

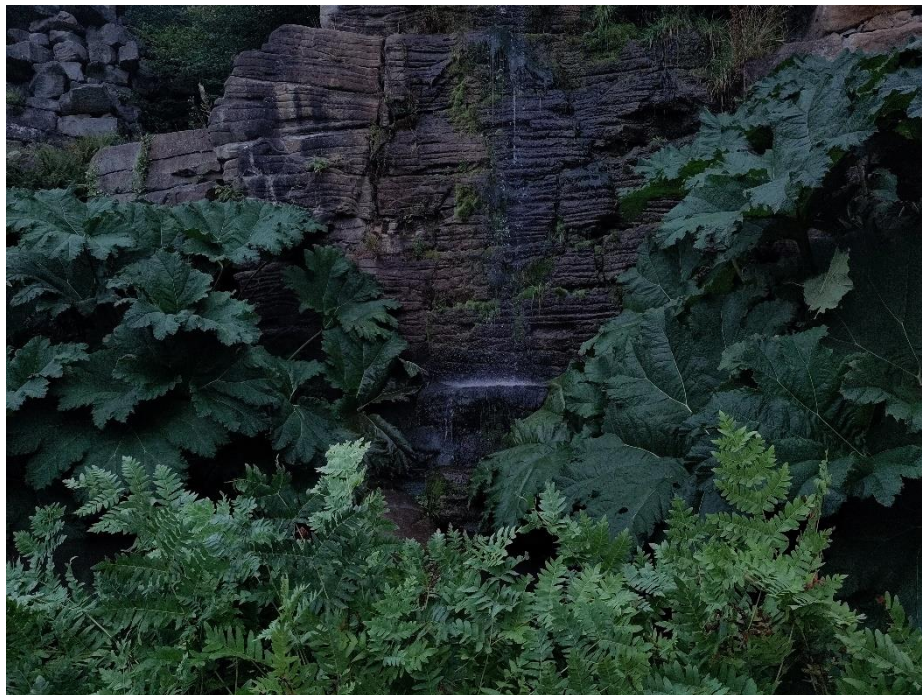
# A Report on: Garden Masterclass Conference: Managing a dynamic garden and landscape into the future.

By Madeleine Roberts

*"When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."*  
Aldo Leopold

The grandeur of the Chatsworth estate is immediate. The drive winds down a landscape carved out by Capability Brown more than 250 years ago with the intention to impress, and the drama very much prevails. But this landscape is and was shaped by a vision from the past. What is the vision for the future of Chatsworth? How do we make a landscape such as this one relevant **and** resilient? How do we adapt it for the modern world **but** also protect it against climate change induced challenges? And more importantly how does this translate into a vision for the wider horticultural world?

Over two days a variety of industry professionals, from landscape architects to head gardeners, sought to examine this in detail, with the intention of understanding where we go from here. I hoped that this new shared direction would help guide me in my own career, but that also I could spread the lessons learnt to a wider audience, so those unable to attend could learn something too.



*Figure 1: The Rockery by Tom Stuart-Smith*

The Head of Gardens and Landscape at Chatsworth, **Steve Porter**, introduced us to the 35, 000-acre estate. Managing the needs of an aristocratic family, 625, 000 visitors, farmers, and local communities is no easy task. One strategy has been to devise 10 goals for 10 years which range from buying at least 50% of supplies and services locally, to enabling every child in local schools to experience the estate. Another has been to create a parkland management plan, something which had never been done before in the estates' 468-year history. This enabled the entire estate to be visualized on one (albeit large) page in detail and has since inspired plans for habitat connectivity and tree strategies.



*Figure 2: Arcadia by Tom Stuart-Smith*

On a slightly smaller scale, the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire wanted to leave their own stamp on the evolution of the garden. Over the years they have enlisted Dan Pearson, Tom Stuart-Smith and James Hitchmough to bring new life to different areas. We were guided through The Rockery, Arcadia and Maze by **Tom Stuart-Smith** who shared precious design insights along the way... from overestimating the number of small boring plants needed to using jute to plant onto particularly steep slopes. Arcadia was a particularly interesting shade planting scheme. When designing it, Tom thought block planting would be more impactful in the low light, than a matrix planting scheme. And I think he was right. It looks beautiful.



*Figure 3: The Meadow Glade by James Hitchmough*

And where there is good design, even better management should always follow. **James Hitchmough** sought to help us rethink our relationship with design and management. Rather than seeing them as separate entities, we should start to see them as fundamentally intertwined. Rather than seeing design as superior to management, we should start to see management as important as design – if not more. And yet this goes against how a capitalist society has historically viewed maintenance as unnecessary.

The Knepp rewilding garden, designed by James Hitchmough, Tom Stuart Smith, Mick Crawley, and Jekka McVicar, is a perfect example of how management can take centre stage, and design can follow later. A so called ‘re-wilded’ garden, crushed building rubble provided the substrate and the plants were selected with global warming in mind. But being management led, there was no plan. Instead, a spreadsheet of plant species by quantity was devised with instructions to lay out the plants evenly across the site. The management is a game of push-pull, gently weeding out the prolific self-seeders and taking bites out of the original, but now quite wacky, topiary, but generally sitting back and letting the flora do its thing.

One of my favourite takeaways of James Hitchmough’s talk was the spectrum of design and management he coined.

