



Fig. 1a & b Monet's Garden at Giverny has predictable, seasonal patterns in its design: top mid-May, bottom late July.

An acquaintance, in a state of bemused anxiety, once showed me his new lawn. He had covered the area with black polythene against hungry birds. When he removed the cover, his lawn was blood red. He had sown a variety of fine-leaved fescue grass which is prone to making a lot of red pigment as well as green chlorophylls when young. After a few days in sunshine, the new lawn was a disappointingly ordinary green. He was relieved.

It occurred to me later that, by suitable arrangements of pieces of black polythene, he could have made temporary pictures in red and green – or perhaps an interesting political statement. In fact, several artists were well ahead of me, playing with a plant's chemistry in a sort of *phytography*. In this case, the early red flush of the benighted fescue is very ephemeral, unlike,

say, a bicoloured lawn made of two different types of grass, which is fairly permanent, or the pattern of white daisy heads on a green carpet, a show repeated each year. The idea has been put to good use by some artists who have in effect created large, living, disappearing, photographs! This may be merely one up on the old biology lab trick with pelargonium leaves, shapes cut out of cardboard, and sunlight. But let an artist's mind work on an idea, and who knows what will result!

Still, this is only a new-fangled way of playing with plants. We've been making patterns and pictures – both static and (very slow) moving – with living plants for a long time. Think of examples as varied as le Nôtre's 17<sup>th</sup> century 'Turkish carpets' at Vaux-le-Vicomte, Monet's garden

## Some artistic thoughts gleaned from the gentle art of gardening

Martin Spray

(figs 1a & b), a Capability landscape, or an ancient Persian *paradise*. (They are all, of course, in their different ways, much else besides patterns and pictures.)

In English gardens the seasonal growth, flowering, fruiting, then hibernation of plants is often intended as a predictably changing picture. I think that many garden owners would prefer to cut out the growing-up, seeding, and dying-down bits, and have a year-round, colourful, static, and predictable pattern. A compromise on this was, I remember, reached by a front-gardener on a street near my home in the sixties, who each year bedded out a 'scene' of river (blue *Lobelia*) edged in white (*Alyssum*) running through a forest (dwarf conifers) to a lake in the meadow (lawn).



Fig. 2 Geometric evergreens at The Laskett.



Fig. 3 Cloud topiary at Kew.

I still think Hugh Johnson was right when he wrote in *The principles of gardening* (1979) that ‘most gardens are the only artistic effort their owners ever make.’

Gardeners perhaps tend to be conservative where the garden-as-art is concerned, in spite of annual gasps of amazement heard in Chelsea. (Or is the noise the plants’ cries of anguish?) There is, certainly, a great variety of art in gardens nowadays; and artist-minds’ play with plants is more noticeable. Garden

designer Paul Cooper gave us a wonderful study of *Living sculpture* (2001), ranging from bonsai to branch-weaving to crop art. Mind you, he’s also given us plants manacled upside-down in metal frames mounted on walls. However, I’m thinking not about garden-making in particular, or about art in gardens, but about some of the opportunities that might come from insights from the growing of plants, and applications of ecology.

Accidents can be interesting. The daisy is not as ubiquitous in Britain as we are inclined to think. It prefers short sward or bare patches where competition is reduced; and it prefers a soil fairly rich in calcium. The example of a daisy-head pattern that I had in mind a few lines back is one that intrigued me many years ago, when I was

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shown what appeared to be a tennis court – but wasn’t. It had been – but that was fifty years before. What I saw was the distribution of flowering daisies growing in straight lines in a lawn made on somewhat acidic soil. Marking the court had left a sharply distinct distribution of lime in the soil.

