

Beth Chatto Symposium - Ecological Planting in the 21st Century

30th -31st August 2018

Essex University Colchester Campus

Shelley O'Berg



Introduction

The Symposium that I attended was planned, when Beth Chatto was still alive, to celebrate her 95th birthday and the 40th anniversary of her book 'The Dry Garden'. I wanted to attend as I had read Beth Chatto's book 'The Dry Garden' for the first time a few weeks before I saw the symposium advertised. I was very excited when reading the book due to the way that she writes which is so accessible. I also wondered to myself why I had not read the book earlier! I was even more excited when I saw the symposium advertised as I thought this would give me the perfect opportunity to find out more about Beth's planting philosophy which is still often used today of 'Right plant, right place'.

This report for MPG will cover my objectives for attending, (previously set out to the bursary committee), my own impressions from the symposium and a list of books that were mentioned.

Speakers at the Symposium were...

Marina Christopher – Phoenix Perennial Plants

Olivier Filippi – Plantsman

James Hitchmough – Sheffield University Landscape Department

Peter Janke – Designer and Plantsman

Peter Korn – Plantsman

Dan Pearson – Landscape and Garden Designer

Andi Pettis – Director of Horticulture, The High Line

Cassian Schmidt – Director of Hermannshof Garden, Germany

Midori Shintani – Head Gardener, Tokachi Millennium Forest

Keith Wiley – Gardner and Plantsman, Wildside Nursery

We were also lucky to attend a garden party at Beth Chatto's garden in Essex. I have some photos from this visit, so I will also share those.

Objectives:

1. To keep up to date with the latest practise in Horticulture
 - One of the speakers at the symposium was Marina Christopher, plantswoman and owner of Phoenix Perennial Plants. Marina shared some insights into her growing medium for nursery grown plants. She uses a mixture of loam, grit and peat in her potting composts and finds that this gives the strongest root systems for new plants.
 - Ecological planting designers made a point of saying that they aimed to 'Take nature and enhance it'. Designers are not aiming to directly imitate nature as they realised this is not possible. What they are aiming to do is to recreate the mood and feeling that nature has on people and to use this in their designs.

- Research from Sheffield University Landscape Department and the trials site in Germany at Hermannshoff into perennial plantings for urban landscapes are testing plants for longevity and cost savings for local authorities.
- Much research is going into studying plants growing in their native environments e.g. *Magnolia stellata* has been observed growing in very wet conditions.
- A thick gravel mulch around ecological plantings in urban design is often used to suppress weeds as the dry surface is hostile to weed invasion.
- Trimming of plantings such as sub shrubs mimics the natural environment such as herbivore damage, wind erosion etc.
- In ecological plantings cultivars of wild species are often used as they are usually bigger and stronger than the wild plant.
- Most Mediterranean plants get over irrigated and therefore they often die or are not long lived.
- Ecological designers are thinking about the influence and speed of evolution on the garden. A design will not look the same in 2,3,5 years' time. So, they are designing and planning for change.
- The French are using allelopathy in urban design to avoid the use of chemicals to control pests.
- Coppicing trees in mixed borders to produce multiple stems and bigger leaves. Examples of trees that can be coppiced in this way are *Elaeagnus* 'Quicksilver', *Arbutus*, *Magnolia*, *Cotinus*.
- The use of smaller pots or plugs in planting designs for stronger, longer lived plants with strong root systems.
- Multi layering in design such as layer 1 – Bulbs, layer 2 – Perennials, layer 3 – trees
- Using biomass as ground cover to block light, inhibit weed invasion and prevent soil erosion.

2. To stay informed of ecological horticulture

The RHS report Gardening in a Changing Climate outlines that the UK will probably suffer from longer drier summers and warmer wetter winters. Therefore, it will be interesting to learn from the speakers at the symposium what ideas and insights they have for the future of gardening in the UK.

I found during the conference that there was not much reference to climate change or using these 'ecological plantings' as an offset or antidote to climate change. I have included what I thought was the most appropriate from the speakers on this point.

