

Beth Chatto Symposium

August 30-31 2018

Ecological Planting in the 21st Century



Hardy Plant Society- Kenneth Black Bursary Symposium Report 2019

Sophie Walwin

The Beth Chatto Symposium: Ecological Planting in the 21st Century, took place on 30-31 August 2018 at the University of Essex, Colchester.

This event might be seen in years to come as the moment a new phase in the 'New Perennial' movement began, heralding in the 'Ecological Planting' era. Beth Chatto died a few months before the symposium, which was devised to celebrate her work and garden in her 95th year, however her legacy will endure, as was made clear over the two-day series of lectures and discussions.

The idea for the symposium was conceived by Amy Sanderson, a Canadian gardener and florist who has spent some time working at the Beth Chatto Gardens in recent years, and was organised by Amy, Garden and Nursery Director, Dave Ward and Head Gardener, Åsa Gregers-Warg. 500 people from 26 countries were present for this seminal event and there was definitely an air of excitement throughout.

It was an international line-up of speakers; gardeners, designers, nursery-people and academics presenting their ideas and philosophies, including names you would expect like James Hitchmough, Dan Pearson and Cassian Schmidt and others that were less well-known but equally relevant.



Symposium speakers and organisers: left to right: James Hitchmough, David Ward, Taylor Johnston, Olivier Filippi, Marina Christopher, Peter Janke, Dan Pearson, Midori Shintani, Keith Wiley, Andi Pettis, Peter Korn, Åsa Gregers-Warg, Cassian Schmidt, Amy Sanderson. Photo: Huw Morgan 2018

Olivier Filippi gave a passionate address in his lecture 'Mediterranean Landscapes as Inspiration for Planting Design' in favour of the move towards greater scientific and ecological thought to be fed into planting design and gardening. Filippi works in

southern France and is inspired by the Mediterranean climate and the biomes that exist within it. I found his presentation affecting because he offered a different 'ecological' aesthetic to the now ubiquitous Piet Oudolf style we are so familiar with in Northern Europe. He was un-apologetic and forthright with his views and devotion to the approach to planting in a way that mimics the wild Mediterranean landscape. His presentation was well illustrated with images of work by regional designers and gardeners including Thomas Doxiadis, the practice Urquijo-Kastner, Jennifer Gay and Piers Goldson, Agence APS and Bruno Demoustier.

Keith Wiley (Wildside Garden, Devon) and Peter Korn (private garden, Sweden) each gave presentations from their perspectives as very keen plants-people, both shaping their gardens through soil excavation and manipulation to bend their different climates to their wills to create something exotic and unexpected.

A resonant lecture was given by the Head Gardener of Tokachi Millennium Park in Hokkaido, Japan. Midori Shintani gave a moving talk titled 'The Naturalistic Garden in Japan' with fantastic photographs to discuss the depth of the cultural connection with nature in Japan, where they have 72 seasons. The practical considerations of developing a garden on a large scale were described, particularly the suppression of the invasive *Sasa palmata* which took five years to achieve and unleashed an incredible seedbank of native and endemic plants. Shintani worked in collaboration with designer Dan Pearson to shape the landscape into his design and she consults with him yearly to discuss changes and maintenance. Pearson spoke before Shintani, which gave a fluidity to their lectures as he spoke mainly about their collaboration.

In between each lecture period there was a chance to meet existing contemporaries and new ones. The atmosphere was fizzing with anticipation and excitement, especially as the symposium was so well attended which made the event feel so necessary and relevant to recent movements in horticulture, art and design.

The visit to the Beth Chatto Gardens on the first evening of the event was very special. It was a well-organised affair with lots of fantastic food and drink, enabling new and old connections and the chance to explore the gardens and consider Chatto's work and life. In the learning centre, the team had set up a public archive of writings and books to peruse, with the chance to add thoughts and thanks to an open book.

I have been inspired to carry out further research into the main proponents of this way of thinking about and the aesthetics of ecological planting. I will endeavour to create gardens following the guiding principles of this way of gardening, considering various practitioner's ideas and methods, and eventually developing my own. During one of the

panel discussions, Filippi and Korn agreed that the horticultural skills necessary to maintain 'ecological plantings' are lacking in our industry which was an interesting perspective. These comments have made me consider my skills as a horticulturist and how I could improve them and my understanding of maintenance of naturalistic designs in a sustainable and efficient way. I believe that studying plants in the wild will deepen my knowledge of how plants interact with their environment and the conditions they tolerate. I aim to visit Andalucía in southern Spain this year to research the plant communities there, such as maquis and garigue, to gather ideas and inspiration. This is based on the suggestion by Filippi, to look towards the Mediterranean landscape to develop our gardens in Britain.

As I have a botanic garden background, considering different ecologies feels like a natural place to start when considering new landscape designs. Now I am working in an historic garden, where the plants work in harmony with the architecture and spirit of place are the focus. However, now armed with inspiration from this symposium, taking a cue from nature could be massively beneficial to keeping a college garden innovative and dynamic to continue to capture the imagination of professors and students alike.

The symposium has provided lots of food for thought, with hope that another event of this kind may follow soon.

[Acknowledgements](#)

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