

Gardening: does Britain lead the world?

Forget the anguish of supporting our national sporting teams: **Stephen Lacey** believes that Britain should start being proud of what it is really good at – gardening. Photography by Neil Hepworth

What do you think? Should the British be proud of their gardening heritage, or are we no longer 'a nation of gardeners'? Which countries are better than the UK in developing horticulture and gardening? Write to: Viewpoint, The Garden, 4th Floor, Churchgate, New Road, Peterborough PE1 1TT; email: thegarden@rhs.org.uk; please include a postal address

WE WOULD BE MORE CONSISTENT title winners if we played the world at gardening rather than football (or tennis, or numerous other sports). Shut your eyes and listen to the roar of the crowd as Beth Chatto outfoxes the German perennials team, Andy Sturgeon takes on American contemporary designers, and Jekka McVicar and Medwyn Williams effortlessly dribble past Cameroon with armfuls of perfect herbs and supersized carrots.

I won't pursue this analogy, as it is a bit shaky and I don't know anything about football; I only like penalty shoot-outs. But it seems to me that this outpouring of shared excitement, media coverage and (briefly) national pride that we witness on sporting occasions might be more rewardingly focused on things we are really good at. And is there anything we are better at in Britain than gardening?

A long-lasting history

We take our skill largely for granted, but we should not – it is pretty amazing. The richness and quality of our heritage alone is a marvel. Stick to one letter of the alphabet: Stowe, Stourhead, Sissinghurst, Studley Royal, Sheffield Park, Shute House. One county: Hidcote, Kiftsgate, Westonbirt, Snowhill Manor (Gloucestershire). One region: Bodnant, Portmeirion, Powis Castle (North Wales). Any visitor on a garden tour can still be enchanted and astounded.

This is because, fairly unusually among nations, we have sustained our fascination and creativity over centuries, encouraged by benign microclimates and deep soils, long periods of peace and prosperity, lots of foreign booty-collecting adventures, and a national delight in engaging with nature in a private idyll. In the hands of organisations such as the National Trust, this cornucopia of styles and planting is nurtured as nowhere else.

But we haven't sat on our laurels, spotted or otherwise. The brilliance is everywhere: village shows, the National Gardens Scheme, the John Innes Centre, Great Dixter, Tom Stuart-Smith, roundabouts in Telford, Avon Bulbs, Charles Jencks' Garden of Cosmic Speculation, Garden Organic, David Austin Roses, Penelope Hobhouse, Chelsea Flower Show, the parks in Leeds, blogging from Blackpitts, Chiltern Seeds, RHS Garden Wisley, Keith Wiley...

It is a glorious melting pot of Britishness in which amateurs and professionals, individuals and nursery/commercial/garden teams, hippies and bankers, prisoners and princes, all participate at the highest level, with a great exchange of information, expertise and (in the main) bonhomie.

But what of international competition? Heritage there can also take your breath away – look at Italy alone, with the newly restored Villa d'Este in Tivoli the jewel in its crown. The Dutch and German nurseries are leviathans. And surveying the contemporary creative scene – German garden festivals, Swedish garden design, French annual planting, Dutch perennial planting, American landscape architecture, the gardens of Steve Martino in Arizona and Fernando Caruncho in Spain... It is obvious that the British cannot spend too much time idly preening.

Yet, worldwide, we are still (for the moment) viewed as the leading nation of garden-makers, and now, as we emerge from our long infatuation with Arts and Crafts gardening into a new chapter of modern design, we ought to be able to find plenty of inspiration to keep us moving imaginatively forward.

Raucous chanting is probably not the way to celebrate our achievements and spur on our practitioners. But neither should we bury our prowess in British reserve. Gardening is a deeply ingrained part of our national identity and we should sing about it a lot more at home and abroad as a sharing of our culture and affection for our planet – and, if we can make some financial gain from it in the process, well there is no harm in that.

So, let Downing Street fly the flag for our horticultural research, commercial and garden tourism industries. Let the BBC, which mysteriously but studiously eschews showing our great gardens and interviewing our great garden-makers in favour of surprise-surprise makeovers, make some proper programmes to market here and abroad. And let us gardeners spread the word quietly among the unenlightened – starting with any sports supporters in need of some patriotic feel-good therapy. ■

Stephen Lacey is a garden writer and designer

Long considered 'a nation of gardeners', the British should still feel substantial national pride in their gardening prowess, suggests Stephen Lacey