

## **The Beth Chatto Symposium: Ecological Planting in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, a report by Colin Skelly.**

This symposium really caught the imagination of the horticultural world, with around 500 delegates from 26 countries coming together to discuss the future of ecological planting. Naturalism is a style of planting that draws on an ecological understanding of natural plant populations and now occupies the horticultural mainstream. How far though, is 'ecological planting' something more than just a passing fashion?

James Hitchmough, in the opening talk of the symposium, posed the question of whether naturalistic planting was just a utopian impression of nature and/or a cost effective utilitarian horticultural solution for cash-starved public spaces. He defined ecological planting as assemblages of plants that are designed to interact rather than traditional horticulture where the aim is to prevent them from interacting through intensive interference (weeding, pruning, and so on). This type of planting seeks to combine aesthetics and function, creating attractive planting designs but using ecological processes to improve performance and reduce labour inputs (through routine weeding for example). Hitchmough is now less sure that this improvement in function is really there as ecological planting schemes often fail without significant inputs of resources and horticultural skill but still argued that improved function (less weeding and other routine gardening tasks) can be achieved if plants are chosen for their broadly equivalent competitiveness and fitness. Planting density is the key to this style of planting - if the biomass (total amount of plants) that can be supported by a given plot is maximised then the space for weeds is limited, if not then weeds will fill the vacuum. Covering the ground is also important as exclusion of light will minimise the ability of weeds to establish and compete. Aesthetic appeal is enhanced by planting in layers and utilising emergent flower stems. In a later talk Hitchmough detailed his technique of sowing designed plant communities, utilising seed mixes sown on gravel mulches.

Hitchmough argued that there was still a significant cultural gap between the enthusiasm of gardeners and designers for naturalistic style planting and the appreciation of the wider public, a gap that could be narrowed by maximising of flowering density and longevity in order to support the wider appeal of naturalistic planting beyond the bubble of its adherents. Interestingly, Cassian Schmidt later argued that naturalistic gardening was avant garde and should push forward and not try to please the mainstream.

Keith Wiley, head gardener at the Garden House for many years and now the owner of Wild Side garden and nursery, gave an interesting talk describing his style of gardening and its evolution. Wiley emulates the natural landscapes that he has seen on his travels around the world, especially those of South Africa. It is not a case of copying those landscapes but echoing them, often by using different plants but recreating the forms and atmosphere of larger landscapes in a garden setting.

Olivier Filippi discussed the challenge of designing ecological gardens in the dry southern Mediterranean. Here the harsh climate means that designers have to work with shapes, light and shadow and utilise rhythm, texture and contrast to create striking designs in the absence of herbaceous planting options. For Filippi, gardeners are often the problem as disturbance is the friend of pioneer growth. The aim, he argued, should be to make things more difficult for plants, not easier – to hold them at a rate of slow change in order to reduce labour inputs and eliminate the need for the use of herbicide (banned in public spaces in France). Filippi's description of allelopathic

gardens being designed in southern Europe was a particularly interesting approach to using natural processes to reduce or eliminate weeding.

Cassian Schmidt described naturalistic planting as being well-established in Germany. The main maintenance strategies for designed plant communities for Schmidt is to engineer the soil to create a more stressful habitat (a point also made by Hitchmough and Peter Korn), to plant densely and to use plants of high rigour and stress tolerance. Schmidt also questioned the use of the word ecological (man is a part of nature, there are very few natural landscapes only semi-natural) and preferred the term naturalistic – gardeners are creating an idealised picture of nature. An interesting panel discussion followed this by discussing the impact of ideology on notions of nativeness in plants, which imposes political boundaries on dynamic plant communities that will not be helpful in an era of rapid climate change.

Presentations by Peter Janke and Dan Pearson showcased their design styles – naturalistic planting within a formal structure for the former and a romantic emulation of nature for the latter. This was followed by a fascinating talk by Midori Shintani, head gardener at the Pearson designed Millennium Forest in Hokkaido, Japan, about the trials and tribulations of gardening in this northerly garden and the challenges of faithfully implementing a designed space across time. Andi Pettis gave an overview of the amazing High Line and the difficulties and opportunities presented by this unique site.

The ambition for a new dynamic horticulture in urban public spaces, using ecological principles to design plant communities, has largely not been achieved. As a style of garden design, however, naturalism has been far more influential. Indeed, it has become a popular and fashionable style for planting in private gardens. James Hitchmough clearly hoped in his opening question that naturalism was more than a utopian response to industrialisation, urbanisation and intensive agriculture. This symposium hinted that in large measure naturalism is such a utopian response. It is, however, nonetheless meaningful for that.

Whilst the contemporary economic and political climate has limited the adoption of naturalism in the public sphere, it has flourished elsewhere because its aesthetic qualities engage us. It is driven by a creative response to the intensity and pace of modernity and formed by both nostalgia and a yearning for a new set of relationships with the natural world. It draws on ecological science but is people-centred, created for our enjoyment first. It does have real benefits in terms of biodiversity, dynamic planting schemes and lower labour inputs but these are secondary to the desire for an immersive impact on the human senses.

More of the human population lives in urban environments but the need for contact with the natural world remains as strong as ever. As our daily lives become more divorced from the rhythms of nature, the capacity grows for naturalistic planting to remake this instinctive connection. Despite this, another recurring theme at the conference was the need for the skills necessary to maintain designed gardens and landscapes. High quality green spaces are increasingly being acknowledged for their positive effect in terms of ecological goods and services (shade, shelter, drainage, air filtration, etc.) and for people's well-being. It is high time more value was put on those that make and maintain them.