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The new Centenary Border at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens

David Jewell

Achillea 'Terracotta', Stipa gigantea & Campanula lactiflora 'Prichard's Variety'.

In 1964 Harold Hillier (later Sir Harold) (fig. 2) decided to plant a mixed border running diagonally north-east/south-west, straight through the middle of an existing 10-

acre field of nursery rows of trees and shrubs. He wanted it to celebrate the centenary of the family business which had developed from small beginnings as a flower shop in

Winchester, founded by his grandfather Edwin in 1864. The business had grown and established an international reputation as a source of temperate woody plants, and



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Fig. 1 The new Centenary Border, 250m long and around 5000m².



Fig. 2 Harold Hillier, who started the arboretum/gardens in the early 1950s.

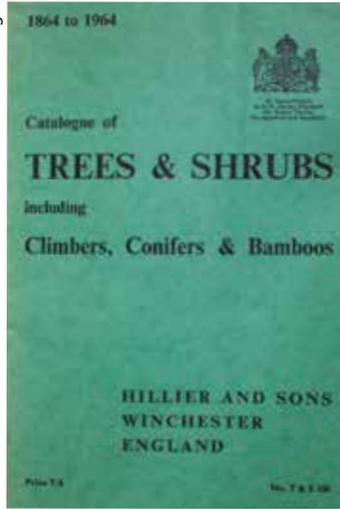


Fig. 3 The 1964 catalogue. Note the price: 7s. 6d. (37.5p).

it is unlikely that the huge variety offered by their nursery catalogues during Harold's tenure has been equalled or surpassed since¹. Interestingly, it was only last year that my friend and Patron of the Gardens, Roy Lancaster, kindly gave me a copy of the 1964 centenary edition catalogue (fig. 3), which provided a fascinating insight into the plants that were being grown at that time by Hillier nurseries. I eagerly thumbed through the pages, reading about the plants, now mature, which can still be seen growing well at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens.



Fig. 4 Full summer exuberance in July.

¹In 1977 the Gardens and Arboretum were gifted to Hampshire County Council, which remains the sole trustee and has responsibility for managing and developing the site.



Fig. 5 *Monarda* 'Jacob Cline', reliable and attractive to insects.



Fig. 6 New Zealand tussock grass, *Chionochloa rubra*, moves in the breeze.

The first Centenary Border

The original Centenary Border had a central grass vista flanked by beds of predominantly woody plants, species roses and perennials. They were set against a background of evergreen trees which included an interesting mix of *Ilex*, *Taxus*, *Juniperus*, *Cephalotaxus* and *Cupressus*, but over the years the shrubs and trees had grown to considerable heights, competing for space and light, and were past their prime. In 2010, prior to my appointment as Head of Collections, I visited the border for the first time. I was faced with a long, narrow, almost oppressive tunnel of over-mature trees, with perennials clearly struggling owing to root competition and lack of light. Clearly there were problems, but I felt that the site offered much potential. The Gardens were faced with a tricky dilemma: either to revamp the existing plantings and hard-

prune the woody plants as required, or to almost clear the area and start again.

I was unaware that eighteen months later I would be asked to lead the complete redevelopment of the border with a team of in-house staff and volunteers.

The new Centenary Border

Gardens Director Wolfgang Bopp gained permission to start again, with a completely new design brief. Plans were invited from a number of garden designers, with Julia Fogg Associates winning the tender. Julia and her colleague Anny Evason increased the length of the border to 250m and also increased the width of the central grass path to 6m and the width of the borders to 9m. Crucially, paving was introduced. This was long overdue as it caters for wheelchair users and also allows the border to be open all year round, whereas historically it had

been closed during periods of wet weather. The clear grey-white granite paving, interspersed with granite setts, is a key component of the new design, giving the site a much improved structure. Visually it enhances the overall sense of balance, scale and proportion, while diagonal pathways draw the eye towards Ten Acres East and West, effectively integrating the border with other parts of the gardens. A central ellipse creates a focal point and leads on one side towards a timber pavilion, offering a pleasing viewpoint, ideal in both hot or cold weather for visitors to sit, relax and enjoy the plantings. In early spring magnolias and camellias can easily be seen in the background where previously they had been hidden.

