

## 'BARNSDALE - THE TV YEARS': A TALK BY NICK HAMILTON

*Anne Still*

Nick Hamilton's passion for the garden and his admiration and loyalty to his father's work ethic, as well as to his creations at what were actually two Barnsdale gardens, shone through his talk. He himself chose to train at Writtle, after reviewing all that was on offer at a show at the NEC, where a number of agricultural and horticultural colleges were represented, all trying to attract students. Geoff had also trained there, years before.

Geoff was the editor of *Practical Gardener* when he was invited by John, the producer, to fill first one, then a number of slots on *Gardeners' World*. That editorial work continued for years and Geoff subsidised his Barnsdale garden by also writing articles for other publications, so that he was working seven days a week and writing into the evenings, to keep all the balls in the air.

Geoff had ideas for what he could do on the programme and actually spent an evening supplying excellent local beer to a producer who was waiting to ask him to do just that! Geoff had rented the house and land at Barnsdale in 1976 and, increasingly, the ideas for the programme had to be set up there, so that real work in progress could be filmed as it was really happening. The filming occupied the time from Monday to Wednesday during one week, with the material being broadcast over the next two programmes on successive Friday evenings. This caused some problems, as the weather had sometimes changed dramatically by the end of the second week.

The filming schedule necessitated two huge BBC vehicles, full of cameras and editing equipment, being parked at Barnsdale, which on one occasion allowed Geoff to escape an embarrassing situation. He had just acquired his first TV set, rather unwillingly, as he'd never been interested in owning one. A BBC rule involved the immediate dismissal of any employee, caught by detector vans, watching television without a licence. Luckily, he was able to show the astonished sleuth a probable source for the 'strong signal' in the form of a large vehicle with a whole battery of 24 televisions installed for monitoring purposes. Needless to say, he fled to the nearest post office to buy a licence immediately!

In 1982, the owners of Barnsdale Hall put everything up for sale, but Geoff was able to acquire a small farmhouse a mile away, with five acres of land, four of them flat pasture and one, woodland. He was permitted to move three large trees from 'home' to the new site, where he had to set about modelling a complete new garden. He used beech for hedging, completing his Versailles section first. He also put in a very wide grass path and wider herbaceous borders, because increasing visitor numbers made him aware of the need to allow the public to cut corners a little. Even so, tumbling plants designed to set a 'cottage garden' atmosphere in parts of the garden do get trampled.

The new garden was all on heavy clay and, after thirty years of adding well-rotted horse manure and home-produced compost, it is still heavy clay. Many of us understand this all too well. He also regularly kept viewers up to date with trade developments, including new varieties and pelleted chicken manure. He continued with his beloved raised beds, using them to show many different varieties of vegetable - for example, beetroot in different colours - and alternative ways of growing them, so that people with gardens of all sizes could have a succession of home-grown veggies. This was pioneering work, as there was no trend towards growing such things in small gardens at the time he started showing it.

Geoff maintained the old-fashioned garden traditions of using a variety of available materials to make bridges to go over the raised beds, as well as construct fences, shelters and ornamental plant

supports and obelisks. The latter were topped with old ball-cocks, painted to match, as large wooden balls were expensive. Many materials were recycled, including old bricks, and cloches which were made from battens with plastic or netting tacked onto them. This down-to-earth approach was and remains welcome and refreshing, when most of the audience do not have unlimited funds to beautify their gardens. He also had a method of creating 'rocks' for alpine beds, using 2 parts coir, 1 part sharp sand and a little cement mixed in. The mixture was divided and placed in holes in the field, which were lined with polythene, lightly punctured and covered over for a couple of weeks. This was started in order to prevent too much limestone paving being taken from its native environment, and gives a very attractive result.

I have had to omit much fascinating detail about the creation of, for example, a Paradise Garden, a Hermit's Garden, and several others, for reasons of space. The lecture was impressive throughout, revealing how far-sighted a gardener Geoff really was, and how far ahead of his time he was in his methods and his approach to re-cycling, vegetable growing, and in creating wildlife-friendly spaces as a matter of course. I could very happily hear this talk again, to catch details that I know have been missed.

It is also reassuring to recognise the pride and the continuity of attitude that Nick Hamilton demonstrated throughout.

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