

The Beth Chatto Gardens

Sally-Ann Turner

I'm fortunate to live only fifteen miles from Elmstead Market, near Colchester in Essex, where Beth Chatto OBE, VMH has her wonderful gardens and nursery. Over the years, I have found the gardens inspiring and the nursery a marvellous source of good plants.

Walking from the car park past the screening conifer hedge, you enter the tasteful world of Beth Chatto, where everything is well organised and attractively arranged – down to the pretty posies of seasonal flowers and foliage in ceramic vases not only on the tables in the tea room but also in the ladies! At the entrance, a decision has to be made: whether first to have a cup of coffee and study the plant list, or head straight for the well-stocked nursery, or enjoy the lovely gardens. Whatever your choice, plenty of time is needed to do justice to the visit as there is so much to see.



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Fig.1 The Gravel Garden. In the driest part of the country and on the poorest soil, Beth Chatto pioneered using drought-resistant plants which once planted are never watered.

Let's begin with the gardens, started 54 years ago. Gardens that have long been open to the public have a tendency to lose the spirit of their creator, but this is definitely not the case here because these are very much still the personal gardens of Beth Chatto, who celebrated her 90th birthday last June.

Essex generally has low rainfall and in the Colchester area the average per annum is just 51cms and periods of summer drought are regular occurrences. The now famous Gravel Garden (fig. 1), built on the site of her old car park in the early 1990s, has been an experiment to gauge the resilience of plants and, although seriously tempted during very hot, dry periods of prolonged drought and scorching winds when some plants appeared to be struggling, nothing has been watered after its initial planting. Using the idea of a dried-up river bed, large island beds were marked out between gravel paths, and the "earth" (comprising mainly stones, gravel and sand) was enriched to give the plants a good start. Each plant was dunked in a bucket of water until the bubbles stopped (a good tip for planting all containerised plants), and once planted it was watered by hose for the first and only time. The Garden looks good throughout the year, but I love it best of all in the spring when the euphorbias and bergenias are flowering, the area is spangled with fritillarias, species tulips, and other bulbs, and a large clump of *Bergenia* 'Schneekonigin' with tall shell-pink flowers greets visitors.

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Fig. 2 The Water Gardens. Damp areas around the ponds provide quite different conditions.

Overlooked by a majestic pollarded oak is the main entrance with steps down to the rest of the gardens. It was in 1960 that Beth and her husband Andrew moved to Elmstead Market, to their newly built split-level house on the family fruit farm. The site, much of it not previously cultivated, comprised several acres of unproductive waste land including several difficult areas, and Beth rose to the challenge by creating different gardens using plants best suited to the prevailing conditions. She was guided in this by her husband who had spent many years studying plant ecology, and so she became an early exponent of growing the right plant in the right place – then a new approach to gardening, but widely accepted today. Sadly Andrew Chatto died in 1999, but information about his seminal work on the natural origins of plants is found at www.bethchatto.co.uk/andrew-chatto-s-archives.htm

The Water Gardens (fig. 2) were created from a very damp, overgrown hollow with a spring-fed stream running through. Once the wilderness had been cleared, the Chattos had the stream dammed to create a series of ponds. The making of this area is well documented in Beth's book *The Damp Garden*, first published in 1982. The outline of the ponds is best seen in winter when one can appreciate how the shapes sit so harmoniously within their setting.



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Fig. 3 A shady area for specimen plants such as hostas and ferns and seasonal flowers.

Beyond the ponds are shadier areas (fig. 3) where the space between specimen plants, such as hostas and ferns, features interesting ground-cover plants that provide an attractive foil for seasonal flowering subjects such as snowdrops and erythroniums.

The house sits at a higher level where the soil is poor, sandy and gravelly. The south-west sloping site was used to advantage as a Mediterranean Garden featuring plants best suited to such conditions. On both sides of the stepped gravel path, joining the upper and lower levels, the planting includes many silver, grey, and glaucous-leaved specimens. To the south of the house, and at the same level, is the newer Scree Garden of five island beds holding smaller plants which would be lost in the Gravel Garden.

Each has its own special charm, but perhaps I feel most at home in the Woodland Garden (fig. 4), where the accompanying bird song is always more pronounced – even if the birds aren't always visible! This 2-acre corner had been kept as a wooded area for wildlife until the hurricane of October 1987 struck, leaving many mature trees uprooted or damaged. Over the following years the area was cleared, paths made, and a wonderful range of shade-loving plants added to create a magical place which has interest throughout the year.

