

THE ORIENT IN YORKSHIRE

Jenny Rhodes

Prairie flowers and grasses from North America are a popular garden trend in garden design at present, but I've turned East for my modest end-of-terrace garden. Twenty-five years ago I was nursing a ninety-one year old lady who lived in Chipping Campden. At one end of the long high street there was a small garden made in remembrance of Ernest 'Chinese' Wilson who grew up in the small town.

He became a plant hunter in China first, sent out there by Veitch, the plant nursery based in Kingston-on-Thames and Exeter. Many of the seeds and plants he sent home are still grown today: *wilsoniae*, *helenae*, *sinensis*, *sargentiae* and *davidiae* are all clues in the plant names as to their provenance. I thought it would be interesting to make a garden in Yorkshire using only plants native to China, with perhaps one or two Japanese varieties, because the two countries are botanically intertwined especially where certain flowers such as chrysanthemums are concerned.

Of course this did mean that I had to squash all the other flowers I like from the rest of the world into the front garden: it is about ten feet square.

But, should I copy the Chinese style of garden or just plant the plants? The more I researched, the harder it was to decide. In China, the very poor struggled to feed themselves. A drawing shows a low circular stone building. Half was a pigsty, while the other side was the human toilet. A channel let the waste contents of both sides be shovelled up and spread on the land to aid crop production.

In cities there were courtyards with potted plants, and a tree or a climber growing in restricted space. The civil servants and scholars had modest gardens with small wooden pavilions for wine-drinking parties by the light of the moon. The emperors had vast palace grounds only visited at special times. When the peonies, or the lotus, or the cherry blossom were at their perfect state of flowering, servants erected little temporary viewing gazebos placed so that the court could ooh and ah at the beauty before them.

Nature was held in such high regard that rocks and water were used to imitate it, although, to my eyes, there is too much rock and not enough flowers and colour. Out in the hills, as Wilson and others found, there were sheets of lilies, valleys full of rhododendron, roses climbing up trees thirty feet high, with hundreds of blooms. Yet the Chinese clung to a small choice of plants that had meaning for their harsh lives; longevity, the birth of a son, prosperity and health all had plants symbolising these qualities and are still grown widely today.

My garden will have a paved courtyard, an area for flowers, shrubs and trees and a very small gazebo facing the setting sun. I am omitting the pigsty! The wisteria, magnolia and hamamelis are growing well. However, of seven Gansu peonies planted in 2006, only one survived the flooding of 2007. Few plants can survive under water unless they are aquatic.

The list of herbaceous flowers is slowly growing as more searching of the Plant Finder and catalogues is done. I have learned a lot. This is a garden for my old age. When it is done (if a garden is ever 'done') I shall sit drinking wine and look at the moon.

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