

# **World without Torture, the Q-CAT garden at RHS Tatton Show**

**Dori Miller**

## **The design**

Weeds, demolition rubble and high-security fencing are not the most usual materials for making a Show Garden, but they all had a crucial role in getting the message across.

The design had developed from somewhat smaller beginnings. I was inspired by a visit to the Quaker Tapestry in Kendal in 2011. The Tapestry is a series of beautiful embroidered panels depicting events and people in the history of Quakers, or the Religious Society of Friends. I was struck by the Botanists panel, which shows notable Quaker plant collectors<sup>1</sup> and some of the 1000 or so plants they introduced in the 1600s and 1700s.

My first idea was to do a garden on these plantsmen, but my son and co-designer, Howard, felt that would be of limited interest. Flushed by the success of our 2011 Tatton garden for Oxfam, which won a Gold medal, Howard was keen to tackle a more

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<sup>1</sup> *The Golden Age of Quaker Botanists* by Ann Nichols, published by Quaker Tapestry at Kendal Ltd, 2006

challenging subject. I am a member of the Wirral and Chester Quaker Area Meeting, which upholds a particularly difficult concern: the Quaker Concern for the Abolition of Torture (Q-CAT). Q-CAT's aim is to end torture and complicity in torture. There could hardly be a more challenging subject to translate into a garden.

Q-CAT trustees readily accepted the invitation to be the Exhibitor of the garden, and work began. The main elements of the design were:

- an ecological succession, with plants naturally colonising land destroyed by bombing (because bombing does to land what torture does to man). This would show how, over time, land heals itself, and it would embody the spirit of provocative optimism so important when tackling a difficult subject.
- a walkway inviting visitors into a cell reminiscent of Guantanamo Bay, with quiet speakers telling stories of political prisoners;
- high-security concrete posts (with chain link and barbed wire) to give the feeling of oppression and claustrophobia;
- exit through a 'release' garden, planted with white varieties of Quaker introductions, to symbolise the peace and purity of a world without torture; hard landscaping made with concrete posts, but now laid horizontally and trodden underfoot; and an image of freedom provided by a sculpture of a figure releasing a dove, together with further doves flying across the chain link, in wire embroidery.
- a deep, still pool to symbolise the stillness and silence at the heart of the Quaker way.



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The creative brilliance of the design was down to Howard, who is an architect by profession, with me insisting on the Quaker elements, and taking responsibility for the planting.

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The start of the ecological planting.

We enlisted invaluable help from two universities: Dr David Wilkinson (Liverpool John Moore University) is an expert on ecology, and he advised on the planting for the ecological succession (which James Alexander-Sinclair, head judge, said was “perfect”); and Wayne Szabo, from Chester University’s Harlequin project, did a wonderful job with the speaker project.

The two chain-link panels depicting the dove in flight were made by a Dutch firm, Lace Fence, to Howard’s design. The panels were much admired by visitors to the show.

The sculpture, named ‘Liberty’, was the result of a second collaboration with Judy Greaves, a sculptor

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Cosmos, penstemons, and poppies against a background of *Corylus avellana* ‘Contorta’, white foxgloves, and the mature woodland that was the culmination of the ecological succession.

from Shropshire. Liberty worked beautifully with the lace fence panels.

The plants were chosen from those introduced by Quakers, the choice further restricted by two considerations: they had to be due to flower during the third week in July, and white varieties had to be available. The mainstays of the display were perennials, superb specimens supplied by Dingle Nurseries of Welshpool.

### Quaker plants and plantsmen

The plants used in *World without Torture* were introduced to gardens by just four of the many Quaker botanists, plant hunters, collectors, nurserymen and gardeners: John Bartram, John Fothergill, Peter Collinson and Phillip Miller.

John Bartram (1699–1777) was an American who was called by Linnaeus “the greatest natural botanist in the world”. Primarily a farmer, Bartram’s study of plants confirmed him in his faith, for he saw God through nature’s eye – perfection, intricacy and sheer beauty.

Among Bartram’s introductions are *Phlox paniculata* and *Monarda* (bee balm or bergamot). We used *P. p.* ‘David’, with showy, bright white flowers, and very fragrant, and *Monarda* ‘Schneewittchen’. The plants were full of bud but not in flower during show week, but they provided tall handsome foliage.

Dr John Fothergill (1712–1780) was a British physician, philanthropist, botanist and plant collector. Among his introductions are *Clematis florida* var. *sieboldiana*, *Penstemon laevigatus* (beardtongue) and *Viola cornuta* (horned pansy).

*Clematis florida* var. *sieboldiana* was the only climbing plant which satisfied all the criteria for inclusion in the garden, and its role was to provide a backdrop to the sculpture and to clothe the chain link. Known as the passion flower clematis, its flowers develop through several spectacular stages. Green/white narrow pointed petals emerge first, and then they open fully to white. Meanwhile, the central purple stamen cluster grows from a button when new, to a full rosette which remains when the white petals have fallen. Unfortunately it is not very hardy. It is also prone to Clematis Wilt: healthy buds stand up like little candles, but with Wilt they suddenly droop from the top, quickly progressing down the stem unless the affected parts are cut off promptly. Rain or wind can easily cause physical damage, with symptoms similar to Wilt, but throughout the plant rather than starting at the top. The stem (usually single) is delicate and brittle, and will not recover from the slightest kink. These susceptibilities caused some difficulties during



The chain-link supports can just be seen.

preparation for the show. It was necessary to keep the plants under cover for as long as possible, not only to keep them looking good, but to keep them alive! But to display climbers in a show garden, they need to look as if they have been grown on the support.

