

Celebrating the growth of great women gardeners

August 01 2023 — by Adrienne Wyper



Photo by Catriona Bry from Pixels

Women have been overlooked by the predominantly male gardening establishment for centuries, unacknowledged for their work on magnificent estates, banned from horticultural colleges, and under-represented in garden events and on TV – presenter Carol Klein has highlighted that the BBC series *Gardeners' World* has had a male lead presenter since 1968. However, for the first time, this year at the Chelsea Flower Show there were more women designers than men, overall, the Balcony and Container Gardens category was exclusively female-designed, and there was a celebration of 'Women in Horticulture' installation in the Great Pavilion, featuring wicker planters around a shepherd's hut, designed by Pollyanna Wilkinson. Designers, scientists, campaigners, plant collectors, journalists and artists were featured, as well as, of course, gardeners, including some of the greatest, whose work – and influence – you can still see.

Today at Beth Chatto Gardens.Photo via Instagram

Beth Chatto (1923–2018) is known for her principle of 'right plant, right place'. Her naturalistic, wildlife-friendly schemes, for which she won 10 consecutive Gold medals at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, were ground-breaking. One judge apparently said all her plants were weeds and wanted her to be disqualified. And now her influence is everywhere. *The Beth Chatto Handbook* says: 'We lost too many plants in our impatience to possess them, because we had not achieved the proper growing conditions.'

Her book *The Dry Garden*, published in 1978, has never been more relevant as we face increasingly hotter, drier summers and hosepipe bans. Visit Beth Chatto's garden near Colchester in Essex, and see the dry gravel garden, unwatered since it was planted in 1992.

Beth Chatto's 'The Gravel Garden'

At work nearly a century earlier was Gertrude Jekyll (1843–1932; 'Jeekee', not 'Jeeckle') worked alongside architect Edwin Lutyens and approached gardening as designing with colour, influenced by the artist JMW Turner. She's best known for huge herbaceous borders, in colours running from hot to cold and back to hot. Gertrude was the first woman to be awarded the Royal Horticultural Society's Victoria Medal of Honour – the most prominent of awards for British horticulturalists – introduced in 1897 to mark Queen Victoria's Jubilee.

Earlier this year the National Trust acquired Mundesley Wood, Surrey, Gertrude's home from the 1890s to 1930s. The 11-acre garden, not yet open to the public, features areas designed to flower in different seasons with a woodland garden that demonstrates her approach to artistic 'wild gardening'. Andy Jasper, Head of Gardens and Parklands at the National Trust, said: 'Mundesley Wood is not only a rare surviving example of Jekyll's work...it continues to showcase Jekyll's signature naturalistic design, her bold use of colour and innovative use of everyday plants. There is no greater example of a classic English garden.'

Gertrude created some 400 gardens in the UK, Europe and America. Five of her gardens are looked after by the National Trust: *Lindisfarne Castle*, Northumberland; *Barrington Court*, Somerset; *Latchlands Park*, Surrey; *Knightsbays*, and *Castle Drogo*, in Devon.

Vita Sackville-West (1892–1962) opened Sissinghurst Castle Garden to the public in 1938, and the admission was one shilling (now from £16). The innovative Formal Garden was designed by her and her husband Harold Nicolson, as a series of rooms. Perhaps the best-known element is the White Garden, featuring only white, green, grey and silver flowers and foliage. In her plans, Vita imagined 'a low sea of grey clumps of foliage, pierced here and there with tall white flowers'.

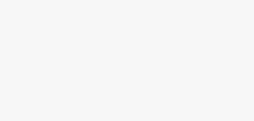
As well as colour-block planting, she advised readers of her weekly newspaper column in *The Observer* not to be too tidy, to tolerate self-seeding and to fill the garden, saying, 'Cram, cram, cram, every chink and cranny'. That's sound advice, because it leaves less room for weeds.

A more modern take on women who garden is *Why Women Grow: Stories of Soil, Sisterhood and Survival*, by gardening writer Alice Vincent. She sought out the stories of many women who garden, and why, charting her own personal growth along the way. Some of the reasons she discovered are: 'Women grow to create life and food and beauty... Women grow because sometimes rage can only be mollified by digging until the sweat trickles down their backs... Women grow because in doing so they can make space – sometimes silently, sometimes by stealth – that nobody expects them to occupy. Women grow because it offers them control in a world determined to rid them of it.'

Adrienne Wyper is a health and lifestyle writer and regular TNMA contributor.

Great Women Gardeners

We've compiled a list of 12 great gardening books by women HERE. And the TNMA podcast digs women gardeners, so if you haven't listened already, there's an interview with *Gardener's World* presenter Ait Anderson HERE and flower farmer George Newbery HERE.