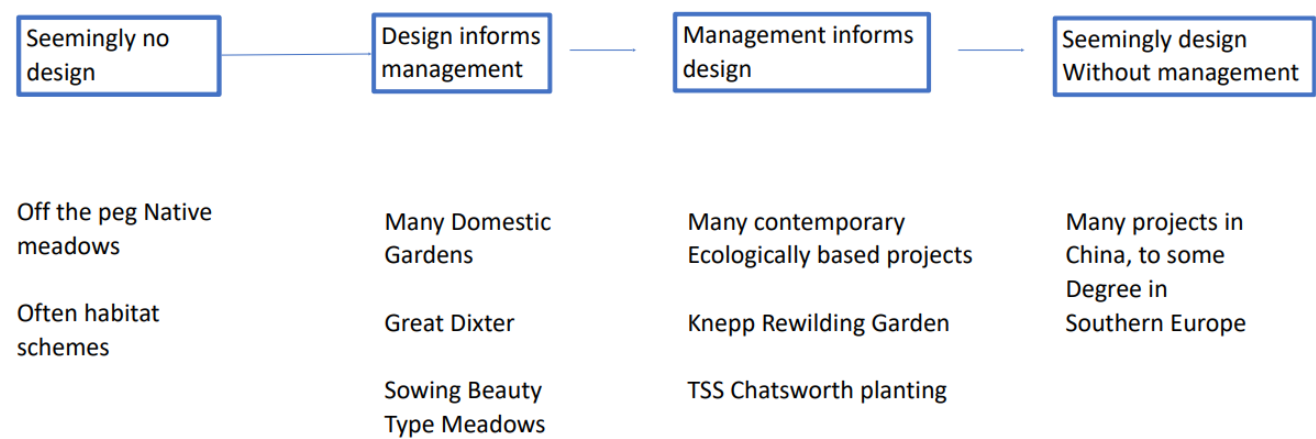


Figure 4: Spectrum of design and management by James Hitchmough

Above all, James laid out his 3 hopes for the future of ecological planting design. That they are more resilient, more sustainable, and better for supporting biodiversity. By putting the gardener front and center these hopes are more likely to be realized.

A rectangular table discussion was facilitated by **Katy Merrington** and brought together **Lizzie Balmforth**, the head gardener at Harlow Carr, and **Claire Greenslade**, the head gardener at Hestercombe. For an hour we heard the joys and challenges of being head gardeners. It was deeply refreshing hearing how they are championing the next generation of gardeners and how passionate they were about sharing their vast knowledge. They were also both acutely aware that they are merely the current custodians of the gardens and it’s their responsibility to care for it as best they can before it is passed on.

It deeply frustrated me that the session (which I should add was the only one women-led) was marketed as conversations between ‘esteemed women head gardeners’. I think ‘conversations between esteemed head gardeners’ would have sufficed. I was also curious when asked about gender during the Q+A, Lizzie said that she didn’t feel her gender had ever held her back, despite being the youngest and first female garden curator in the history of the RHS. I suspected that she had in fact overcome a huge amount to get there. After the conference, I found an article by the Yorkshire Post announcing the new head gardener of Harlow Carr. The first paragraph states “...at a glance it is hard to believe she is now in charge of one of England’s most important plant

collections". This article was only written in 2010...which only left me more inspired by the journey these three incredible women have been on to get where they are today.

The story of the creation of the 'Northern Flowerhouse', was also deeply inspiring. **Richard Scott's** presentation reminded us of the more romantic reasons that we need beautiful, biodiversity rich planting. Through setting up the National Wildflower Centre based in Liverpool, Richard Scott has developed innovative conservation techniques for habitat creation, most successfully for wildflower meadows (as detailed in 'Wildflowers Work'). It was deeply heart-warming as he shared stories of the areas of Liverpool which had been transformed through meadows sown by their communities. The vibrancy these flowers brought demonstrated just how powerful planting can be, no better visualized than Jamie Reid's print 'Nature Still Draws a Crowd'. We were all reminded of the core values by which should care for the land with – that of kindness, respect, and belonging. Above all Richard Scott encouraged us to 'Be Bold'.



*Figure 5: Nature still draws a crowd by Jamie Reid*

If Richard Scott's presentation was a love letter to the landscape industry, **John Grimshaw's** was an urgent call to arms. Summers are increasingly hotter and drier; winters are warmer and wetter and overall, there are considerably more freak weather events. Climate change is here, and we need our landscapes to survive. They need to be more durable, more resilient and need to be taken more seriously as a crucial component of climate mitigation. Yet if that wasn't enough of a challenge, we also have the twin threat of pests and diseases.

The stakes have never been higher – and therefore, it has never been so important to get it right first time. John's presentation then became a library of resources to help select the right trees for the right places and then to implement the right management. I've listed these below because they are so useful, and we should all be using them. At its core, to plant for the future, we must be considered and site specific in our choices. We must also opt to create the most diverse plantings – both by maximizing species and maximizing genetic diversity within species. And lastly, we must adapt our cultivation techniques, aesthetic preferences, and inputs. Failure will become commonplace, and we must be open minded to learning from it. And quickly.

- <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/climate-change/>
- <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/climate-change/resources/decision-support-tools/>
- <https://www.bgci.org/resources/bgci-hosted-data-tools/climate-assessment-tool/>
- <https://cat.bgci.org/>
- <https://climatematch.org.uk/>
- <https://www.treesandshrubsonline.org/>

The Chatsworth 2023 Garden masterclass conference was a rich education in the ways we can choose to use plants in the future. To bring so many horticultural professionals under one (gilded) roof inspired many new connections and conversations which will stay with me throughout my career. If only we had as much diversity in the speakers as we did in the plants to which we were introduced. Despite this, it was the most incredible two days and I'm extremely grateful to the Merlin Trust for enabling me to attend with the rest of my Pictorial Meadow colleagues.



*Figure 6: The Pictorial Meadows team in front of a Pictorial Meadow at Chatsworth.*