

Comment

The Garden, RHS Media, Churchgate, New Road, Peterborough PE1 1TT



RHS / TIM SANDALL

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Gardening a small world

Editor of *The Garden*, Chris Young

At a conference I attended recently, it was evident how much smaller the gardening world is becoming. Climates and plants may be quite different, cultures and religions as varied as ever, but for those whose gardens are open to visit, issues that make them successful are markedly similar around the world. How do you attract people to your garden? And how do you ensure a mix of ages, interests and cultures can get the most from that experience?

The conference, 'Gardens without Limits', is held in the city of Metz in northeast France, and has a typically upbeat, heartland-European view on life. It is about making connections and sharing experiences. It does both well. Speakers, who hailed from countries such as New Zealand, Mexico, Australia, the USA and Lebanon, agreed that the challenge for those who run or own a garden is to find ways of sharing their passion for that place.

The most successful are those who know what makes their garden special; who can tell the story of the place in an engaging way; and

who have identified the sort of people who visit. And success doesn't always mean big numbers – a garden may attract one million or 1,000 guests a year, but it is about how, as one speaker put it, 'you mediate between your visitors and the place they are visiting'.

So how can gardens attract more people? Again, the successful ones were making connections with garden-visiting groups and those working in education, or setting up 'friends' (members) networks. The most enlightened understood their role in the local community, especially in urban areas where links between people and green space are so challenged.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is how these gardens can offer something for all and create the right feel. They should be welcoming but not desperate, telling a story rather than lecturing. Whether you are a child looking for conkers or a botanist comparing different plants, as a garden visitor you want to enjoy the place you are going to, and get something from it. And that, surely, is true the world over. ●

FROM THIS ISSUE

If you venture a kiss under some mistletoe this Christmas, pause afterwards to examine the plant more closely.

Jonathan Briggs: Kiss me quick

» Pages 61-64

By mid-afternoon in December, most of us are indoors, but think of the pleasure of a frosty night walk leading to a lake.

Mary Keen: Set for the winter's tale

» Pages 30-33

DID YOU KNOW?

Shape shifters

Author: **Mike Grant**, Editor, *The Plantsman*

Holly and ivy converge at Christmas in a decorative way. Apart from being evergreen, there is little to connect them – they are certainly not related botanically.

But they do have a biological feature in common, namely 'dimorphic leaves'. This is where the leaves of the same species exhibit two different shapes.

Ivy is one of the best-known examples: climbing stems have leaves that are lobed, while those on non-clinging, flower-bearing, aerial stems (inset), produced when ivy reaches the top of its support, are barely lobed at all.

The modified shape probably enables leaves to gather light more efficiently.

Holly performs a similar trick, but it is only noticeable on tree-sized specimens, tall enough to be out of reach of grazing animals. And that is the clue; leaves from holly shrubs or lower tree branches are spiny to avoid being eaten, but those higher up can dispense with spines.

Dimorphism can be seen in many plants. Conifers such as juniper have needle-like juvenile leaves (again, for protection) and adult leaves that are scale shaped. Some water plants have linear submerged leaves to reduce drag in flowing water, but circular floating leaves to support flowers. ●

❖ *The Plantsman* is sister publication to *The Garden*; www.rhs.org.uk/plantsman; 020 7821 3401.



RHS / CAROL SHEPPARD



Watercolour from the RHS Lindley Library of *Euphorbia pulcherrima* (poinsettia), painted by Laurence Perugini in 1929.

Happy to jump on a new plant bandwagon

The Garden columnist and designer Mary Keen

Meeting a new plant is like hearing a new word. It crops up everywhere once you have identified it.

Derry Watkins of Special Plants in Wiltshire is terrific at keeping ahead of the game. I went to see her at her nursery towards the end of summer and asked what her latest favourites were. She pointed out a slightly sparse-looking, small-flowered daisy in a pot. 'You must have this, it's the best,' she said. *Erigeron annuus* is a fleabane that is described on the internet as one of the weediest flowers in Missouri. I was doubtful about this plant and hoped Derry wouldn't reproach me for ignoring her latest treasure.

When I had finished browsing and collecting armfuls of what I thought were more desirable plants, she invited me to see her garden. There she pointed out a tall plant topped by an aureole, a whole Milky Way of tiny white daisies. It was the plant I had

shunned in the pot and it was ravishing. 'It's been out for months,' Derry said. 'All summer.' I felt humbled. The moral of that embarrassing confession is that when a great grower gives you some advice, you take it unquestioningly. And you buy the plant he or she recommends, even if it looks weedy and even if you are not lucky enough to get the private tour of the garden.

After my visit to Derry a friend told me that Fergus Garrett was growing the same fleabane daisy at Great Dixter in East Sussex. Then I read Fergus in *The Guardian* where he wrote: '*Erigeron annuus* (white fleabane) is a recent discovery for me. With masses of small white daisies from July to October on

stiff 1.5m stems, it is a good weaver. I use it with dark blue *Salvia guaranitica* 'Blue Enigma' and the slender, velvety, red spikes of *Salvia confertiflora*.'

A few weeks later, landscape designer Dan Pearson was singing the praises of the plant in his column. He wrote about trying it out next year with bronze fennel and French marigolds. When so many top-flight gardeners are agreed that a plant is worth growing, it has to be good.

