, extending our reach further than before.

Colour became Madoo's *raison d'être* in the 1980s, as Dash would paint a gate or a door a bright hue that contrasted with whatever plant was in bloom nearby – or just because he felt like it. From swaths of brown cedar shingle and white trim, Madoo evolved into a brightly-hued wonderland, although never too much and seldom including orange. I started to expand on Dash's palette in the plant world and broke ranks with a beautiful orange geum next to a vivid fuchsia-coloured tree peony and, in the cutting garden (verboten in Dash's day), the charming *Dablia* 'Totally Tangerine'. Some spidery *Eremurus* 'Romance', planted the previous autumn, surprised us with eight-foot-tall racemes of the palest orange, and another fresh jolt came in the form of the perfectly cupped, richly apricot English rose 'Crown Princess Margarita'. Planted in oversize, bright blue *caisses de Versailles* outside the painting studio, they flooded the garden's entrance with their fruity scent.

I sometimes fret over the lack of perfection at Madoo – bricks occasionally stray out of place, and delayed topiary shearing draws my ire – but I find comfort in the comment of a friend who, upon returning from a garden tour in England a few years ago, said that her favourite gardens were those with the fewest gardeners and a looser feeling. The best thing about imperfection is that it allows for experimentation, such as planting the wickedly named *Sarracinia* 'Dana's Delight' in a lovely fluted basin – without a drainage hole. I had been fascinated by carnivorous plants since boyhood, but had never grown them. The beautifully striped, snakelike tubes even yielded surprisingly delicate blossoms in their mini-bog-like container.

Spending most of every day at Madoo – we had an irrational fear of leaving the property and generally combined a week's worth of

errands into single outings – left me with more time than ever to make the small improvements I had always thought about, but never implemented. The fruits of my labours paid off when I moved two ersatz eight-foot-tall tuteurs made of rebar into the potager in the spring. At their base, I planted sweet peas and *Ipomoea alba* grown from seed. The sweet peas were my most successful ever, greedily climbing the frames and providing vases full of blossoms for the summer house. By the time they petered out, the moonflower was gaining steam, fully cloaking the towers in emerald green leaves in mid-August. The zigzag yew hedge, on the other hand, continued to vex me. The zigs and zags created perfect triangles for *Fritillaria raddeana* in the spring, but the astilbe just didn't cut it in the dark shade of summer. I'll have to wait and see how the *Anemone* 'Honorine Jobert' that I planted last autumn performs this year.

In the early autumn, we had planned a dinner for my brother and his family, which is when the third of the stove's four burners gave out. (The oven on the ancient range bit the dust in July, when Kendell was between batches of homemade chocolate-chip cookies.) My nephew's eyes nearly popped out of his head when he saw the electric burner burst into flames. It was finally time to order a new stove, particularly since we were nearing the end of outdoor barbecue season. At Thanksgiving, we dined à deux in the red library, grateful for our health, the beauty of autumn at Madoo, and the new oven, in which we cooked a turkey roulade and roasted parsnips.

I didn't get the garlic into the potager in time, but somewhere on Instagram I came across someone who was planting garlic in pots, so at the moment, pots of garlic are randomly scattered about the potting shed, along with a big copper tub I filled with *Tulipa* 'Prinses Irene', my absolute favourite tulip, for its subtle purple flames on orange petals and the unmistakable fragrance of saffron. When they're ready to bloom I'll polish up the copper and tuck in a few 'Tiger Eye' violas here and there. I have wildly high hopes for this container.

Our tenants were due to vacate our house by 15 December, so I drove to Amagansett to order a Christmas tree. And then our tenants asked for an extension through to the end of the month. So up

went the tree in the library at Madoo, which we decorated somewhat naively with pomanders, ribbon bows and garlands strung with popcorn and cranberries. (All our ornaments were in storage.) Covid cases had started spiking again, and new restrictions on social gatherings meant a somewhat condensed form of Merry Madoo, our annual holiday market. This year, caroling by local school-children and roasted chestnuts were not to be, but our curbside-pickup Santa Stand was a hit. All the potted paperwhites, lady apple pomanders with velvet ribbons, and fresh-cut evergreen boughs from the garden sold out in less than three hours.

One day toward the end of our stay, we woke to a magical snow-fall. All my horticultural concerns disappeared under the white eiderdown, which amplified the pops of colour on the buildings and outdoor furniture and articulated the lovely silhouettes of the trees and shrubs. It was a true winter wonderland. When our tenants finally moved out, we were surprised to find ourselves a bit hesitant about returning to our own house. 'Are you crazy? Go home – it's time!', one of our board members said to me. And with those words ringing in our ears, we packed up our clothes, cooking equipment, and even the beautiful candy-striped *Amaryllis* 'Tosca' that had started blooming in mid-December. It went into the dining room and made it through to Valentine's Day weekend, a lingering memento from our nine months at Madoo.

Page 59: *Spring Dining*, 1972. By Robert Dash, acrylic on canvas.

Articles by or about Robert Dash
appeared in HORTUS numbers 4, 19, 22 and 108.

Madoo and Alejandro Saralegui were featured in Episode 1 of *Monty Don's American Gardens*, first shown on British television in January 2020 and available via various digital outlets.