

The Beth Chatto Symposium: Ecological planting in the 21st century

Colin Skelly

The symposium, which took place in August 2018 at the University of Essex, really caught the imagination of the horticultural world, with around 500 attendees from 26 countries and from a variety of professional backgrounds – students, gardeners, designers, landscape architects, academics – coming together to discuss the future of ecological planting. The appeal was quite broad, reflecting the current popularity of naturalistic planting in design, as well as the longer-term increasing ecological awareness which affects the way we think about gardening.

Naturalism is a style of planting that draws on an ecological understanding of natural plant populations and it now occupies the horticultural mainstream. How far, though, is ‘ecological planting’ something more than just a passing fashion?

James Hitchmough, in the opening talk of the symposium, posed the question of whether naturalistic planting was just a utopian impression of nature and/or a cost-effective, utilitarian, horticultural solution for cash-starved public spaces.

He defined ecological planting as assemblages of plants which are designed to interact, rather than traditional horticulture where the aim is to prevent them from interacting through intensive interference (weeding, pruning, and so on). This type of planting seeks to combine aesthetics and function, creating attractive planting designs but using ecological processes to improve performance and reduce labour input (such as routine weeding). Hitchmough is now less sure that this improvement in function is real, as ecological planting schemes often fail without significant input of resources and horticultural skill, but he still argued that improved function (less maintenance) can be achieved if plants are chosen for their broadly equivalent competitiveness and fitness.

Planting density is the key to this style of planting – if the biomass (the total quantity or weight of plants) that can be supported by a given plot is maximised, then the space for weeds is limited; if not, then weeds will fill the vacuum. Covering the ground is also important, as exclusion of

light will minimise the ability of weeds to establish and compete. Aesthetic appeal is enhanced by planting in layers and utilising emergent flower stems. In a later talk Hitchmough detailed his technique of sowing designed plant communities, using seed mixes sown on gravel mulches.

Hitchmough argued that there was still a significant cultural gap between the enthusiasm of gardeners and designers for a naturalistic style of planting and the appreciation of the wider public, a gap that could be narrowed by maximising flowering density and longevity; this could widen its appeal beyond the bubble of its adherents. Interestingly, later Cassian Schmidt argued that naturalistic gardening was *avant garde* and should push forward and not try to please the mainstream.

Keith Wiley, head gardener at the Garden House for many years and now the owner of Wild Side garden and nursery, gave an interesting talk describing his style of gardening and its evolution. Wiley emulates the natural landscapes that he has seen on his travels around the world, especially those of South Africa.

It is not a case of copying those landscapes but echoing them, often by using different plants but recreating the forms and atmosphere of larger landscapes in a garden setting.

Olivier Filippi discussed the challenge of designing ecological gardens in the dry southern Mediterranean. Here the harsh climate means that designers have to work with shapes, light and shadow, and utilise rhythm, texture and contrast to create striking designs in the absence of herbaceous

planting options. For Filippi, gardeners are often the problem, as disturbance is the friend of pioneer growth. The aim, he argued, should be to make things more difficult for plants, not easier – to hold them at a rate of slow change in order to reduce labour input and eliminate the need for the use of herbicide (banned in public spaces in France). Filippi's description of allelopathic gardens in southern Europe, where the inhibition of growth in one plant species by chemicals

produced by another is utilised, was a particularly interesting approach to using natural processes to reduce or eliminate weeding.

Cassian Schmidt described naturalistic planting as being well-established in Germany. For him, the main maintenance strategies for designed plant communities is to engineer the soil to create a more stressful habitat (a point also made by Hitchmough and Peter Korn), to plant densely, and to use plants of high rigour and stress tolerance.



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The gardens at the Eden Project seek to connect people to the living world, something that naturalistic planting styles do very effectively. Ecological approaches seek to create plant communities that reduce labour input by minimising weed establishment while offering biodiversity benefits, which has obvious relevance to planning future planting schemes.

Schmidt also questioned the use of the word ecological (humans are part of nature; there are very few natural landscapes, only semi-natural areas) and preferred the term naturalistic – gardeners are creating an idealised picture of nature. An interesting panel discussion followed, discussing the impact of ideology on notions of nativeness in plants, which imposes political boundaries on dynamic plant communities that may not be helpful in an era of rapid climate change.

Presentations by Peter Janke and Dan Pearson showcased their design styles – Janke’s naturalistic planting within a formal structure and Pearson’s romantic emulation of nature. This was followed by a fascinating talk by Midori Shintani, head gardener at the Pearson-designed Millennium Forest in Hokkaido, Japan, about the trials and tribulations of gardening in this northerly region and the challenges of faithfully implementing a designed space across time. Andi Pettis gave an overview of the amazing High Line, and the difficulties and opportunities presented by this unique site.

The ambition of proponents of naturalistic gardening for a new, dynamic horticulture in urban public spaces, using ecological principles to design plant communities, has largely not been achieved. As a style of garden design, however, naturalism has been far more influential. Indeed, it has become a popular and fashionable style of planting in private gardens. In posing his opening question, James Hitchmough clearly hoped that naturalism was more than a utopian response to industrialisation, urbanisation and intensive agriculture. The symposium hinted that in large measure naturalism *is* such a utopian response. It is, however, nonetheless meaningful.

While the contemporary economic and political climate has limited the adoption of naturalism in the public sphere, it has flourished elsewhere because its aesthetic qualities engage us. It is driven by a creative response to the intensity and pace of modernity and by both nostalgia and a yearning for a new set

of relationships with the natural world. It draws on ecological science but it is people-centred, created first for our enjoyment. It does have real benefits in terms of biodiversity, dynamic planting schemes and lower labour input, but these are secondary to the desire for an immersive impact on the human senses.

More of the human population now lives in urban environments, but the need for contact with the natural world remains as strong as ever. As our daily lives become more divorced from the rhythms of nature, there are more opportunities to use naturalistic planting to make this instinctive connection. Despite this, another recurring theme at the conference was the need for the skills necessary to maintain designed gardens and landscapes. High-quality green spaces are increasingly acknowledged for their positive effects in terms of ecological goods and services (shade, shelter, drainage, air filtration, etc.) and for people’s well-being. It is high time more value was put on those that make and maintain them. 🌿

Colin Skelly is a skilled horticulturalist with responsibility for the Sense of History garden in the outdoor gardens (the cool temperate biome) at the Eden Project. Previously he was manager of a specialist nursery in west Cornwall and a gardener at St. Michael’s Mount. He has a long-standing interest in perennial plants in general and naturalistic planting styles in particular. Colin’s attendance at the symposium was part-funded by the HPS Kenneth Black Bursary Scheme.