

Dear Mrs Chatto

The Beth Chatto Gardens celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. Roy Lancaster pays a visit and renews his friendship with a fellow gardening legend. Photography by Tim Sandall

COMBINED KNOWLEDGE

Roy Lancaster and Beth Chatto enjoy an autumn afternoon talking plants, in the garden on which Beth and her late husband began work some 50 years ago

MY FIRST LETTER TO the now celebrated gardener, plantswoman, author, nurserywoman and friend, Beth Chatto, began on a rather formal note. It was written in 1972 and, though I was aware of her work and passion for plants, I had yet to meet her, and would not dream of being overfamiliar. I was Curator of the Hillier Arboretum in Hampshire and was eager to learn of the 'Unusual Plants' being offered by her nursery, which she had started just six years earlier. Mrs Chatto replied, by return post, enclosing a catalogue and an invitation to 'come and see my garden if ever you are this way'. It was an opportunity I gratefully accepted, not once but several times over the years, as a result of which our friendship grew and our correspondence became more relaxed.

I reminded her of this in October last year when I visited to discuss her plants and her 2.4ha (6 acre) garden, which this year celebrates its 50th anniversary. I arrived earlier than expected and waited in the relatively new teahouse while a search was made for Beth, who had been seen heading into the garden with a basket. Shortly after, she appeared, her basket filled with bunches of a small pinkish red grape. In her inimitable way she greeted me while selecting a sample from the basket, inviting me to taste them. They had a slight musky flavour, some claim of strawberries, which I recognised as belonging to *Vitis* 'Fragola', a hybrid we once grew at Hillier Nurseries.

I suggested that we settle ourselves in a quiet place where we could talk and reminisce. She chose a seat on the small private paved terrace close to her house, beneath one of the finest examples of golden larch from China (*Pseudolarix amabilis*) that I have seen in Britain. It was a well-shaped tree, the branches of its spreading crown studded with cones, reminding me of small yellow-green globe artichokes, while abundant rosettes of narrow leaves were quietly turning from green to gold; those already fallen provided a rich carpet on the ground.

'Andrew and I bought it together over 40 years ago,'

said Beth, referring to her late husband whose almost lifelong interest in plant ecology – especially his research into where our garden plants grow in the world's wild places – had a major impact on Beth's approach to gardening and gardens.

'We had enough land to plant some significant trees and, given that we already had 300-year-old oaks as features on the boundary of the water meadow, it was no good just planting laburnums and cherries and lilacs, as they would have been too small and out of scale,' she said. 'So we planted golden larch, swamp cypress (*Taxodium*), dawn redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*), tulip tree (*Liriodendron*) and others, which are vast now and add a nobility to the garden.' Strolling around with her later, I could only agree – and the tawny reflection of the swamp cypress in the pond beneath was not the only benefit to the garden, as Beth pointed out. 'I always thought about "painting the sky". Look up and see all the different shapes of these trees. None of them were here when we came. It's easy enough to paint the ground to provide colour, but you have to live 20, 30 or 40 years before your trees paint the sky.'

Preferred locations

Listening to Beth describing her passion for plants, Andrew's name crops up again and again, reminding me how fortunate I was to have met him on one of my earlier visits when I had the opportunity to discuss with him plant habitats and associations in the wild. 'He used to say,' Beth said, 'plants, like people, don't care to be pushed into the nearest available space, but they have their preferences. I thought his research would help us find plants most suitable for this garden, especially the difficult areas, and I was right.'

Were the Water and Woodland and the famous Gravel gardens a result of this thinking? 'Yes, very much so, but we started with the dry, gravelly areas. Our rainfall is very low, 50cm (20in) on average in a year, though this year (2009) we had only 18cm (7in) in 6 months. But many plants do survive.' She is keen to stress that hers is not an ecological garden – that is, a replica of wild plant communities. 'I don't have the conditions and it wouldn't look right anyway. A garden needs an artistic eye as well, and for this I have to thank the late Cedric Morris, the artist and gardener who lived at Benton End in Suffolk.'

Beth confessed that she had never even heard of Cedric Morris until one day in the late 1940s, when a mutual friend took Andrew and her to meet him. It was, Beth said, 'the day that changed our lives'. They toured the garden, 'Andrew and Cedric talking Latin and I simply taking in all the shapes and textures'. Walking through Cedric's garden was, for Beth, like being a child in a sweet shop. 'So many plants new to me, so many of them garden worthy. I wanted to grow them all, especially the euphorbias, alliums, species crocus, tulips and fritillaries which were not so commonly grown in gardens then.' ►



Memories of Cedric Morris, his garden and his plants come easily to Beth. Not surprisingly, they have helped shape so many of her successful planting schemes as well as her pioneering and never-to-be-forgotten exhibits at the Chelsea Flower Show in the late 1970s and 1980s that won for her 10 consecutive gold medals.

