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Fig. 1 The enclosing hedge mimics the distant shapes at Felley Priory

## What is a garden?

### Bob Brown

I changed jobs and we moved to a house in Monmouthshire with a magical view of the Black Mountains. The house had five acres of fields below it and had an undeveloped curtilage. The soil was the best I had ever had – a rich dark brown loam developed over Old Red Sandstone. The potential to build and develop a garden was the best I am ever likely to have; yet nothing was done. The problem was I didn't know what to do.

Let's say I was to dig and plant flower beds and plant ornamental trees – something ordinary and conventional and unthinking – then, the view through the garden to the landscape beyond would be very disconcerting because the garden would not sit comfortably with the background. Equally, from the other point of view, seeing the garden from the

landscape it would seem an intrusion, an eyesore.

By the time we had sold up and left I had done nothing except keep some rough grass cut. My next garden had difficult soil developed on Weald Clay and as I thought back, I began to wonder about what I had not achieved and why I hadn't achieved it. Above all I asked myself what had I been trying to do and fundamentally, what is this thing I was trying to create: 'WHAT IS A GARDEN?'

I began to ask other people that very question. It's a philosophical question and I got some amazing answers. Many of the respondents talked about a place to grow plants and food and about the need for some of us to get our hands dirty, but three answers stood out. Nick Dakin-Elliott (a lecturer at Pershore College of Horticulture, now curating the Villa la Pietra

Garden in Florence) said, "gardens are either totally artificial or totally naturalistic, or hell on earth trying to cram paradise into a kidney-shaped bed". The Girls (the late Pam Schwerdt, and Sibylle Kreutzberger, Vita Sackville-West's former Head Gardeners at Sissinghurst, who later retired to the Cotswolds) said, "A garden to a gardener is a novel, to a plantsman it's a dictionary". Stephen Lacey, somewhat uncomfortable at being asked the question, replied "They're a jigsaw, a series of design challenges and the result is often indigestible". Above all, of the very many answers I was given, one theme ran through. It was often obliquely implied rather than stated and it explained my dilemma. Gardens are separate, they are not part of the landscape and they usually have enclosure of some kind.



Fig. 2 Jackson's Wold

One should go INTO a garden and feel cuddled. At the Monmouthshire site the view was the problem and enclosure was virtually impossible.

So, answer number one. GARDENS ARE SEPARATE FROM LANDSCAPE.

Having stated that, there are a few gardens which cope with and maybe use a view, either intentionally or unintentionally, by transitioning the planting until it ends up looking like the landscape beyond or mimicking the view by planting similar shapes within the garden. People speak loosely of Borrowed Landscape but the borrowing must be thought through. The inclusion of a neighbouring church tower might be easy, and it'll become another garden ornament, but borrowing wider views is considerably harder. When it's done well



Fig. 3 The orchard as a transition from garden into landscape, Le Jardin Plume, Normandy

the result is wonderful (fig. 2).

Pettifers, the garden of Gina Price at Wardington outside Banbury, is currently one of my favourite gardens. It does everything well, but the clincher is the view – nothing exceptional and not distant – a hillside with hedges and trees; and leading your eye without interruption into the view is the garden before you. Le Jardin Plume is in Normandy at Auzouville-sur-Ry. It's the garden of a couple of plantsmen/nurserymen Sylvie and Patrick Quibel and, last time I saw it, it had the most perfect transitional garden, belying this distinction between garden and landscape. If you stood with your back to the house there were formal framed beds of perennials in riotous colour; beyond them were orchard trees set in rough grass, and natural-looking

plants like camassia framed by mown grass in broad formal avenues stretching into the distance (fig. 3).

John Treasure's garden at Burford outside Tenbury Wells coped well with the transition too. Here it was the restrained colours and shapes in the farthest borders within the view that were the key. These led the eye seamlessly across the River Teme and up onto the hillside opposite (fig. 4). And finally, the view out of the garden designed by Harold Peto at West Dean in Sussex has blobs of evergreens set in grass, mimicking the sweep of the Downs which are studded with old yews (fig. 5).