In-house preparation

Implementing the new design began with a thorough propagation programme to



Fig. 7 Australian tussock grass, *Poa labillardierei*.



Fig. 8 *Hydrangea arborescens* Incrediball.

ensure that no important or rare plants were lost from the collection. At the same time, as the 'old' border was still a favoured location, news bulletins informed members and garden visitors about what was to unfold. It took two seasons to clear the area almost completely; it was so thick with roots and stubborn tree stumps that even a heavy JCB struggled and groaned as it removed 45 years of history.

Few gardeners enjoy ideal soil and the Hillier Gardens are no exception, with clay at one end of the border and a more sandy soil at the other. The scale and size of the new border really struck me when I realised that we would need to cultivate and improve a planted area of around 5,000 square metres! In early spring this was achieved by using our own home-grown compost mixed with large volumes of the recycled Pro-Grow that Hampshire County Council produces from household

waste. A healthy 15cm-thick layer was applied, dug in by machine during periods of dry weather, and then allowed time to sink and settle.

Planting

By the spring of 2012 the site was ready for planting, which in total amounted to 30,000 plants including 8,000 alliums. Even more bulb planting has followed, using groups of *Galanthus* and *Narcissus* to inject seasonal interest during the quiet 'shoulder season' periods. Wherever possible perennials were planted at 1L pot size, as I firmly believe they will establish just as easily as a 3L plant but at considerably cheaper cost. Planting days were usually scheduled for a Tuesday and Thursday using a combined 25-strong team of staff, volunteers and students. For these team days to work, preparation was key and areas had to be marked out and the plants set out in accordance

with the planting plans; again no mean feat given the size and scale of the project. On reflection we managed very well; on some days I would see the whole team bent double, planting, working hard as their chatter filled the air, and a tangible sense of purpose was clear. It made me smile quietly to myself, at the same time proud because the project was really coming together.

All borders require a hedge or background to provide shelter and a backcloth of some kind, and the new border uses a traditional evergreen yew, *Taxus baccata*. Young plants, 45cm tall, create a broken-line effect at the back, and intermittent diagonal buttresses help split up the long length of the border. Now, some four years later the yews are nearly 1.8m tall and will need to be cut at that height to ease future maintenance. Importantly, height has also been added

by 27 metal obelisks covered by annual or perennial climbers which rise above the tapestry of lower-growing perennials to help break up the plantings. Along the diagonal pathways are taller supports to draw the eye looking east and west as you walk the length of the border.

When you see the new border for the first time the scale is impressive, and the length is enhanced by a subtle curve in the topography of the site with a view line towards a fine, tall, columnar Dawyck Beech at the far end. Occasionally I can enjoy this view early in the morning when the summer light is less intense and irrigation sprinklers gently spin and the scene is pleasingly quiet against a backdrop of nearby arboretum trees.

Plants of interest

It's a pleasure to walk down both sides from time to time to admire individual plants or plant associations along the way, and here are a few



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Fig. 9 *Leucanthemum x superbum* 'Phyllis Smith' with *Phlox paniculata* 'Monica Lynden-Bell'.



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Fig. 10 *Lonicera* 'Mandarin', much admired but without scent.



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Fig. 11 *Clematis* 'Broughton Star', *Anthriscus* 'Ravenswing' & alliums – a near-perfect picture.



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Fig. 12 *Clematis* 'Alionushka' with *Artemisia lactiflora*.

selections noted during July (fig. 4). *Monarda* often has noteworthy bright flowers, typically with long-lipped tubular flowers on top of coloured bracts, and *M.* 'Jacob Cline' (fig. 5) always performs reliably and is a magnet to pollinating insects. Nearby, *Achillea* 'Terracotta' has turned rich yellow, and blends nicely with the shimmering, airy, see-through seedheads of the Spanish oat grass, *Stipa gigantea*, teasing the view towards a background clump of rich violet-blue *Campanula lactiflora* 'Prichard's Variety'.