Walk around the garden today, or her nursery for that matter, and you will find many plants recalling the influence of Cedric Morris as well as the late Graham Stuart Thomas and the late Christopher Lloyd, both of whom she counted as special friends. Indeed it was in Morris's garden that she first met Thomas. He and Cedric had similar tastes, especially in plants; both loved bulbs and perennials, and old roses including the wild species. Yet however much Beth learned from those gardeners that she admired and respected, she also had her own likes and dislikes, and was to form her own opinions. She remembers being given Christopher Lloyd's *The Well-Tempered Garden* and admits that she knew of him but did not know him. 'I was bowled over and couldn't put it down. I took it to bed and read on and on. I hadn't read a book like it – and still haven't – and I don't think he wrote anything better. It was a delight.'

'Did you agree with all Christopher wrote in that book?' I asked. 'Well, I was nodding my head and kept saying "yes, yes, I feel just like that" and then I got towards the end of the book and discovered that he obviously hated bergenias,

which I cannot live without. To me they are an integral part of my garden design.' So what did she do? 'Well, I had never written to an author before, so I just sat down and wrote to say how much I enjoyed his book but could not agree with him on bergenias which I find so soothing

at the end of a complicated bit of planting. Back in the post came a card saying "Come to lunch". Done!' Thus began an enduring friendship and a fruitful one, too, exemplified in their joint publication *Dear Friend and Gardener*, a collection of letters between them, published in 1998.

Changing times

Plants have loomed large in Beth's life, as they have in mine, and I asked if she agreed that there were probably more different kinds available to gardeners today than ever before – too many perhaps? The true plantswoman, she is fascinated with the range of new and exciting species introduced in the last 30 years but is more cautious when it comes to breeding. 'There are many plants that horticulturists have "improved" to make them more garden worthy, but to take them right out of character worries me,' she said. 'To take just two examples, new echinaceas are constantly being introduced; now we have yellow flowers and flame instead of lovely strawberry pink ones of the prairie with their bronzy-brown centres. Then there are *Helleborus x hybridus* which I first admired in Cedric's garden. But they have now been taken up and improved, yes, but

in some cases too far. I don't want doubles in preference to singles, or for them to hold their faces up like buttercups.'

But what of the plants she grows, especially those she has found most useful or decorative over the years such as *Calamintha nepeta* subsp. *nepeta*, whose tiny flowers always attract a host of nectar-seeking insects? 'Every year it makes a haze of pale, slaty-blue – quite charming,' she said. 'It all depends on where you put it. It's part of the companion planting: we all need star performers, but you also want the quieter things, too.' What about *Genista aetnensis* (Mount Etna broom), which is wonderful in Beth's gravel garden? I used to have a large specimen of this multistemmed shrub in my own garden, where I looked forward to its slender weeping branches flooded with tiny fragrant yellow pea flowers in July until it grew old and died. 'Oh yes, I have lost them too, but then a garden doesn't stand still. It's not a picture hanging on a wall. It's really different from one day to the next, let alone one month or one year, and now I've had this garden for 50 years but I am constantly thinking and planning ahead.'

By way of confirmation Beth showed me a glasshouse, near her home, containing a collection of succulents of every shape and hue. Had she been collecting them over the years? 'Yes and I don't know the names of half of them, but we've got them and as people keep talking about global warming I wondered what might tolerate the drought. These will, and hopefully some of the other plants as well. Softer things, *Gaura* and bergenias, they won't, but succulents and others will take their place.'

To appreciate, enjoy and learn from the plants Beth has grown and grows now, first consult her books and then visit her garden to see the many shapes, the varied hues, the happy associations – and the trees that paint the sky.

As I write these words I have to hand a copy of the 2009 Beth Chatto Gardens Mail Order List, packed with names and photographs of plants old and new. Its first page carries a portrait of a sprightly Beth Chatto OBE, VMH at 86, calm and confident. It accompanies an encouraging message from her reflecting on the disturbing times in which we live. It ends with the following words: 'We go into the garden however small to be refreshed, strengthened in body and mind by our bonds with nature, enabled to face what each day may bring. For you to carry on being a contented gardener, is the wish of Beth Chatto and her staff.' It is a statement so typical of a woman regarded by many as a national treasure. Long may she remain so. ■

Roy Lancaster OBE, VMH is a member of the RHS Woody Plant Committee

i **The Beth Chatto Gardens**, Elmstead Market, Colchester, Essex CO7 7DB; 01206 822007; www.bethchatto.co.uk.

● The Beth Chatto Gardens is an RHS Recommended Garden; see *RHS Members' Handbook 2009*, p108

● See also Gardens to Visit, p66

@ See more of Beth and Roy's conversation on video on RHS Online; visit www.rhs.org.uk/thegarden

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