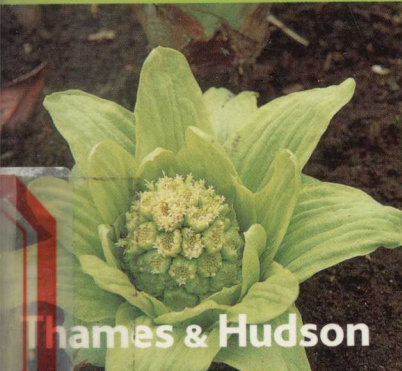




URSULA BUCHAN

Garden People

VALERIE FINNIS & THE GOLDEN AGE OF GARDENING



Thames & Hudson



30805009

Garden People

VALERIE FINNIS & THE GOLDEN AGE OF GARDENING

Ursula Buchan

with Anna Pavord
and Brent Elliott

with 229 colour illustrations



Thames & Hudson

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Valerie Finnis
(31 October 1924 to 17 October 2006) – mentor and friend.

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First published in the United Kingdom in 2007 by
Thames & Hudson Ltd, 181A High Holborn, London WC1V 7QX
www.thamesandhudson.com

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Photographs © 2007 Valerie Finnis (page 134) © Howard Sooley
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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-0-500-51353-8
ISBN-10: 0-500-51353-8

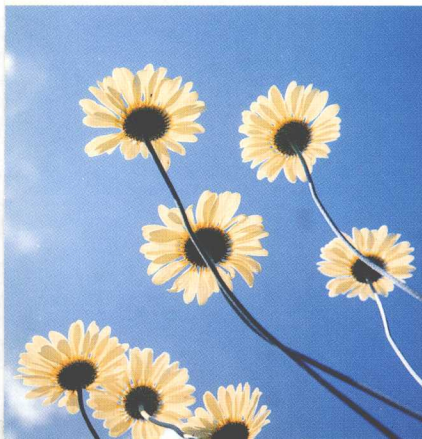
Printed and bound in China by Imago

Front endpapers *Papaver rhoeas* 'Fairy Wings'.
Back endpapers *Papaver nudicaule* 'Constance Finnis'.

Half-title One of Valerie's exuberant arrangements of flowers and fruit gathered from The Dower House garden in August, including lilies, roses, *Kniphofia*, asters, gentians and colchicums.

Title-page Valerie Finnis gardening, at the family home in Reigate, most unusually in a dress.

Below, left to right *Anthemis tinctoria*, Valerie and David wedding in The Dower House garden, with Kate the pug; a leaf of *Macleaya cordata*, the Plume Poppy; Constance Finnis, hoeing the vegetables in her garden in Reigate, with Posy the pug; *Petasites japonicus* var. *giganteus*; Sir David Scott, aged 90, scything in the garden at The Dower House.



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CONTENTS

introduction A LIFELONG FASCINATION 6

I

THE EDUCATION OF A GARDENER 22

II

COUNTRY HOUSE & COTTAGE GARDEN 58

III

A PASSION FOR PLANTS 96

VALERIE FINNIS: GARDENER AND PHOTOGRAPHER 134

Anna Pavord

GARDEN LIVES 140

Brent Elliott

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 160

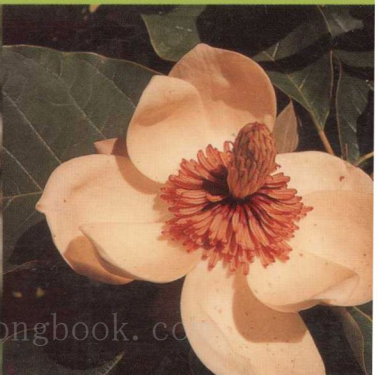
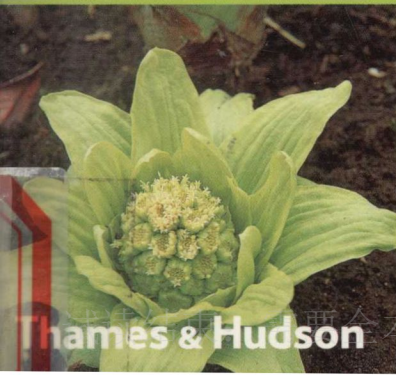