Ecology is a complicated business. The ghost tennis court was an unusually clear example of a plant’s response. A little more complicated was another ghost I met. This time, a tennis court had been invaded by a mole. The animal had tunnelled close to the surface, under the lawn. The ecology of the situation is this: some sorts of earthworm like to feed on decaying leaves, which they pull down into their tunnels. The greatest density of tasty dead grass occurred where repeated white-lining had killed the plants, so the greatest density of well-fed, tasty worms occurred under the straight lines of the tennis court markings. A neat example of a food chain – though I think in practice the daisies would be easier for an artist to collaborate with than moles.

An expert in mole ecology suggested that this particular digging was done by a male: female moles forage more randomly than boringly logical males. Rather like the English out shopping.

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Fig. 4 Bonsai tree



Fig. 5 A tulip picture was planted at Keukenhof in 2015.

It is easy, of course, for the artist to run away with an idea and treat plants as merely another material and colour on the palette. And in this respect artist and gardener can be very much alike. I remember the mixture of fascination and hesitation I felt when I stumbled on Axel Erlandson's (fascinating and skilful) graft sculptures of such things as hearts and chairs, but in many gardens trees are trained and/or trimmed into geometric shapes (figs 2 & 3). I

also remember the delight and amazement when I first saw the yew 'hedge' at Powis Castle and, indeed, the topiary at Levens Hall. Having stood bemused, surrounded by upwards of an acre of bonsai, many more than a century old, in a Suzhou park, I err towards awe. As much as anything else, I admire the careful skill involved in their survival. Incidentally, this was in 1980; I was told the bonsai collection alone was maintained by a staff of six, all with three

years' training. (Fig. 4).

Flick through, say, *The garden book* (Phaidon Press, 2000), and the feeling that plants are merely material for use in designs is very strong. Yet go and look at a few (ordinary) gardens, and the feeling subsides. Look through (say) Jane Fearnley-Whittingstall's *The garden. An English love affair* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002), and you can see how much relationships with plants have changed down the centuries. This is, of course, very fashion prone. Changes now are bringing new partners into the art of gardening.

If there is much to be gained by collaboration between ecologist and artist, in a different way collaboration with archaeologists might be fruitful. This takes us out of the garden into the wider landscape. 'Crop marks' – not the circles made by Martians or fairies – are well-known features of our pastoral and arable landscapes in drought summers, when the shallow soil covering antique walls and other structures dries out fastest, starving the plants growing on it of water, and thus nutrients, so stunting their growth or making them flower and seed earlier, or killing them. For instance, droughted grass at Stonehenge recently showed where some of the missing sarsens had once stood. Crop marks are ghosts that come and go – mysteriously, if you don't know why. A negative of the above reasoning explains patterns one sometimes sees, indicating the distribution of filled-in ditches

and silted-up streams and drains. Here, we have pointers for cryptic, seasonal, and weather-dependent interventions, and edaphic art, related to the soil.

Much research has been done on the interplay of soil fertility, moisture content, depth, and pH, microclimatic factors, and different mixtures of plant species – including the ongoing Rothamsted Research Station experiments on grassland that were begun in 1856! This has led to some interesting recent rethinking by garden makers. I don't include such things as the turf-roofed car that occasionally used to pass by, but Nigel Dunnett's flowery roof-meadows, for example, remind us of relationships between plants and site fertility. One might say that this is in the tradition of alpine bed and bog garden. Think, though, of what an artist might do with the *Gunnera* 'tunnels' in the Cornish gem of Trebah!

I am thinking of the sculptural possibilities of 'giant rhubarb'. Or indeed its playability: if a maize maze is amazing, how much more would one of *Gunnera* be? Or perhaps eulalia grass a.k.a. elephant grass (*Miscanthus*) is a more playable plant? It reaches 10 or 12 ft. here. When our daughters were young, about fifteen square yards of it made an excellent play jungle (so long as we were careful with the cut stem bases – it is like deciduous bamboo) but it wasn't really art.

I don't think the example of the bedding-plant stream was art either, nor the elaborate Victorian bedding schemes in



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Fig. 6 Art seen only from space: irrigation circles in Kansas.

the days of cheap labour, when a dozen gardeners might take two weeks setting up a display; and I think we can leave aside such things as 3-D elephants and teapots done in *Echeveria* – though all serve as pointers.

