

## Beth Chatto OBE VMH

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Beth Chatto, who died on 13 May 2018 aged 94, will probably be seen by future garden historians as the Gertrude Jekyll of her generation, triggering a change of gardening fashion and taste. People often assumed she was influenced by Jekyll, but in fact she was already developing her own gardening ideas based on form and foliage by the time her mentor, the artist and gardener Cedric Morris, lent her a set of Jekyll books. As Beth read them, she reported, she kept nodding and agreeing with what was written, and felt like assuring

her predecessor: 'It's all right, we still care for your plants and look after them'.

The pre-war gardening world was one of colour and cultivars; it was also very exclusive, revolving around people of wealth and class, who visited each other's gardens. There was no concept of garden visiting being the mass occupation that it is now. But in the 1950s and 60s, at artist Cedric Morris's Suffolk house and garden, class didn't matter – an enthusiasm for plants was the thing. Beth Chatto recalled the excitement caused by occasional visits from an Ipswich bus driver, complete with an old flat cap, because this unassuming man was the country's greatest authority on South African bulbs. In her sitting room hung a much-loved Cedric Morris painting, depicting angled roofs in a small Mediterranean town. She pointed out the triangles, the way the eye is satisfyingly drawn up and down and between them, encapsulating the sense of harmony and design that she tried to reproduce in the garden.

She had begun as a flower arranger, giving talks, and bringing examples from her own garden, which created much interest among her audience. Mrs Desmond Morris, who went on to found Ramparts Nursery specialising in grey and silver-leaved plants, encouraged her and also found the unusual plants intriguing. Another great influence on Beth's ideas was her beloved husband Andrew, who was an authority on plants' natural habitats. Thus putting plants in the right place for their needs, and for the pleasing effect of their form and foliage, became the basis of her gardening style.

The Essex nursery, Unusual Plants, grew from her garden which was begun in 1960 on a patch of land too poor for farming. There was, however, a year-round spring, which enabled the creation of a series of ponds and habitats for moisture-loving plants – a pleasing contrast with those liking conditions on the gravel soil elsewhere. Public interest was fanned by the nursery's Chelsea exhibits, which caused a stir – and won ten consecutive gold medals – from 1977 to 1986. Keen gardeners crowded round, making notes. But Beth had already decided

1986 would be her last Chelsea when the RHS awarded her the VMH, and also the Lawrence Memorial Medal for the best exhibit in the whole year, a compliment which pleased her greatly. With regret she turned down Lord Aberconway's invitation to be an RHS judge and committee member: while she appreciated the honour, she felt she could not give it the time and attention needed, the same reason for ceasing to exhibit. The security of her staff, through the success of the garden and nursery, should come first. 'If I had known what it would grow into,' she remarked, 'I would have been scared stiff. But it happened gradually. Like dropping a pebble in a pool, the circles get wider and wider, and now they're worldwide. And it's enriched my life. I enjoy the friendship and companionship of the staff, and warmth and stimulation of the visitors.'

She was always at pains to point out that the nursery was a team effort. 'Running a business like this needs individuals, some special skills, people who can take responsibility, use their own initiative, as well as put up with regular routine,' she said, paying particular tribute to her secretary Tricia, and David Ward her nursery manager.

She wrote several books, of which *The Dry Garden* and *The Damp Garden* became essential reading for those seeking suitable plants for those conditions. And in 1992 she turned the former car park into a Gravel Garden, designed to be reminiscent of a dried river bed, using plants that would withstand the poor, arid soil and Essex's low rainfall. A sign informed visitors that it was an experiment to establish what would flourish in such conditions without watering. It was a great success.

'Not long after creating the Gravel Garden,' she recalled, 'when we were experiencing severe drought and I was concerned about what was, after all a horticultural experiment, a 90-year old botanist wandered round it, and not knowing that I was behind him, announced "This looks and smells just like the Mediterranean." A week later it rained.'

Encouraged by Alan Bloom and Mrs Underwood, she joined the Hardy Plant Society in the 1960s, and was very supportive of its aims. An interest in plants – for themselves as well as for decorative purposes – is like a yeast', she said, 'leavening friendships.'

Trained as a teacher during the war, Beth Chatto ended up teaching what she had learned herself, preferring to turn down official positions in horticulture. The Beth Chatto Education Trust was established in 2015 to promote her beliefs and give practical advice to future generations of young gardeners. 'The most important thing,' she said, 'was to make a garden and share it.'

