

English modern gardens

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Abstract In this paper, we have sketched, briefly, the origins and traditions which went to the making of English gardens into the nineteenth century. The intention now is to describe and display a certain number of gardens which can safely be called representative of the ideal, the paradise so long sought and worked towards: representative, however, of styles and methods and skill, but in no sense "average", for each is an outstanding example of its kind.

Key words

gardens, styles, methods, woodland

However, several points should be made and emphasized: the number of superb gardens in England, Scotland and Wales is so large that it would be impossible to display them in less than a dozen volumes as large as this one. It has been necessary to leave out very many gardens which are quite as fine, of their kind, as those which we have included. But if a man knows the gardens we have included, then he knows what modern English gardens are like, which is what chiefly matters. We have also made an attempt to get away, again briefly, from the 'great' gardens, gardens vast in extent as well as superlative in execution, and to show how the smaller English gardens, the gardens of the village, of the Suburb, even of the city, have likewise been given their twentieth-century character by the work of the five preceding centuries.

The great gardens of Britain today are, very roughly, of three kinds. In the first place there are the museum pieces - the words are used in no denigrator sense - the gardens of the eighteenth century which are preserved in their original form, as far as that is possible in a work of art whose materials are alive and growing: with some of these we have already dealt and we shall not return to them. Next there are the gardens, the most important class now, in which a balance is struck, in style, between anti-Robinson's and Robinson's, between the earlier, formal or Italianate styles, and the less formal wilder garden.

Material and Methods

Such gardens might very well be considered as a tribute to the memory of Loudon and his sensible, catholic taste. Thirdly, there are the woodland gardens, in some ways the most romantic, the nearest to the "paradise" of the English dream, gardens in which plants, for the most part shrubs, of the most gorgeous and exotic beauty, are so set as to simulate a "natural"

woodland scene, although in nature no such plants are found growing all together. Such gardens are the product of two influences, that of the great plantmen and plant-collectors; and that of Robinson's *The Wild Garden*. We shall come to them in their place.

Of the great, relatively modern gardens of mixed styles but complete integrity, the most important, artistically, and to some extent also botanically but that is less interesting in the broad context of "aesthetic" horticulture, is *Hidcote Manor*. For this garden set a style, created, out of its success, a number of rules which could be followed, with interesting local variations, in other gardens. Let us first glance, very briefly, at the position of gardening in general at the time when Lawrence Johnston began to make *Hidcote Manor* gardens.

Robinson's own garden had been made at *Gravetye* in *Sussex*. The house was derelict when he bought it. As for the garden, he went at it with such passionate impatience that garden historians are now a little apt to shrug their shoulders over his goings-on. I, for one, understand and sympathize; I believe that Robinson was one of those men who are haunted by a keen and frightening sense of the passage of time: "ars longa" is true in a special and distressing way in the garden, for no man's lifetime is long enough to enable him to accomplish what he sees in his imagination's eye; the painter can finish a picture, the novelist his trilogy; the gardener, dependent on the rate at which his plants grow, cannot finish his garden.

When Robinson had vast quantities of earth moved, when he planted fully grown trees, when he planted not a few hundred bulbs to increase naturally, but bulbs by the hundred thousand, he was trying to make a garden as he envisaged it within what remained of his lifetime. It is, of course, folly; I share in it. Why, gardeners begin to wonder, was Robinson such a great figure in the history of gardening? His success as a gardener in practice was not comparable with

Loudon's, Paxton's, Jekyll's; he failed as a farmer; he was rude, noisy, impatient, extravagant and arrogant.

There are men who cannot but strive to realize their vision; there are others, more fortunate, who manage to envisage no more than they can accomplish and are not driven to strive to do too much. But it is the first who persuade the second to envisage anything at all. Arthur Young, in the related field of agriculture, had a vision of what farming should be; he failed dismally as a farmer, he was a chronic bankrupt, but he transformed the whole of European farming for the better. I have not a shadow of doubt that Robinson was a great gardener.

Plant collectors, and the increasing number of breeders of new garden plants, were making it necessary, by the beginning of our own century, for gardening to borrow from another fine craft, dress-making, the device of annual fashion changes in order to absorb the energy of the craftsmen and women. The newest plants brought forward, and given an accolade by the *rh*s at its shows, displaced the older ones, not always because the new ones were really better, but simply because they were new. It was almost as necessary for the socially conscious gardener to have the newest hybrid rose, the latest bearded iris, as for the woman of fashion to have her waist in the socially, rather than the anatomically, correct place. The RHS Award of Merit system gave authority to a plant's claims for space in the garden, as the Society's system of awards to gardeners, the highest being the Victoria Medal of Honour, set a mark upon the gardening elect. But it is probably true to say that never have awards, both to plants and to men, been made with such consistent integrity.