Grasses and perennials always sit comfortably together and numerous examples may be seen including the mound-shaped New Zealand tussock grass, *Chionochloa rubra* (fig. 6), with warm, brassy-brown to golden leaves providing subtle movement in the slightest breeze. Further along

the colour tones change with the steel-blue, narrow foliage of the Australian tussock grass, *Poa labillardierei* (fig. 7), which is a shimmering silvery haze in full flower. The South African lovegrass, *Eragrostis curvula*, gracefully leans forward, its airy flower heads and rounded habit helping to soften the straight-edged paving and at the same time unobtrusively increase the depth of the border.

Front-row perennials must earn their place and *Sedum* 'Matrona' always delivers, with dark-maroon-tinted leaves and free-standing soft-pink flowers. Immediately opposite is *Inula magnifica* 'Sonnenstrahl,' which at 2.4m with enormous foliage and deep-yellow daisy flowers cannot fail to draw the eye and grab attention. At the back of the border, *Hydrangea arborescens* 'Incrediball' (fig. 8) is like a beacon with distinctly

round, almost football-size, pure white flower heads borne on strong stems; it is well placed in front of purple/beige *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster', giving trademark 1.8m verticals, and their two shapes create good contrast. Further along, the flowerheads of the reliably good Shasta daisy, *Leucanthemum x superbum* 'Phyllis Smith' provide an effective but subtle combination with *Phlox paniculata* 'Monica Lynden-Bell', both growing happily in dappled shade (fig. 9).

Climbing plants are an essential part of any planting scheme and the two stars of the show this year have been *Lonicera* 'Mandarin' (fig. 10), which reaches 5m, and *Clematis* 'Broughton Star'. The *Lonicera*, a hybrid cross between *L. tragophylla* and *L. x brownii* 'Dropmore Scarlet', is a particularly good, free-flowering cultivar much admired by visitors. Copper-tinted foliage is followed by deep-reddish-orange buds opening to vivid orange tubular flowers, 6–7cm long. In full flower the archway it covers is a delight and almost glows, but scent is sadly missing.

The montana covers an archway nearby and is equally desirable, its dark trifoliate leaves and semi-double dusky-pink flowers partnered by a group of the dark-leaved *Anthriscus* 'Ravenswing', with delicate white flowers showing off particularly well drifts of purple-toned alliums – a near-perfect picture (fig. 11).

Other clematis of note include semi-herbaceous C. 'Alionushka', its mauve-pink tepals with tips that twist and recurve with age; it is always reliable but it needs to be lightly tied against a support as it is non-clinging. It contrasts attractively with *Artemisia lactiflora*, its purplish young foliage and a froth of creamy white flowers carried on tall stems (fig. 12). C. 'Alionushka' has been repeat-planted close to the central ellipse of the border where 3 obelisks face each other diagonally. On the opposite diagonal this pattern is repeated using *Clematis* 'Minuet', reaching 3m with attractive white, blunted tepals tipped purple-red.

I must also mention *Dactylicapnos macrocapnos* (fig. 13), which originates from Nepal and in UK gardens requires some ground-level frost protection during winter. Reaching 2.5m, it has fine, pale green foliage and is covered with drooping, bright yellow clusters of heart-shaped flowers, as many as a dozen or more at a time, from June to autumn. Like so many plants it needs to be seen and used more often, and is very much a personal favourite.



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Fig. 13a & 13b *Dactylicapnos macrocapnos*, half hardy in Hampshire.

On a border of such size and scale, the four obelisk groups inject height making the central area overall more cohesive. It reminds me of advice given to me many years ago by the respected designer and plantswoman Penelope Hobhouse, who suggested 'If in doubt with your planting scheme, then repeat.' Her words live long in my memory as this works so well in gardens of any size or situation.

The redeveloped Centenary Border may be very contemporary in style but it also adds a considerable number of new taxa to the Garden Collections, bringing the total to more than 12,000 species and cultivars. Started by Sir Harold Hillier in the early 1950s, without doubt the Gardens are a real gem in the county, and the country. We strive to continue his work as an important centre for plants, education and conservation to be enjoyed by visitors of all ages throughout the year. All thanks to the spirit, vision and hard work of a truly remarkable man. 🌸

David Jewell trained at RBG Kew. For 11 years he was Floral Superintendent at RHS Garden Wisley, where he worked with a very broad range of plants. His plantsmanship and eye for detail have been well used during the past 6 years as Head of Collections at The Sir Harold Hillier Gardens.