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VALERIE FINNIS & THE GOLDEN AGE OF GARDENING



Thames & Hudson

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Alongside the dungarees-and-digging Finnis, there existed a completely different Finnis, actressy, mischievous, a woman who adored gossip and outrageous hats. She joined the exclusive circle of People who kept Pugs, the last of her pug dogs a beguiling barrel-shaped creature called Sophie. She knew most of the people who mattered in the gardening world and many of them were invited to the Dower House, where they would usually be photographed and asked to write in one of her extraordinary scrap-books.

She had a knack for engineering spectacular fallings-out with people, a process she thoroughly enjoyed. She was a great chronicler of her age and a terrific letter writer. I've kept every one she sent me.

ANNA PAVORD, author of *The Tulip* and *The Naming of Names*





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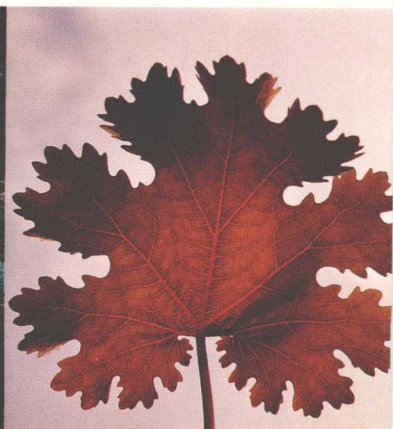
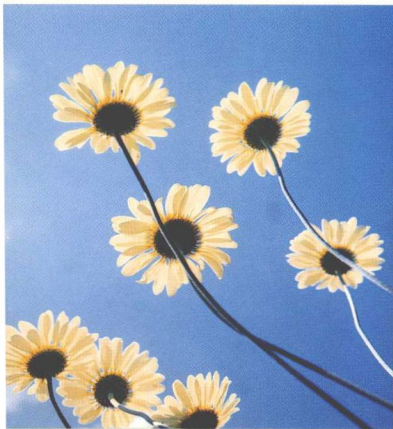
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A PASSION FOR PLANTS 96

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introduction A LIFELONG FASCINATION

When Valerie Finnis acquired her first proper camera in 1955, she began a lifelong fascination with capturing on film both the plants she loved and her wide and eclectic circle of horticulturally inclined contemporaries and friends. Over the course of almost four decades, until the 1990s, she assembled a truly astonishing archive of pictures, mainly on 2½-inch square transparencies – some 50,000 in total. The vast majority were taken with a Rolleiflex camera, given to her by Wilhelm Schacht, a good friend, who was himself an accomplished flower photographer and the Curator of the Munich Botanical Garden.

The photographs have a remarkable quality, the result of Valerie's almost preternatural powers of observation, coupled with an ebullient personality and an ability to connect with her subjects, and they provide an evocative record of a world which now seems strangely distant from our own. Despite the growth in professional garden photography and advances in both techniques and technology, Valerie is still acknowledged by modern practitioners of the art as one of the finest plant photographers that there has ever been, and a strong influence on those who came after her. She was notable for a 'natural' style, particularly evident in her collections of flowers, gathered from her garden in every season of the year. Her formidable talents as a gardener, her encyclopaedic knowledge of plants, and her 'eye' combined to produce a highly individual body of work, with great charm and immediate appeal.

