

Gardens in England  
Northwest Garden News  
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2005 was a year of garden angst. Refurbishing and redesigning the front entry and adding dry gravel beds on the south of the sidewalk consumed my energies in 2003 and 2004. With no exciting renovations on the drawing board and no ideas for small projects I mopped about the garden all spring and summer.

In lieu of executing cutting edge alterations (not) I paid fastidious attention to grooming and maintenance details, fretted about my passivity and lack of creativity and worried that my vision for the garden was faltering. Nursery visits failed to induce plant lust. Lack of inertia stymied me—passion failed to consume me. Was I having a midlife gardening crisis and if so what was the cure?

It turns out that the antidote for my gardening blues was an unexpected trip to England. Even though the Visa bill continues to remind me that I should have stayed home my heart reminds me that my English adventure was a once in a lifetime experience. London captivated me—the old and new jostling for attention. Historic buildings, grounded in the past juxtaposed against the colors and sounds of a society that is a cultural melting pot.

I had writers cramp after spending a day at the Royal Botanic Garden, Kew, just a short bus ride from my hotel. So much to see and record and so little time. One in eight of the known plants in the world are held in the Kew collection. The glass houses and conservatories showcase an astounding array of plants from tropical climes. The Evolution House chronicles the development of plants throughout the geologic ages. Kew is a research and conservation facility involving 275 horticulturalists, scientists and researchers working to expand our understanding of plant diversity, seed banking, pharmaceutical uses for plants and plant education.

Hampton Court Palace is immense—60 acres of garden plus the palace itself with its many towers and turrets and fireplace flues topped with chimney pots. Construction on the palace, situated on the banks of the Thames, was begun in 1514 by Cardinal Woolsey who gifted the palace to King Henry VIII. The palace is a rich tapestry of 500 years of royal history. The gardens are formal laid out in geometric patterns with hedges, topiary and garish bedding out. This was certainly a look at how the other half used to live.

Visiting Sissinghurst Castle for the first time was a near religious experience—for its literary associations with the Bloomsbury group, its architecture and history and the glorious gardens created by Vita Sackville-West and her husband Harold Nicolson. My fear of heights made climbing the tower pure torture but the view from the ramparts all but erased my anxiety. What a thrill to have look down on the layout and structure of the garden that so influenced garden design in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Influenced by the work of Gertrude Jekyll and William Robinson the garden embodies classic design and an obsession with perfection—a historic stage set in the guise of a garden.

It was fun to see other gardens but none of them spoke to my inner gardener. It was at Great Dixter, where we had been invited to stay for several days, that I fell in love and left my heart. Meeting Christopher Lloyd some 20 years ago when he spoke to the Hardy Plant Society of Oregon for the first time was a defining moment for me. Already a disciple of his writing and I was enthralled by his lecture loosely based on his book *The Well Tempered Garden* as readable and relevant now as it was when he wrote it. In the first chapter of that opinionated tome he writes: “The great wonder, in gardening, is that so many plants live.” Sage words for those of us who nurture plants.

Over the years our paths crossed many times. On one of his visits to the Northwest he lingered on the bench in my wall garden while we debated the relative merits of the Mediterranean plants in the gravel beds. He held court and I was a willing subject anxious to learn as much as possible from his tremendous treasure trove of knowledge. Spending several days at Great Dixter was a seminal experience. Words fail me here.

Christopher Lloyd, in his eighth decade, is still the consummate maestro orchestrating plantings that resonate throughout the seasons. Trained as a horticulturalist he has led the way in planting

design since the 1960's. He and head gardener Fergus Garrett shocked the gardening cognoscenti when they ripped out the classic rose garden and created a tropical paradise. With one stroke tropicalismo was born. The famous long border reaches across the stone walkway holding hands with the meadow sown with thousands of spring blooming bulbs. Meadow gardening techniques learned from his mother informed the origins of the naturalistic movement. Never content with the status quo or concerned about what anyone else thinks he continues to experiment with plants.

My malaise is gone—my head filled with images of Great Dixter, the house, garden, Christo and the community that have coalesced around him. May I have the stamina to live as long and garden with the same fervor and passion—all the remaining days of my life.