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## Comments on an open garden

**Peter Williams**

Fig. 1 *Magnolia* 'Star Wars', with *M.* 'Leonard Messel' in the background.

I have always enjoyed visiting gardens and ten years ago I decided to open my garden for the first time. The thought that visitors would be arriving on a set date certainly motivated me to actually do all those jobs that I had always intended to do, but had never quite got around to doing. Preparing for an open day can be physically and mentally demanding, especially when the weather preceding the event is unhelpful, but the biggest challenge has sometimes been to reflect on what I've overheard in the garden!

### Baptism of fire

The very first group to visit my garden was a small U3A contingent from a nearby city. Having seen our first entry in the NGS Yellow book, they asked to come at quite short notice, in mid April. I suggested that the visit was perhaps a little early in the season, but they informed me that it was the only available date in their

programme. I was unable to lay on refreshments so suggested that the group use an excellent garden centre café nearby.

I was really nervous about the visit because the two previous springs had been notable for harsh mid-April frosts which damaged my early-flowering rhododendrons and magnolias. To try to protect them I purchased a large quantity of fleece and during the week preceding the visit I covered all the vulnerable plants every night. On the day the weather was perfect and I thought that the garden looked really good. All my shrubs had escaped the frosts and specimens such as magnolias, *Corylopsis sinensis* and *Camellia* x *williamsii* were at their peak. The erythroniums and *Cyclamen coum* were fully open and the circular meadow was overflowing with *Narcissus poeticus*. I had manicured the lawn edges, and carefully

raked the leaves between the shrubs and bulbs in the woodland beds (figs 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5). I was feeling relieved and happy.

The group arrived, and after a brief welcome I offered to take them on a conducted tour of the garden. My offer was declined. The group leader said that individuals would rather go around on their own, and at their own pace. I expected this to be a leisurely stroll but, in fact, they 'did' the garden, glasshouse and large polytunnel in less than fifteen minutes and headed back to their minibus.

I asked one of the visitors why they were leaving so soon and he replied grumpily that it was the worst visit they had ever been on. I was shocked and asked why. He replied, "First, tea and cakes were not provided; secondly, there were not enough benches; and thirdly, and most importantly, the garden is scruffy."



Fig. 2 *Corylopsis sinensis* in full bloom.

He went on to say that I had not bothered to rake the fallen leaves off the flower beds and some of the grass had not been cut. I explained that the uncut grass was the meadow and that woodland beds are usually covered with leaf litter to provide natural growing conditions for the bulbs and spring flowers – but he clearly had other ideas.

I subsequently discovered that the group was not a gardening group, but an



Fig. 3 *Erythronium* 'Pagoda' edging the manicured lawn.

'Excursion group' and that they had come to view the garden only because their planned visit to a pottery had been cancelled at very short notice. I am pleased to say that many U3A gardening groups have since visited, some on more than one occasion, and that they all appear to have enjoyed their visits.

#### The importance of cake

I sometimes wonder what visitors actually remember

about my garden after their visit – is it an overall impression, or a memory of a particular area, or a plant that was looking good on the open day, or perhaps something that looked poor and needed attention? Recently, when I was giving a talk to a local gardening club, I found out what one visitor remembered. As I sat on the front row, waiting for the meeting to open, I chatted with a member



Fig. 4 *Narcissus poeticus* filled the meadow.



Fig. 5 *Meconopsis* protected by the woodland litter.

of the audience who asked where I was from. She told me that the gardening club had had an excellent visit to my village in spring. "Yes, that was my garden" I replied, "and I remember seeing you in the group." She went on enthusiastically, saying that it had been a lovely afternoon with excellent weather and the club members had really enjoyed the trip and lots had gone home with plants. Then she remembered the cakes (fig. 6) : "I had a piece of gooseberry cake at your garden: I had never even heard of gooseberry cake before the visit, but it was amazing." (Gooseberry cake is one of my wife's special recipes.)

Feeling confident because my companion had had such a good time, I politely asked what she remembered about the garden. After a long, thoughtful pause she replied, "You know, I can't remember anything at all about the garden, but the cakes were really wonderful."

### Garden? What garden?

At least that visitor had looked at my garden, even if she remembered nothing about it a few months later. On an earlier occasion a potential visitor wrote off the garden without even taking a look! The person in question is now one of my closest friends, but our relationship didn't start well. We had both been asked to give some advice about improving the appearance of a small area of waste ground owned by the parish. We met



Fig. 6 The importance of cake.

with a local councillor at the site, and we both made suggestions. I was unaware at that time that my fellow advisor was famous nationally for doing this just this sort of thing for churchyards. I did, however, quickly get the feeling that he thought my input was unhelpful and quite unnecessary (in the 'this village is big enough for only one horticulturist' sort of way).

After the meeting he drove me the short distance

home and I asked if he would like to have a look around my garden. We approached the gate and he looked over at the front garden, which is lovely in spring and autumn but a little dull in mid-summer (fig. 7) when this meeting took place. After a quick scan he said, "No thank you", got back into his car, and left.

He hadn't realised that the main garden lies behind the house and can't be seen from the road.



Fig. 7 "Garden? What garden?" The view from the front gate.



Fig. 8 A well-tended lawn and a curved border – the garden of a man or a woman?

A year later, on the inaugural day of our village open gardens, he appeared early and unannounced, and asked to look around. He was surprised to find that we have quite a large rear garden with some interesting plants. Remarkably, we quickly became really good friends and have remained so ever since.

### Gender and gardening

On our first NGS open day I overheard two women discussing the garden. “Do you think the main gardener is a man or woman?” asked one.