Discussion (13 Comments)

Helen
August 1, 2023 at 10:14 am
While it's great that a category at Chelsea was exclusively female-designed, isn't the fact that it was the "Balcony and Container Gardens category" part of the problem, i.e. women do pots & hanging baskets, men do "real" gardens? There's a beautiful Gertrude Jekyll garden at Bois des Moutiers (https://www.boisdesmoutiers.com), a Lutyens-designed house in Normandy, it's closed for refurbishment at the moment, but it's well worth a visit.

Reply

Sara
August 2, 2023 at 10:26 am
As a keen if not always totally successful gardener this is a welcome post. All hail Carol Klein indeed and doesn't she always look pretty damn great for gardening "occasions" despite the fact that she is rightly focussed on the horticulture. It looks as if it comes so naturally to her. Ditto Ait Anderson, both women of style in its widest sense. So many of the women presenters are 'proper' gardeners, i.e. not creating a garden in 48 hours solely for its TV appearance. It feels as if there is a beginning of a move towards some kind of equal representation of women on screen, which is often the only place where so many see gardeners. When I think of great gardeners, it is the women who always come first to my mind, especially those mentioned above.

A female presenter of *Gardener's World* would be great, but I confess a soft spot for Monty Don, so perhaps when he's eventually ready to hang up his wellies?

Reply

Pippa
August 2, 2023 at 10:09 am
Wow, I too had been under the misapprehension that she'd solely worked with what she had! That is quite a preparation. My solution (living in E Anglia too) is to encourage shade via trees and shrubs and weeds (aka self seeded plants) to keep the soil as little exposed to the air as possible. It does mean having to find slug-resistant plants, but a side benefit is lots of frogs, lizards and other wildlife.

It is, of course, not as beautiful as Chatto's though!

Reply

Pippa
August 2, 2023 at 10:10 am
Lovely post, especially the focus on how much gardening gives us back. I would also like to add *Alys Fowler's* name to the list of great women in the garden.

Another addition, to the booklist, is *The Well-gardened mind*, which explores the importance of gardening for recovery from mental health crises, and for maintaining positive mental health.

https://uk.bookshop.org/books/the-well-gardened-mind-rediscovering-nature-in-the-modern-world-sue-stuart-smith/139547-eam/978000800735

Reply

Alison Walsh
August 2, 2023 at 10:11 am
Oh thanks Pippa, I'm an Alys Fowler fan and have included her *Eddies Garden* book on the list. Thanks also for the recommendation.

Reply

Sue French
August 2, 2023 at 10:24 pm
How have the women of Kiftgate Court been missed out? A beautiful garden worked by three generations of women gardeners. Kiftgate is literally just down the road from Hidcote, the most visited garden in England according to the National Trust.

I always regard Hidcote as an appetiser and then rush off to Kiftgate (not National Trust). I hope all those who haven't visited do so, it won't disappoint. There's a great book about Kiftgate too, *Kiftgate Court Gardens: Three Generations of Women Gardeners*.

Reply

Alison Walsh
August 2, 2023 at 8:19 pm
Thanks for the tip-off, Sue. We'll bear this in mind for future features; I think Adrienne wanted to focus on the gardens she has visited.

Reply

Mary Grogan
August 2, 2023 at 9:30 pm
Nice post, as a 90+ mature woman and a lifelong gardener this is a most welcome article. Thanks!

Reply

Lisa
August 3, 2023 at 2:33 am
I want to recommend *Uprooting* by Marchelle Farrell to you. She's from Trinidad, educated in England, and living there now in a village near Bath with her family. It's a beautiful, moving, intelligent and personal look at the nexus of gardening, colonialism and mental health. "Uprooting" comes out tomorrow in the UK. You'll see the reviews and her interviews with a quick internet search. Highly, highly recommend.

Reply

Alison Walsh
August 3, 2023 at 9:01 am
Thank you, Lisa! I will definitely check Marchelle's book out and add it to my list.

Reply

Lee Ann
August 3, 2023 at 4:33 pm
I can't wait to dive into some of these books. However, living in the Southeast of the United States, I have the feeling our planting issues will be very different from many that I'll find in these books. Yet one can read and learn...and then I'll look for a female gardener in my area to use as a muse. Thank you!

Reply

Leave a Reply

Please be respectful and kind.

Comment *

Name *

Email *

Website

POST COMMENT

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. [Learn how your comment data is processed.](#)

Kery Beading

On Losing Old Friends and Making New Ones

Women have been overlooked by the predominantly male gardening establishment for centuries, unacknowledged for their work on magnificent estates, banned from horticultural colleges and...

LOAD IN 4 TURN OFF AUTO SCROLL

Refuse to be invisible & subscribe to our newsletter

enter your email JOIN