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Visitors walk through the garden...

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...and pause to listen to the speaker stories.

Luckily, a weakness of *C. sieboldii* turned out to be also a strength. As the plants were mostly single stemmed, it was possible to detach them fairly easily from their canes, and twine each carefully onto a single strand of chain link. They could then remain under cover till the last minute, before wiring the single strand on to the chain link panel. And they did look as if they'd grown there. Nevertheless, we had plenty of backup plants in case any needed replacing during show week. I think we had the entire European stock in reserve.

The perennial *Penstemon* 'White Bedder' is creamy in bud, with plentiful flowers opening white with a touch of pink. We were not able to obtain a white variety of the *Viola cornuta*, so we used the purple only for its foliage, by cutting off the flowers.

Peter Collinson (1693–1768) was a British woollen draper, botanist and naturalist. Through his business and Quaker connections and trade with the Americas he introduced British plants to America and vice versa. Among these

plants are *Linaria purpurea* (toadflax) and *Papaver nudicaule* (Arctic or Iceland poppy). We were unable to get white-only seed of the poppy, so we grew 'Meadow Pastels' and Champagne Bubbles Group. I potted them up singly with the intention of using only the white and cream ones. However, the colours were so beautiful we decided to use the white/cream amongst the other white flowers, but develop into the stronger pink, yellow, orange and red beyond the strict confines of the garden.

It is one of Howard's trademarks to reach out beyond the garden boundary in order to engage the visitor. In *World without Torture*, the lace fence section extended into the showground, as did the 'prongs' formed by the horizontally laid posts. It was in the prongs that the coloured poppies were planted with such effect, all the more dramatic after the severe restraint of the white/green colour palette.

Both poppy and toadflax were rather floppy and needed support. The toadflax came from Dingle's fastened to sticks, while I had grown the poppies in a poly tunnel and they were quite soft. The only hard materials used in the construction of the garden were concrete and wire, to emphasise the hard brutality of torture. In order to preserve unity of materials, we devised plant supports of single strands of chain link, cut to length and twisted over at the top to provide protection from their sharp points. The result was surprisingly effective (and cheap.) A bit of a 'swords into ploughshares' moment.

*Cosmos bipinnatus* 'Purity' proved to be another annual that deserved its place. This was an introduction by Phillip Miller FRS, gardener at Chelsea Physic Garden 1722–1770. Though not formally a Quaker, he collaborated closely with them. *C. p.* 'Purity' was easy to grow from seed, with fresh, light green fronds of foliage and lots of big daisy flowers.

### Other plants

*Corylus avellana* 'Contorta' (corkscrew or twisted hazel) was an essential plant for the garden. It provided a metaphor in itself for victims of torture. Discovered in an English hedgerow in the 1800s, it is an example of a plant which, though grown in an unnatural form through mutation, seems to thrive. Perhaps victims of torture can go on to thrive, despite horrific mental and physical scars?

In the pool, a simple combination of white water lily, *Alisma plantago-aquatica*, and *Iris pseudacorus* (foliage only), served as a symbol of the stillness and silence of the Quaker way. Between the water lily and the perennial planting we used *Briza media*, the perennial Quaking grass, planted for word play. The round grass seedheads complemented the little starry flowers of the alisma.

### Building the garden

The build-up period was much harder than for the previous two gardens we'd done at Tatton, not only because of the appalling weather during the first two weeks of July. Landstruction, our contractors, did a fantastic job under very difficult conditions. Concrete posts and wire are hard, heavy, hostile materials to work with; we spent days scrabbling around in a load of rubble to create the bombsite; and the weeds we planted in it were not well-behaved like garden plants. It was surprisingly difficult to make them look natural. In fact, it felt like self-inflicted torture building the garden.



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The deep, still pool symbolising the stillness and silence at the heart of the Quaker way.



Doves, a sign of freedom

### The Show

Being awarded an RHS Gold Medal made the hard work worthwhile, and the positive response of visitors to the garden exceeded all expectations. We had an army of volunteers on hand to talk to visitors about the garden, and to staff the entrance and exit. One of Howard's and my conditions for a Show Garden is that visitors must be able to enter it. We wanted people to experience the garden, not just look at it from behind a barrier. And experience it they did. Our volunteers explained that they could listen to the speaker stories if they wished, and they slowed down entry to the garden, admitting only individuals or small groups at a time, so that it would be a meditative walk rather than a dash through. Visitors were happy to queue, and treated the garden with great respect. Most listened to the speakers. Many emerged visibly moved. A little girl awarded it her own rosette for best garden, and wrote in our visitors' book, 'I'm against torture too'.

### Afterword

The core of the garden is to be relocated to Woodbrooke, the Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham. Woodbrooke was the home of the Cadbury family, and has extensive grounds in a lovely wooded setting. At Woodbrooke, *World without Torture* will be seen by many more people, not only Quakers, and the awareness-raising potential of the garden will be extended beyond Tatton and Show Week. 🌱

**Dori Miller writes:** I'm an amateur gardener. My first show garden was for my choir, *A Handbag of Harmonies*, followed by *When the Waters Rise* for Oxfam, then *World without Torture*. Each time the original idea develops into a huge team effort. I am indebted to many sponsors, donors, experts, volunteers, and to my family: Tom, Howard, Liz and Hugh Miller.