They both looked around, and the other said, “Well, the lawn is really well cared for and the edges are immaculate, and the hedge is beautifully cut. All that suggests it’s a man’s garden. But ... there are no straight lines, and the herbaceous

border is nicely curved, which suggests a woman’s touch.” (Fig. 8)

“Yes,” said the first, “but have you **seen** the herbaceous border? It’s rubbish, just a muddle of plants with no care taken about colour combinations, leaf shapes or relative size – it must be a man’s garden.”

She was correct on both counts – it is a man’s garden and the herbaceous border was indeed in need of some attention.

So I asked a close female friend who is an expert at colour-themed beds for help with the border. One summer’s day she came for lunch and viewed the garden. After spending a long time examining the herbaceous planting she said, “This is a classic border”. I was very pleasantly surprised, and

thought perhaps it wasn’t as bad as I had feared, but then she went on, “Yes, a classic ‘Morecambe and Wise’ border [as Eric Morecambe defended the duo’s music-making against André Previn’s criticism], all the right plants but not necessarily in the right order.” After extensive repositioning with the help and guidance of my friend, I believe the border now looks much more interesting, colour-coordinated, and feminine (figs 9 & 10)!

### Plant sales

Groups usually visit in April and May, but occasionally they wish to come in June. At this time my potted spring bulbs have largely finished so I sometimes replace the containers of tulips with pots of rhododendrons in flower.

I overheard one visitor talking enthusiastically about a few pots of compact, very floriferous rhododendrons I had put on the patio. "I will certainly buy one of those if they have any for sale," he said, to which his companion responded, "That would be a daft thing to do – it's a well known fact that shrubs only flower really well just before they die – mark my words, those will be dead by autumn."

This only confirmed my long-held view that whatever follows the phrase 'It's a well known fact' is usually wrong.

I always try to have plants for sale that reflect the garden, which isn't difficult because all are propagated from garden stock and none bought in for the event. I frequently hear visitors, especially couples, carefully



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Figs 9 & 10 With advice from my friend Julie, seen here with *Malus floribunda*, the herbaceous borders were greatly improved and deceptively feminine.

discussing whether it is worth spending £2.50 for a plant that they probably couldn't get from a garden centre for less than £5, if at all. If I think that they are dithering but one of the pair really wants the plant, I suggest

that it is only the price of a cup of coffee that will provide enjoyment for just 10 minutes – whilst the plant is potentially immortal, capable of multiplying and could provide pleasure for a lifetime – what a bargain! (Fig. 11).



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Fig. 11 A successful raid on the plant stall.



Fig. 12 Our postman's perspective – he just couldn't see the fun in gardening.

### We're not all gardeners

Surprising at it may seem, not everyone is keen on gardening. I was expecting a parcel one day and left a note on the front door telling the postman that I'd be in the back garden and asking him to come and find me. He duly appeared through the car port, took one look at the large garden (fig. 12), and said with

a sarcastic Glaswegian smile, "Do you think that you've enough garden here – couldn't you do with another field or two to go at?" When I replied that it kept me out of mischief, he retorted, "It's far more fun getting into mischief than crawling about on your hands and knees in a garden. You should give it a go sometime."

### Out of the mouths of children

Gardener visitors are invariably polite and complimentary. When in conversation with the garden owner they will think of positive, supportive things to say. Sometimes, however, their thoughts may be more critical and usually remain unsaid. This doesn't always apply to young children, who have yet to master the art of diplomacy and hence supply more honest comments.

When our children were small I had an embarrassing encounter with the owner of the once magnificent St Nicholas garden where the rambling rose 'Bobby James' was raised. When we visited, the garden had been in decline for some years. As we walked around the somewhat sad remains, complete with collapsed glasshouse and overgrown shrubbery, we encountered Lady Serena James. Lady James was charming and asked if we were enjoying the garden. Being diplomatic I said, "Yes thank you, I've wanted to see this garden for ages", which was absolutely true. I was just going to add that it must have been wonderful at its best when my five-year-old daughter cheerfully interrupted the conversation saying, "But Daddy, you just told Mummy it was a weed-infested jungle!" Lady James simply smiled and said, "Just tell your father that he needs to look past the weeds to see the real garden."



Fig. 13 It's just my garden, a space for quiet contemplation.

The same child also spoke out on another gardening matter. One day her older sister came to find me because something 'had happened to the apple trees'. We went to look and I saw that there were many small fruits on the ground under the trees. It was late June and the previous few days had been warm. I explained that it must be 'the June drop', adding that apple trees just do that sometimes when too many flowers had been pollinated. I was happy to be able to educate my child on the finer points of fruit growing, and when we were joined by her younger sister I was delighted to hear her repeat my explanation very accurately. This didn't last. My younger daughter replied, "Yes,

it might be that, but I think it's Robbie's fault," referring to their brother, "he was in a very bad mood this morning and was hitting the trees with his tennis racquet." A more detailed examination of the trees confirmed she was correct.

#### And finally – what do I think?

Although I make great efforts to ensure that my garden looks as attractive as possible on open days, because people are asked to pay an entrance fee to support a charity, my garden is not a show garden, it is just my garden. I do not add plants, pots or beds simply because they will look good on open days, and I don't put off major gardening

work because they might spoil the effect either. My garden is my personal space, where I potter about and feel comfortable (fig. 13). It is where friendships are formed, re-established, and strengthened; where plants and ideas are exchanged freely; and where 'real world problems' are excluded at least temporarily. Raising money for charity on the occasional open day is a bonus, but it's not why I garden. Overheard comments may be amusing, insightful or critical, but ultimately they are not really important. If all a visitor remembers after coming to my garden is the scrumptious cake, then I believe the visit was a success. 🍪

**Peter Williams** has been fascinated by plants, gardening and gardeners since childhood. After a lifetime spent working with plants both professionally and for relaxation, his one regret is that he did not join the Hardy Plant Society sooner.