Looking back to my Monmouthshire site, I reckon I now know what I should have done, which was to plant something that was half landscape and half garden and work within it.

I would have chosen an orchard – not an orchard of mixed fruit but an orchard planted in a grid with one kind of fruit: apples, pears, cherries or quinces. Then I would have underplanted the trees in a semi-natural way. I think that would have worked.

If enclosure is necessary, it can be a fence or a hedge or the wall of next door's house, but it can also be unobvious. A long time ago, as part of a summer day of garden-visiting organised by the local HPS Group, Diana and I visited the garden of an architect in Hertfordshire. The garden walls were made of clunch and were covered with ramping climbers and fronted by mounding shrubs and perennials. As enclosing boundaries, they were invisible but effective (fig. 6).

Another good example of invisible enclosure is the Heather Garden within the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens

in Hampshire, where the rest of the garden is hidden; there are birch trees and pines which look right with the heathers, and obscure the remainder of the garden without losing the sense of space around the heathers. In general, heathers and gardens do not go together. Heathers are plants of barren open places – heaths and moorland. Put them in a lush enclosed garden and they look out of place. Enclose them in any way and they look wrong, but block out the lushness and maintain the openness and it works.

Enclosure need not be either as solid as a fence or as diffused as a thickening of the tree and shrub planting. I've seen compromises which avoid claustrophobia by leaving gaps between a row of conifers (fig. 7); creating a pleached hornbeam hedge on legs you can see through; or siting a pergola on the



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Fig. 4 Seamless transition from garden to landscape, Burford House, Tenbury

boundary. Such artifices can be enough to separate the garden from what's beyond because they say 'Here endeth the garden' and work magic with our perception. Enclosure need not be claustrophobic.



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Fig. 5 Transition from garden to landscape, West Dean Garden



Fig. 6 Invisible clunch walls in Hertfordshire garden

Buried deep within these distinctions and parallels is an allied thesis which might go further towards answering the question, 'What is a garden?'. This thesis is that gardens are themselves landscapes in miniature. The typical English garden with grass, borders and trees mimics fields with flower-rich headlands, hedges and hedgerow trees. The parterre and classical orderly Italian Garden evolved from the highly ordered landscapes of Mesopotamia and the Nile Valley where parallel rows of crops, fruit trees and canals dominated the scene. The modern grass and gravel gardens come out of landscapes natural to the North European Plain. Even the open American Yard evolved from the idea of rough places made plain, which was the preoccupation of the European settlers, and so on.



Fig. 7 Enclosure need not obscure what's beyond

#### SPACE

Answer number two was that gardens had to have space. In my conversations on this topic, several gardens were alluded to or given as named examples of places where there was no space. These tended to be the plots of plantsmen who didn't know how to stop acquiring plants. The conclusion was that once the space was gone, what had started as a garden had turned into an allotment. Architects are very good at thinking about space, and as a rule of thumb they have good gardens – uncrowded, with enough space so the garden isn't a jumble of plants. This space need not be big – even the width of a path can be enough, especially if the path is of mixed paving, avoiding blandness.

One of the most upsetting features of a garden is to see spaces in a well-designed garden destroyed by Space Invaders

– amoebic beds dug out of grass, floating untethered in a soup of confusion (fig. 8 illustrates the effect). The temptation to dig more beds and create more planting space is a characteristic I particularly associate with Hardy Planters. There are other ways to do this which do not destroy the integrity of the garden's design.

Spaces need to end purposefully and not peter out (unless the objective is to transition into the landscape). Ideally gardens and spaces should come to a climax at their ends, but many do not – maybe the grass roughens, the border stops and there's a compost heap. It follows that the spaces within gardens should be the first things to be fixed in a garden design and NOT what's left over at the end (fig. 9).

