

Hampton Court Flower Show 2011: Is a sense of meaning vital to a good garden?

With the start of Hampton Court Flower Show 2011 Tim Richardson asks whether a sense of meaning is vital to a good garden



The Hampton Court Flower Show offers an opportunity to test whether gardens should have meaning Photo: PAUL GROVER



By [Tim Richardson \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/tim-richardson/\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/tim-richardson/)

4:00PM BST 06 Jul 2011

A century ago, a huge row erupted in the gardens world between William Robinson, the “wild gardener” (wild in temper as well as in planting style) and Reginald Blomfield, the architectural formalist. Robinson suggested that it is plants, above all, which dictate the tone of a garden, claiming that the gardener was therefore the most important creative influence on outdoor space. Blomfield, meanwhile, argued that all the gardener’s work was for nothing without a proper structure to work within, well-balanced and with fine architectural detailing.

The battle was hard fought but inconclusive. The argument was only resolved satisfactorily when the seventh cavalry, in the guise of the great Gertrude Jekyll and Edwin Lutyens, came riding over the hill to demonstrate that collaboration between the disciplines was the answer. At places such as Hestercombe and Folly Farm, they showed that you could indeed “have it all” – wonderful planting and fine architecture all rolled into one.

A similar kind of debate has been brewing in the British gardens world over the past few years concerning the desirability of meaning in gardens. On one side are the conceptualists – people like me, who say a sense of meaning is vital to a good garden. On the other side are the traditionalists (I think Mary Keen, of this parish, may have sympathies in this direction) who are sceptical about gardens which have things to say to us.

The argument is not about the presence or absence of meaning in gardens – simply whether it is worth acknowledging. There is a strong feeling among British gardeners that the best gardens are simply beautiful places to go and to be. That, despite all the work the gardener puts in, the best a visitor can hope for is a relaxing place to while away an afternoon, something that satisfies the heart, not the head.

For me, the late great Christopher Lloyd summed up this typically British attitude following his visit to Charles Jencks's cosmological garden in Scotland, which demonstrates chaos theory and so on. Christo said that he had no interest in the symbolism of the garden; he simply enjoyed being there.

[Introducing the Chelsea Fringe 2012 \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/8580003/Introducing-the-Chelsea-Fringe-2012.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/8580003/Introducing-the-Chelsea-Fringe-2012.html)

[The restoration of Wrest Park, Bedfordshire \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/tim-richardson/8565767/The-restoration-of-Wrest-Park-Bedfordshire.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/tim-richardson/8565767/The-restoration-of-Wrest-Park-Bedfordshire.html)

[Chelsea Flower Show: Show gardens \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/chelseaflowershow/8530549/Chelsea-Flower-Show-2011-Show-gardens.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/chelseaflowershow/8530549/Chelsea-Flower-Show-2011-Show-gardens.html)

[Chelsea Flower Show 2011 preview \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/chelseaflowershow/8525437/Chelsea-Flower-Show-2011-preview.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/chelseaflowershow/8525437/Chelsea-Flower-Show-2011-preview.html)

[Visitors to the Chelsea Flower Show deserve better statues \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/chelseaflowershow/8479833/Visitors-to-the-Chelsea-Flower-Show-deserve-better-statues.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/chelseaflowershow/8479833/Visitors-to-the-Chelsea-Flower-Show-deserve-better-statues.html)

This attitude strikes me as odd and very nearly disingenuous, considering the sophistication with which gardeners of the “herbaceous school” approach colour, form and structure in the garden, not to mention the technicalities of horticulture.

The result of such an approach is often dizzyingly sensuous and hedonistically appealing, but it is the result of

Careful planning, constant revision, skill and experience. Foreigners are usually astonished if they overhear serious traditional British gardeners discussing what they actually do – it's as much a mystery to them as Jencks's symbolism can be to non-scientists. To say there is no intellectual content in such gardens is to deny the obvious.

Meaning in gardens can take many forms. It can be related to the topography and feel of the site – Alexander Pope's "genius of the place"; the character of the owners (what would Sissinghurst be without knowledge of Vita?); the creative identity of the designer; or the history of the site or its area. Only occasionally does a designer insert specific meaning or narrative into a garden – as with the classical symbolism of the 18th century, or a contemporary design such as the biographical Diana Fountain in Hyde Park.

Attitudes to meaning in gardens will be tested again this week at Hampton Court Flower Show, where the hugely successful conceptual gardens section is entirely composed of "readable" gardens. "Excuse me While I Kiss the Sky" features a floral ceiling tapestry, while "Enduring Freedom" offers a political message regarding the Afghanistan war.

Whatever one thinks of the idea of meaning in gardens, there is one thing every visitor seeks out in every garden: delight. Conceptual gardens offer us the delight of the unexpected – of being surprised and stimulated by ideas, as well as pleased by plants.

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2011