Valerie Finnis was born in Crowborough in Sussex on 31 October 1924, the second of two daughters of Commander





Previous page (above) Sir David Scott at The Dower House, aged 90, with Old Roses from his garden – behind him is a magnificent *Carpenteria californica* planted in 1911; (below, left to right) April flowers, including dwarf narcissi and *Anemone pavonina*; July flowers with *Phlox* 'Chatahoochee', garden pinks and *Clematis* 'Bill Mackenzie'; an arrangement picked on Christmas Eve, with *Correa*, *Petasites* and *Prunus subhirtella* 'Autumnalis'.

Above Valerie's mother, Constance, and her pug, Posy, in her garden at Martinhoe, Reigate.

Opposite Valerie named many plants after friends and family: on the left is a strain of Iceland poppy, *Papaver nudicaule* 'Constance Finnis' and on the right, a garden pink, *Dianthus* 'Constance Finnis'.

Steriker and Constance Finnis. Her mother was a talented and keen gardener whose name lives on in a strain of Iceland poppies, *Papaver nudicaule* 'Constance Finnis', as well as a dianthus (garden pink); her father was a naval officer who retired early from the service. By the age of five, the family was settled in Earlswood, near Reigate in Surrey, and the young Valerie had already shown a precocious interest in gardening, encouraged by her mother, who gave her a little garden to cultivate. From her grandmother she received the double daisy 'Rob Roy' and the advice to 'treat these plants reverently – they're people'.

At boarding school at Hayes Court in Kent, which she attended from the age of 13, Valerie was given a plot to look after. Homesick, she found consolation in gardening, thanks to a friendly head gardener and an enlightened headmistress who recognized her horticultural talents. By her own confession she was not very academic, but was good at sport and, more particularly, drama – perhaps inspired by her teacher, a young actor called Alec Guinness.



The outbreak of war in September 1939 brought this happy situation to an abrupt end. Her father was recalled to the service, which entailed a move to Gosforth, near Newcastle, and life in a block of flats. But Constance made a garden in neglected allotments nearby, helped by Valerie in her holidays. Hayes Court was thought too close to London for safety and was closed; Valerie had to move to Downe House School, near Newbury. Although she was 'shattered' to leave her Hayes Court garden, it was to prove most fortuitous for her future career.

At Downe House Valerie made friends with a young gardener, Mary Young, who allowed her to help her when she should have been playing cricket. Mary had been trained at the Waterperry Horticultural School for Women. The Principal there was the extraordinary Miss Beatrix Havergal, who as a young gardener had laid out the tennis courts at Downe House.

By the time Valerie left school in 1942, Waterperry had been established ten years and, when the subject of Valerie's future





Valerie Finnis spent many years of her life at Waterperry, both as student and teacher: in these three photographs she is seen in her potting shed and among rock plants in the summer uniform of white, short-sleeved shirt and green dungarees.



An uncharacteristically stagey arrangement of early summer flowers (*above*); *opposite* are an early summer composition and an early spring posy. Many of Valerie's best-selling images for cards and calendars were her arrangements of flowers, all picked from her own garden. *Page 15* A collection of jewel-like alpines in 3-inch clay pots, including drabas, dionysias, campanulas and saxifrages. These were the rock plants which Valerie loved the best, and that she grew superlatively well.

career came up, horticulture won over both the women's services and the stage – fortunately for British gardening. She worked first as a trainee gardener, then member of staff for 28 years until 1970, running the Alpine Department, and for many years lived in a flat at the top of Shotover House, near Wheatley, home of Colonel John Miller, who was the Queen's Crown Equerry.

In a book written about Waterperry, Valerie's qualities are affectionately recalled: 'Many former students will admit that, given a choice of departments, they would plump for working in the little Alpine Nursery tucked behind the house ... where Valerie Finnis was in charge. Perhaps it was a soft option physically ... but Valerie Finnis herself ensured that it was an exciting department to be in. Volatile and amusing with a strong histrionic streak, and blessed with a remarkable memory and feeling for plants, she charmed the students as indeed she charmed Miss H.[avergal] in whose eyes she could do no wrong. She was not interested in working for the National