#### SCALE

Everything in the garden should be in proportion.

There is a Golden Ratio which operates in gardens as well as art, architecture and mathematics. This naturally occurring ratio is close to a ratio of one third to two thirds (1:2). Gardens that do not conform are restive. They may have a border which is too narrow for the space, when it would look better if it occupied one third or two thirds. Or a tree which is too tall for the space. Or the spotty planting of a plantsman where only drifts of 30 are going to be bold enough when viewed across a wide expanse of grass. This rule of thumb just might explain why you (and certainly I) feel so uneasy in gardens that are half and half: half hard landscaping and half beds of plants; or gardens which have distant spotty views of mixed borders. I've heard opinions that it was inattention to this fundamental principle that lets down the impact of the long border leading up to Battleston Hill at Wisley. Here the broad strip of grass equals the bed width of the two borders added together - half and half. When you are facing the borders, they're great but viewed end-on they work less well. The grass should be wider or narrower.

**PASSION and GENIUS LOCI**

Gardens need something indefinable that comes from love and obsession. There are gardens where immaculate maintenance and perfect design leave me unmoved



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Fig. 8 Half space, half beds, and amoebic shapes



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Fig. 9 The space should not be what's left over

after a visit, but it wouldn't be kind to name them. I know such gardens and have shared the ultimate flatlining with whole groups of visitors. This lack of passion, of soul, shows. On the other hand, I can point out gardens like Spetchley Park outside Worcester where the staff do their very best to maintain the gardens but don't quite achieve perfection, where the owners

are obsessively interested in gardening, which in the case of Spetchley extends back at least three generations. Great Dixter is similar. The spirit of such places can be overwhelming.

It doesn't necessarily take long to give a garden a spirit of place. Geoffrey Jellicoe gave two areas within the garden at Sutton Place near Guildford immediate inspirational atmosphere.

One was requested by the owner at the time (the American Stanley J Seeger) and was to be a Secret (or Moss) Garden. This was created by Geoffrey Jellicoe but proved too difficult to maintain and lapsed. The other is a garden with an irregular rectilinear rough-edged pool and a Ben Nicholson sculpture installed at one end, reflected in the pool's surface. This achieved immediate genius loci and continues to move visitors, but I fear that maintenance has not appreciated how important those untended edges were (fig. 10).

On a smaller scale, the sort of garden you or I have, the garden of any passionate or obsessive gardener shows in intimate touches – as a small cluster of pots; as collections of garden statuary and seats; as some self-sown

seedlings left to blend with more permanent plants or seeded into cracks beside the path (fig. 11). Visiting such gardens is a warm, serene experience, like kicking off your shoes at the end of a day you've spent on your feet.

### CONTRASTS

Gardens should stimulate. I have a sister who believes that her house should have cold places as well as hot places, dark places and light places, hard surfaces and soft surfaces – all of this to make her feel alive. Hell would have central heating, overhead strip lighting and fitted carpets. Gardens are no different. They need textural, shape and colour contrasts and this disorder should be framed because the framing provides the context. We were taken to the first garden

of Ton ter Linden in Holland on an early HPS trip. I wish I'd taken photographs. The garden was essentially wild, but the wildness was framed with baulks of wood laid horizontally and vertically. It was like modern art – full of interesting shapes and colours and not looking like a collapsed chintz sofa because of the framing. We all include hard framing lines automatically and often unintentionally by having straight-edged paths, lawns, borders, fences, house walls and so on which contrast so well with the less orderly flower beds within.

There's an undercurrent in what I've written above, which is my continuing search for good examples of bad garden design. Please don't let this put you off inviting me to look at your garden. 🌱

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Fig. 10 Sutton Place. The pond originally had rough untended edges which were important in conferring genius loci

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Fig. 11 The Old Vicarage Garden, Whitley

**Bob Brown** is a plantsman and nurseryman who believes that crossing the divide between garden design and plantsmanship is difficult and very rarely done. He has never succeeded.