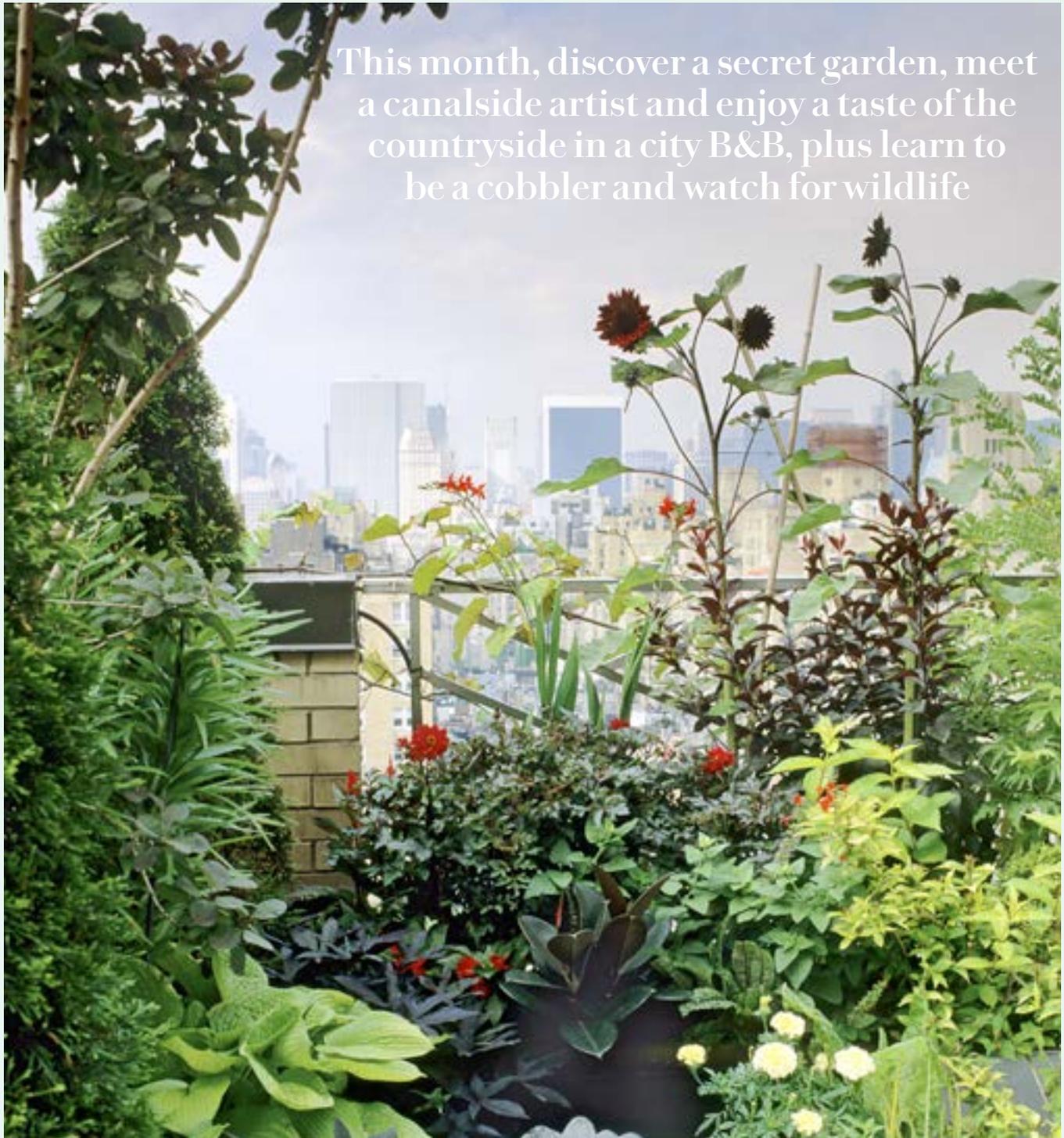


country in the city

URBAN VILLAGES • GREEN SPACES • GROWERS & MAKERS

This month, discover a secret garden, meet a canalside artist and enjoy a taste of the countryside in a city B&B, plus learn to be a cobbler and watch for wildlife



COMPILED BY RUTH CHANDLER AND LOUISE ELLIOTT



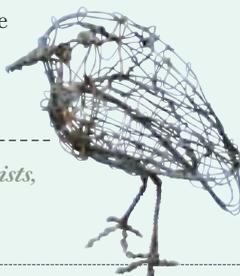
FOLLOW THE CREATIVE TRAIL
Artists' Colony, London

Tiny Johnsons Island in Brentford, West London, provides a rich source of inspiration for Dianne Preston.



From her home on a 45-foot narrowboat, she loves to sketch, photograph and observe the birds she imaginatively captures in her wirework and papier-mâché creations. "Swans, herons, coots, moorhens, geese and kingfishers can all be spotted here, alongside wagtails, robins and wrens," she says. Recycled and reclaimed wire is a favourite material, artistically twisted by hand to form each characterful shape, while bases for many of the pieces are salvaged from the nearby boatyard.