I doubt the *Erigeron* will catch on in the same way as *Dianthus cruentus*, which Cleve West used to such effect in his garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show this year, or *Cirsium rivulare* 'Atropurpureum' – which

was, for a time, almost too fashionable. The fleabane is hardly showy and it is doubtfully perennial. But it will be invaluable in new planting schemes because, at more than a metre high with a long flowering season and self-supporting

stems, it is most appealing. I like the airy delicacy it could bring to a planting and I will definitely be jumping on the fleabane bandwagon next summer.

Erigeron annuus will probably never make it to many garden centres because

it does not have the 'pot appeal' needed to sell things on sight. Which is why, if you are serious about gardening and want to widen the range of things you grow, you should seek out the places where the person running the nursery is as passionate about plants as Derry Watkins.

Graham Gough of Marchants Hardy Plants, East Sussex is another inspirational source of recommendations. These are the two nurseries that I would always want to watch for their knack of finding plants for us to grow. Both have gardens where you can see what you are buying, because it is hard to judge things in a pot. The Great Dixter Nursery is of course another place where you can find plenty of well-tried and desirable introductions, as is Orchard Dene in Oxfordshire.

And if you are really lucky, you will find that you can talk to the growers we most admire about what to plant and how to make what you buy happy once you get it home. ●

- ❖ www.specialplants.net
- ❖ www.marchantshardyplants.co.uk
- ❖ www.greatdixter.co.uk
- ❖ www.orcharddene.co.uk



RHS / NEIL HEWORTH



Endless summer? Give me a break

Regular *The Garden* columnist Lia Leendertz



RHS / NEIL HERWORTH

When travelling in Australia's Northern Territories years ago I met a woman who had never seen winter. 'It's either warm and wet, or warm and dry,' said Suze, all glowing skin and golden hair. She claimed to have never been cold.

To my pale-skinned, temperate self this seemed

a wondrous thing – endless summer – but the more time I spent there, the more I pitied her. No nights warming toes by the fire, no cups of tea and chocolate digestives to ward off the chill. No chill. I longed for a change of season, and to hide away and tuck up. Wearing bikinis day after day (I could get away with them then) becomes exhausting. Sometimes you want to retreat into a big, cosy, grey jumper.

I have always felt that a winter garden should be the horticultural equivalent of such a garment, completely at ease with its wintry status, utterly abandoning such summery flourishes as flowers and colour. I have a problem with those winter gardens that juxtapose red cornus stems with yellow willows and purple heathers, plus a small smattering of pink hellebores.

For one thing, they become a desperate trawling for colour: shades that you'd never consider putting together in summer are propped awkwardly alongside each other as if to say, Look! Colour! Don't think about it too much! They are also the horticultural equivalent of visiting the tanning salon and having your hair highlighted on a chilly December day. It suited Suze. It doesn't suit us.

In winter let's have grey and brown. Let's have black, gnarled branches and a sense of death, decay and dormancy. I'm channelling those bleak fields of beige stubble you pass on a winter drive through the country, populated by two sinister-looking crows. I want to be pale and interesting and hold a steaming cup of tea, while looking out onto a sepia garden. ●



DO YOU AGREE?
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Nouveau gardening in the New World

Rory Stuart, author of *What Are Gardens For?*



SHEPPARD CRAIG

On the face of it, the International Garden Festival at Grand-Métis, Québec, Canada has an unlikely home. Located on the southern shore of the St Lawrence River and enjoying only some 120 frost-free days in an average year, this is not an obvious place to create a garden. But here in 1926 the redoubtable Elsie Reford began to make a garden at her family's summer home. Turning the climate to her advantage, she sought out plants that flourished in the severe conditions; one of her successes was Himalayan blue poppy (*Meconopsis baileyi*) which feels so at home it self-seeds.

Would she recognise her garden now? As you enter it today you encounter flowers arranged in blocks of the brightest colours, like some modern, abstract painting. Clearly this is no ordinary historic garden. At Les Jardins de Métis, as the Reford Garden is now known, the public can visit not only the restored garden Elsie made, but also a collection of gardens designed by cutting-edge designers of international repute. One, Le Jardin de la Connaissance, which was installed in 2010, has benches, tables and paving made of books. It is designed to biodegrade slowly – forest returning to forest. Another, the AlgaeGarden, created last year, consists of curtains of translucent tubes in which water turns different colours as the algae develop.

Most of these thought-provoking garden installations are allowed to remain for two or three years, with six or seven new ones being added each year. Visitors are encouraged to vote for the gardens they most enjoy.

Why do we not see more of this kind of twinning – the historic with the contemporary? The contrast sets up all sorts of provocative questions – what exactly is a garden? And what do I want my garden to do for me? How does a garden reflect the period in which it was made? Above all – the questions all garden-makers ask – how much should I intervene, how much leave to nature? And how obvious should that intervention be? Neither the RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show nor the International Garden Festival at Chaumont-sur-Loire, France make the old speak to the new in this way. ●

Rory Stuart's book *What Are Gardens For?* is published by Frances Lincoln, Sept 2012, £16.99, ISBN 9780711233645
✱ Available at RHS Shops or by mail order from 01483 211320; www.rhsshop.co.uk