Results

This and not want of money or labor, is the real explanation of the fact that the making of great gardens has nearly come to an end. Many great gardens, final products of the progress I am here sketching in outline, were made in our century: Bodnant, Highdown, Sissinghurst, Great Dixter, Garinish Island and others - these are but a few of them. If I choose to begin with Hidcote and its maker Lawrence Johnston for special note, even before describing Nymans in Sussex, it is because it seems to me that no man ever came nearer to perfection in joining garden design - the architecture, the bone-structure of a garden - with plantsmanship and nature.

Major Johnston made two gardens, Hidcote in the *Cots wolds* and *Serre de la Madone* in the South of France. He began work on Hidcote in 1904. His material was a good old stone manor house, pleasantly accidental country, a cedar tree, and a stand of fine beeches. The master-plan was this. The rising land was leveled and ascended from time to time by nights of steps; it was enclosed by a variety of hedges, and formed into a series of geometrically designed gardens,

each with its own delights such as gazebos or pleached limes. All are symmetrically placed on an axis with a clear vista through, ending in the piers of a fine gateway.

The valley was turned into a wild garden; a path winds above the stream which is shaded by rare trees, its banks planted with shrubs, lilies, primulas and other naturalized plants. This little valley diverges somewhat from the main axis of the vista, and it is in this broadening space that we see the true genius of design, for it is packed with a number of little hedged compartments into which one descends, each different and each a place of enchantment, to make one's exit into the valley.

One broad, grassed vista closed by high hornbeam hedges goes as it were to unite both parts at right angles to the main axis; at its head one sees, through iron grilles, nothing but the sky. It is the sky too that one sees as one mounts up the main walk to the cedar - slowly, because of the continued diversions as one passes. When one at last goes through the terminating gateway into a grove of *illex*, there is suddenly disclosed that view to which I have referred: no less than the vale of Avon leading into that stretch of land in which lies the heart of Shakespeare's poetry. Thus Miles Hadfield: it is impossible to improve on it.

Some of the most respectable critics of gardening as an art, if not always a fine art, consider this garden of Hidcote Bartrim Manor to be the master work of the twentieth century; and, as such, bringing together in itself an expression of all the principal styles and traditions of English gardening in a brilliantly successful combination. Hidcote Manor is in the *Cots wolds*, remote from any great city but conveniently near to those famous examples of English domestic architecture, Broadway and Chipping Campden.

The manor house, itself, is a typical *Cots-wold* house of its class, of the well-known golden-buff freestone, roofed with *Itone* shingles, having a forecourt in front of it and, on one side, a chapel. The place stands in the middle of a home farm and there is a hamlet of thatched *COTtflges*. In 1905 when Lawrence Johnston bought the property there was no garden of any kind: there were fields, a specimen cedar which was and is exceptionally large and well-grown; two groups of fine beech trees. Nothing more. And it was not even an encouraging site for a garden; it stands high and is described as being wind-swept. It has no basic, natural 'shape' to suggest any particular treatment or line of development; the soil is heavy clay; it is cold, and as the late Victoria Sackville-West, having created a garden in somewhat similar conditions but a better climate, wrote of it, "There was nothing in the way of old walls or hedges to afford protection", the protection which she herself had benefited from in the old walls of Sissinghurst Castle.

Conclusions

Important to the design is the relief of the site which Johnston started with: from the great cedar which seems to have been used as a sort of starting point, the land rises at a steady slope to the ridge of an escarpment. Then it falls away again, shallowly at first, then steeply. Beside this broad, rising plot of fields, as they then were, is a little valley, parallel but descending, beginning roughly at the cedar, and with a stream at its bottom. This valley widens as it falls away. The first task, after the artist had visualized what he wanted to do with this material, was one of earth-moving on a large scale: in the decade before the First World War it was still possible for a man of means to employ the labour necessary to such operations: at that time the operation entailed the employment of many hands, picks, shovels, horses and carts. The cost of labour has since risen by approximately 1000 per cent. Yet the claim that no man, nowadays, could 'afford' to make such a garden in such conditions as Hidcote, is almost certainly unjustified. The ingenious and efficient earth-moving equipment we now dispose of, costing, with the operator's skilled services, from £3 to £5 per hour, will do in each hour as much work as fifty labourers. The fact is that garden making on the scale undertaken by Lawrence Johnston is simply not in the Zeitgeist. In 1905 all men were sure that the sun would rise tomorrow; in the second half of the same century many men doubt it.

Johnston cut the rising land from the cedar to the escarpment into a series of wide, level terraces. These were connected by flights of stone steps at each rise. These terraces were made upon a single straight line so that a vista (plate 105) clean through the garden would be possible. On each terrace Johnston planned to have one or more geometrically regular enclosures opening into the next; each terrace was hedged with some good hedging plant, or otherwise defined with shrubs or trees, such as pleached hornbeams. The vista through this rising series of gardens culminates in a stone-piered gateway closed by fine wrought-iron gates. From this the observer commands a tremendous view over the heart of England.