In 1951, while living in Braiswick (west of Colchester), Beth had become a founder member of the Colchester Flower Club under the chairmanship of her neighbour Mrs Desmond Underwood, and the artistry Beth used for her demonstrations is reflected in her planting style. I am not qualified to explain Beth's design principles but, from one of her guided tours, I seem to remember that she likes to plant in asymmetric triangles, placing the dominant taller specimens such as trees and shrubs first to provide the "hills" and then infilling the "valleys" with lower-growing sub-shrubs, perennials, annuals and bulbs. Colour is an important consideration but her priorities are shape, form, outline and texture. Her beds and borders are like interwoven rich plant tapestries, and you often come across an inspired grouping of plants, a beautiful cameo which could be repeated in your own garden.

I haven't listed all the garden areas, but I hope I've given a flavour of the different growing conditions and I imagine that most visitors are able to relate to at least one of them and get ideas for future planting. I urge you to read Beth's books: in addition to those about her Gardens, *Dear Friend and Gardener*, in collaboration with her dear friend Christopher Lloyd, gives a fascinating insight into the lives of the two famous gardeners.

It is difficult to explain why these Gardens are so special – the site is not an historic one and there are no statues or follies to provide focal points; perhaps the answer is that the plants are so well placed, both artistically and ecologically, that they alone provide a sense of tranquillity throughout the year.

Now for the nursery, where plants you've admired in the gardens may be available to buy. By the late 1960s Andrew Chatto was not in the best of health and he gave up

fruit farming. In order to help fund her garden, in 1967 Beth set up a nursery called 'Unusual Plants', focusing on species and interesting foliage, as well as flowers. From her involvement with the Flower Club movement she knew that there was an interest in such plants which, at the time, were not readily available. While living in Braiswick, the Chattos had met Sir Cedric Morris, a well-known painter and plantsman, who lived and gardened at Benton End, near Hadleigh in Suffolk. He became Beth's good friend and mentor, and over the years he gave her many unusual plants, including various species, sometimes as seeds or cuttings, and encouraged her to learn how to propagate them. Many of the plants now grown at Elmstead Market originally came from him. A favourite of mine is a delightful little daffodil with a miniature, lemony-yellow, slightly frilled trumpet and narrow green leaves which can flower before Christmas. It had been found in the wild in Spain by a friend of her mentor, and Beth was given permission to name it *Narcissus* 'Cedric Morris' (fig. 5). Another select bulb, originally from Benton End, is *Galanthus elwesii* 'Cedric's Prolific' (fig. 6) which, as its name suggests, is a good doer. It has a large single flower, with a single green 'v' mark on the inner segments and occasional faint green shading on the tips of its outer petals, on a tall stem with broad grey-green leaves that have a pointed tip.



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Fig. 4 The Woodland Garden springs into colour in February.



Fig. 5 *Narcissus* 'Cedric Morris' named after Beth's good friend and mentor, who gave her many unusual plants.



Fig. 6 *Galanthus elwesii* 'Cedric's Prolific'

Over the years other plants, including several pulmonarias, have been introduced by the nursery, including *Pulmonaria* 'Beth Chatto', with bright blue flowers and long narrow leaves marked with well-spaced spots, which forms a fairly upright clump. I know of only one other plant that bears her name – the pale lilac-pink-flowered *Geranium maculatum* 'Beth Chatto', although it wasn't named by her nursery.

When, with just one girl to help her, Beth started selling her unusual plants, she probably had no idea that the nursery would grow into the mecca for keen gardeners that it is today; and fortunately for those who do not live nearby, these days there is a mail order service. The nursery lists around 2000 plants, many propagated on site, including many that are rare, unusual or recent introductions as well as firm favourites. Customers are asked to write their own labels, which I find helps me to remember the plants' names. As one might expect, plants are arranged according to their required growing conditions, so there's no excuse not to follow Beth's advice: "Grow contented plants and you will find peace among them." 🐾

Sally-Ann Turner joined the HPS in 1986, is a founder member of the Pulmonaria Group and currently Chairman of the HPS Essex Group. She has served as a Trustee and for ten years as Groups Coordinator. She has a large garden in Coggeshall, Essex which she shares with a variety of wildlife.