Dianne is part of a flourishing colony of 16 different sculptors, painters, photographers and artisans who work on this intriguing secret island. Based around Brentford Gallery, which is housed inside an early-Victorian brick building, their wooden studios look onto the shimmering canal, with houseboats and trees casting beautiful reflections. This proximity to nature influences much of the output – although artists may have to sandbag their doorsteps against particularly high tides. Alongside Dianne's avian artworks, Sarah Stanley produces original mosaics and ceramics in tranquil, watery shades. "Being on the island is a joy," Dianne says. "I'm inspired by the environment and my fellow artists." This vibrant community holds two special open days a year but visits at other times can be made by appointment. As you cross over the footbridge from Catherine Wheel Road just off the busy high street, you will enter a very different world – and one you might not want to leave.



For more about the island and the individual artists, visit johnsonsislandartists.com. Find details of Dianne's work at dianne-preston.com.

ESCAPE THE HUSTLE AND BUSTLE
Duke House, Cambridge



"The apple juice we serve is from Watergull Orchards in Wisbech and pressed locally, while our marmalade is made by my mother-in-law"

Liz Cameron offers a true taste of country living in the heart of Cambridge, not just through the breakfast ingredients, which include organic granola from a local baker's, free-range eggs and, occasionally, home-baked gammon, but also in the rose-patterned china on which they are served, and the setting: Shaker-style cupboards, an open fire and rustic brick floor. The four guest bedrooms of her boutique townhouse B&B are elegantly furnished in a pale relaxing palette and come complete with goose-down duvets and pillows, while the embroidered linen furnishings and cool Paint Library shades of the sitting room provide an ideal place in which to plot excursions to the city's botanical gardens, a punt down the river Cam or simply a wander in Christ's Pieces, a Victorian park opposite Duke House. **Double B&B from £120 (sawdays.co.uk).**

TRY A TRADITIONAL SKILL
Cobbling

On this one-day workshop, you'll learn the ancient art of creating your own pair of shoes.

Nook & Willow, 2c, 36 Seel Street, Liverpool; 15 and 19 March; 12 and 23 April 2014; £80 (0870 9619030; darlingcollective.com).



VISIT A COMMUNITY GARDEN
Hillside Harvest,
Sheffield



This allotment is tended by 13 families and several associate members aiming to grow food and provide a habitat for wildlife in the Rivelin Valley on the edge of Sheffield. "In the government building where I work, we save food waste to compost at Hillside," says Nick Rousseau, who, with his wife Eleanor, founded the cooperative in 2009. It now has six allotments, and in 2013 they cultivated 536 kilos of produce, shared between members. Throughout this year, the team hope to extend the season in the polytunnel, and plan to grow dozens of crops, from squash and strawberries to sunflowers. *For more info and how to get involved, call 0114 250 1406 or see hillsideharvest.org.uk.*

Hillside Harvest is a member of the Federation of City Farms & Community Gardens, CL's Charity of the Year. Find out how to support it by calling 0117 923 1800 or visiting farmgarden.org.uk.



SEEK OUT A GREEN SPACE
The Plantation Garden, Norwich

Just a stone's throw from the city centre of Norwich lies a hidden green gem that even many residents don't know about. The Plantation Garden was established more than 100 years ago by prosperous upholsterer Henry Trevor, who transformed an abandoned chalk quarry into a horticultural treasure with a Gothic-style fountain, Italianate terrace, serpentine woodland walkways and an elegant palm house. After his death in 1897, it fell into ruin but was rediscovered 25 years ago, since when a dedicated band of volunteers has been working to restore it to its former glory. Tucked away behind the Roman Catholic Cathedral (look for the sign on Earlham Road) and covering three acres, its sunken setting helps to shut out noise, together with the tall horse chestnut trees and conifers that edge the boundaries. Step inside in springtime and you'll discover bluebells, hellebores, primroses and narcissi, while the rock fernery is at its finest as the graceful fronds begin to unfurl and a Victorian bedding scheme of wallflowers, tulips and hyacinths comes into full bloom. If you visit on a Sunday afternoon from April onwards, save room for tea and cake.

For more details, see plantationgarden.co.uk.



BE A CITY NATURALIST
Flora and fauna
in urban areas
*What to look for
this month*

RED FOX An urban and country dweller, this wild dog is most easily sighted after rush hour on bin-collection day when, under the cover of darkness, it emerges from scrubby and wooded areas to scavenge.

COWSLIP Look for signs of the rare yellow flower emerging over the coming weeks in any old, undisturbed grassland such as a churchyard. In a mild spring, it will begin to appear from the beginning of March.

PEREGRINE In recent years, this member of the falcon family has chosen nesting sites in cities on high buildings such as cathedrals, where there is also a ready supply of pigeons for food. It will be returning this month – listen for its screech-like call and look up at ledges to spot it.

Find your nearest urban nature reserve by visiting wildlifetrusts.org.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALAMY; CRISTIAN BARNETT; GAPPHOTOS; ANDREW MONTGOMERY; ILLUSTRATIONS BY JO BIRD

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SAVOUR NATURE'S FLAVOURS
Organic flour from Green's Mill

Windmill Lane, Sneinton, Nottingham. Open Wednesday-Sunday, 10am-4pm (0115 915 6878; nottinghamcity.gov.uk)

Ground in a 19th-century windmill in Nottingham, from wheat grown just 11 miles away at biodynamic Hungary Lane Farm, this flour is a storecupboard staple with strong environmental credentials. The range includes a white wheat variety (which won a Soil Association Organic Food Award in 2013), wholemeal wheat (awarded in 2012), spelt and medium oatmeal. Green's Mill, run by a charity and owned by the city council, welcomes visitors and sells its produce in its shop. www.green-mill.org.uk