The principal section of the garden in the immediate neighborhood of the house is the Courtyard. Here there is an interesting collection of plants used in masses and not in excessive variety. Outstanding are the hydrangeas, the hypericum, which has become famous among gardeners everywhere as "Hidcote" and which is surpassed in beauty only by the "Rowallane" hypericum, which is too tender for the Cotswolds; finally, for evidence of Johnston's plantsmanship: garden architects and designers are apt to be suspicious of plantsmanship because it leads to planting botanical collections instead of gardens, to using plants for their own sake instead of as materials in a work of art. But Johnston, who had traveled very widely and looked at plants wherever he went, and who created, in the Serre

de la Madone in the South of France, a warm-climate garden with quite a different flora, never, so to speak, lost sight of the wood in looking at the trees. His botanical erudition was of positive use. Consider, for example, in this forecourt, the use of *Schiophragma hydrangoides* to clothe a wall.

The number of evergreen plants with the close-clinging, climbing habit of ivy is small; nine out of ten garden designers seem never to have heard of any of them; ivy is made to serve the purpose every time, and without regard to the fact that *schizophragma*, *Pileostegia viburnoides*, or *Ficus stipuldata*, all with the same quality of clinging close without adventitious help to stone or any other vertical surface, give a change of texture, of color, of habit. By having a far wider knowledge of what plants were to be had than most gardeners, and by making a much more catholic use of botanical authorities, Lawrence Johnston was able, time and again, to achieve perfectly an effect which a lesser man would have fallen just short of.

A hedged way, beyond which the kitchen garden and glasshouses are concealed, leads to the vast Theatre Lawn (plate no), an oval focused upon two great beeches rising out of a mound which, in spring, is colored by crocus and narcissus. Beeches, of course, grow magnificently in the Cotswolds since they enjoy lime. The Cotswold soils are calcareous, being on limestone which is often very near the surface. This usually imposes a very severe limitation upon the choice of plants, since hundreds of the most desirable species and their hybrid or selected offspring are intolerant of lime.

In practice a great gardener accepts this limitation and creates, as Sir Frederick Stern has done at Highdown in Sussex, a garden of plants which prefer limestone or are indifferent to soil acidity. At Hidcote, however, Johnston overcame the limitation by abolishing it, creating, where he needed it, a soil to suit what he wanted to grow, as we shall see.

The Old Garden is the part of the garden near to the house and focused on the cedar, gives access to the grass walk through the main axis of the rising terraces which ends, as already described, in the great gateway and the view over Shakespeare's country to Bredon. Thus the link of small enclosed gardens which joins the Long Walk to the valley garden lies on one's left. This valley garden is called the Wilderness.

What is important about Hidcote is not that it exists, but that it was made; in the same sense that what is important about the works of, say, Bach, is not that we have them, but that there once lived a man capable of composing them. Hidcote, too, is a place for plants; it is an extraordinarily full garden, a garden in which the plants have taken over and colonized places for themselves and been restrained only so much as will prevent them from inconveniencing each other and prevent the weak from being overcome by the strong. About the cedar there is a small paved area and some

stone steps to a higher level, enclosed by clipped hedges and some topiary work: the topiary is of the simplest kind. If, in walking round the gardens, you begin at this point, that is, if you see it before the spirit of Hidcote has entered into you, no harm is done: but I recall coming back to the cedar after long wandering in the rest of the gardens and feeling disconcerted by even the small measure of discipline imposed on, the yews. It was entirely irrational, of course, since there are in fact miles of clipped hedges, but one comes to think of them as walls, although walls with a degree of interest in their texture and color which masonry does not achieve.

A note on these hedges, which are so important in giving the quality of secrecy to the garden, will be in place. Lawrence Johnston did not confine himself to one or two species. At the top of the main vista, by the gateway, hornbeams were used, two double ranks, pleached and clipped into a hollow rectangular mass of foliage. Yew and box, the latter the oldest hedging plant in English gardens and, of course, a native; the former also native but not used for clipped hedging until comparatively modern times. Holly, too, perhaps the finest of all hedging plants in cold climates, has been used both alone and mixed with other species to give a diversified texture. There is one tapestry hedge: hornbeam, yew, beech and holly were planted mingled together and clipped; the mixture of textures and colors is very pleasing. Of the copper-beech hedges, Victoria Sackville-West wrote: “. . . they may not inaptly be compared to an Ispahan carpet, with their depths of rose-madder and violet, and the tips of

young growth as sanguine as a garnet seen against the light”.

As well as being one of the most gifted artists in garden design in the history of English gardening, Lawrence Johnston -was not only, as I have said, a great plantsman, he was a botanist and a plant collector who fetched plants from all over the world and who had correspondents everywhere sending him plants to try. One of the surprises at Hidcote is the success of plants which I should have thought too tender for that rather cold quarter of England. The Courtyard has among oilier plants the yellow Banksian rose; Magnolia delavayi with its gigantic evergreen leaves. Hidcote was perhaps the first perfectly successful paradise garden.

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