- German research has shown that economically, in urban design, Perennials are a better choice than bedding.
- We need to be sourcing plants from hot, dry climates and wetter climates to deal with climate change and its effects on plants.
- Dan Pearson mentioned that he had been doing some research into drought tolerant grasses to use in planting design.
- Designers talked about designing gardens for the future not just the here and now or for instant impact. Also, gardens need to be designed for all seasons including benefits for wildlife and pollinators.
- Planting a wide variety of species within a genus will encourage diversity and therefore more resilience in seeds.

- We need to be growing plants that are more adaptable to climate change eg. Californian species.

3. Learn about new plants and planting ideas

The symposium featured speakers from around the world who are 're-imagining ecological planting in both design and practice'. It will be useful to see how the 'right plant, right place' still informs planting design.

My personal thoughts on this, from three of the speakers present, is that designers seem to be manipulating landscapes to suit the plants that they want to grow! Even at Beth Chatto's garden the planting beds were prepared and in the shade border they were even double dug! This challenged my thinking regarding the 'Right plant, right place' ethos...

The new ecological planting in public spaces such as that done by designers James Hitchmough and Nigel Dunnet seem to be the most relevant and closest to Beth Chatto's ethos. Much research is going into these designs and plants, both seed sown and herbaceous plantings, for particular habitats in towns, cities and urban design.

Some other points were

- Growing sub shrubs which have a bigger volume but less surface area so good for a hot, dry climate such as *Santolina*, *Euphorbias*, *Cistus* and *Genista*.
- Seeing gardens as a transient stage, gardens for all seasons.
- Woody plants being essential in design and plantings to create structure in the winter, space and to enhance city climates. Bigger trees can be coppiced.
- Source seeds from at least two different places to support diversity amongst species.

4. Networking opportunities

The symposium offered time for professional networking which should help to spread the word for MPG and may also be beneficial in terms of future employment opportunities.

- My name badge had the MPG name written on it so many people could see who I was representing.
- I was able to meet up with some ex Wisley students and share ideas and thoughts on the symposium speakers.

Afterthoughts

I found the symposium to be very informative and thought provoking. I was most interested and inspired by two talks that were from Horticulturalists who were managing and maintaining designed gardens.

The first was a lady called Midori Shantini who is Head Gardener at Tokachi Millennium Forest in Japan. She is managing a design by Dan Pearson at the forest. She is working very closely with the designer and learning to manage the garden in the most challenging conditions including snow for

several months of the year. The owner of the garden also owns a big newspaper in Japan. He wanted to create the forest to offset his newspaper business. The thought behind the garden and forest is to create a 'Garden that could be sustainable for a thousand years'!

The second speaker that I enjoyed was Andi Pettis who is managing the High Line in New York. This garden was designed by Piet Oudolph a Dutch designer who is well known for his naturalistic style designs. Andi spoke about the challenges of managing and maintaining this garden...

- The planting medium is just 9 inches of engineered soil!
- They do not use any chemicals on the plants but use pheromone traps and other biological methods.
- They have recently started to compost in house and put the compost back onto the beds.
- The herbaceous plants are cut back in March using an army of volunteers.
- They remove the trees when they get too big but nurse the seedlings from these trees to grown up when the larger tree has been removed.

Beth Chatto Garden visit

On the Thursday we were all invited to a garden party at Beth Chatto's garden. It was truly lovely to see the dry garden and shade garden in detail. I was able to admire the tenacity of creating a gravel garden on a car park and the establishments of a range of plants with no irrigation since planting.

I also really enjoyed the coolness and tranquillity within the shade garden and I understood the mood and atmosphere that Beth was trying to create.

We were able to visit the nursery and have a look at the standing bed areas. I found this to be very interesting as a horticulturalist working in public gardens.

Some images from Beth Chatto's Garden



Woodland shade garden



Dry/Gravel garden



Standing beds

Books named in the lectures

- Jennifer Owen – Wildlife in the Garden
- Michael Pollen - 2nd Nature
- Ian Thompson – Ecology, Community, Landscape and Delight