Next to the car park at Trebah is a field in which canary grass (*Phalaris canariensis*) has been grown for several years as bird food. I think it's very attractive *en masse*. It might well be experimented with by artists as a crop-art plant. The making of pictures with plants may be of limited artistry, though remember we are seeing the art of the tractor and spade, not of the brush. Painting sunflowers *with* sunflowers is a neat trick, or tulips *with* tulips (fig. 5) – so long, that is, as the plants behave as intended. Some examples cheated, using coloured mulches as well as living plants. Some examples are interesting, innovatory, abstracts. The images created each year by Japanese rice farmers, using

varieties with green and with yellow and purple leaves, are very representational.

There are patterns as well as pictures. The more interesting patterns are often happenstances: yellow swathes of oilseed rape, wistful blue drifts of flax, the vibrant yellow sheets of buttercup on degraded grazing land, or the occasional blood-splashed cereal field with poppies. I used to enjoy a disk of bright, warm yellow each spring: a roundabout of dandelion safe from trowel and spray in a backdrop of cleansed green. For deliberate sowing there are proprietary mixtures of traditional cereal-field 'weed' species to re-enchant parts of the landscape – and bemuse many farmers. Interesting for the tweeting age, perhaps, but not quite as exciting as old meadow havens of orchids and fritillaries, clary and yellow rattle, swarming with butterflies and musical with buzzing and humming and chirruping.



Fig. 7 A striped plantation

I have drifted away from the scale of the garden. Some of the most interesting patterns made with plants are writ large. For instance, the big, circular (centre-pivot) irrigation systems in the U.S. and Israel are typically a quarter of a mile (400m) in diameter, though some are much larger. When several scores of these 'fields' are seen in aerial photos (fig. 6), a sense of scale is lost. One sees an alien world, one from which serendipity (a vital quality of most successful gardens, incidentally) is banished. They were, some years ago, about the first things that interested me in the possibilities – and dangers – of making 'land art'. Today the latest technology apparently allows non-circular areas to be irrigated

– which must be tempting for megalomaniac artists.

Forestry, as well as agriculture and horticulture, has potential for the artist. Typical British forestry monoculture can produce useful accidents, especially of autumn-colour patterns (fig. 7). We have learned more artistic and adventurous ways of planting trees than hillsides of pyjama-stripes and patriotic proclamations of 'EIIR', but I don't think we have yet explored very far into such things as colour combinations, flowering and autumnal colour sequences, and evergreen and deciduous mixes.

This far from exhausts the possibilities art might take from gardening. Two further

examples are for *ephemeral art* – one very much so. The classic English lawn is striped, a roller laying the grass one way, then the other. Some mowers, though, have (as it were) run amok, and instead of stripes have made curves, checkerboards, knots, Christmas trees, and spelled out messages with their machines. They are gone in a few days.

Dew art – patterns on the wet lawn made before the sunrises – also has the advantage of avoiding most of the ambivalence or bittersweetness of some of the things we can do for aesthetic, artistic, cultural, or semiotic reasons, but which we might not want to do for ecological or environmental reasons. There are, I agree, usually opposing aesthetic reasons for their use and for their rejection. I am certainly not suggesting that we all rush out and deck the land with pictures, patterns, and abstracts, however skilfully done. That would be grotesque, though not necessarily as grotesque as how we have made much of our landscape already. At least artists aren't responsible for all that! Heaven forbid that *artists* – or gardeners – should ever have such freedom! 🌿

**Martin Spray** is a retired botanist and ecologist who began teaching in the environmental faculty of an Art & Design College, where he developed an interest in gardens and environmental art. He gardens in the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire, with his wife who is a landscape architect, potter and community artist.

For more suggestions and references see the HPS website: [www.hardy-plant.org.uk](http://www.hardy-plant.org.uk)