

The Success of Growing in Sand with Peter Korn



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Introduction

After attending a Kew Mutual Improvement Society talk given by Peter in November 2023 I was intrigued by his approach to growing plants in sand. Peter Korn is known for his innovative and naturalistic approach to gardening, which emphasises growing plants in ways that mimic their native habitats. Rather than relying on traditional soil amendments or fertilisers, Korn focuses on creating environments that match the conditions where plants thrive in the wild. He uses techniques that allow the development of deep, resilient root systems and plants which grow strong and slowly aboveground, creating real hardiness and meaning common problems with growing in rich material don't occur, such as mildews and staking. Korn's method promotes sustainability and allows plants to grow with minimal maintenance, adapting to their environment naturally over time. His philosophy encourages observing nature closely to understand and replicate ecological systems in a garden setting.

This goes against the tradition of how we grow plants here in the UK, yet the way Peter spoke about his pioneering methods, and the evidence of beautiful, flourishing gardens he has created really resonated with me and left me wanting to learn more about growing in inorganic materials and better understand how this is achieved. What better way to do this than work with Peter himself in Sweden.

Work: Week One

Myself and a fellow Kew Diploma student, Louie De Witt, embarked on this trip to Sweden. Our first week was spent working at Peter's garden and nursery at his home just outside of Snogerod, Sweden. What we saw is a striking example of his commitment to naturalistic gardening. His garden resembles a rocky, alpine landscape, with an array of native and exotic plants adapted to grow in tough, well-drained conditions. Instead of traditional flower beds or manicured lawns, Korn's garden features rock beds, scree slopes, and sand beds, designed to replicate the challenging environments where many of these plants naturally thrive. On an initial tour of the garden and nursery, Peter really forced the point about using topography to one's advantage in the garden and how it's important to create different heights, aspects and niches in order to create a number of different pockets in which certain plants can thrive in. Every

single plant we observed was looking very healthy and growing very well, embodiment of the gratification plants give you when their natural habitat conditions are given to them.



The nursery itself is similarly unique. Korn cultivates plants in over 100 raised pure-sand beds, which encourages them to develop extensive root systems and become resilient to extreme weather and drought. This setup allows the nursery to offer a diverse selection of hardy, low-maintenance plants that are well-suited to difficult garden conditions. His approach allows for a highly diverse ecosystem, with plants from different parts of the world thriving side-by-side, displaying an unusual mix of colours, textures, and forms that shift with the seasons. Peter's nursery receives absolutely no irrigation, and after a long and hot summer in Sweden the plants in flower were all looking fantastic. On the hottest September day in Sweden's history, in 30 degree heat, I sunk my hand into one of the sand beds and found the sand to be cool and containing a little moisture, this really aided my understanding of how plants grow such good root systems in such favourable conditions.



The work in our first week involved lifting clumps of plants from the nursery beds and dividing them into individual plants for a planting job in Stockholm which were going to do in the second week. Lifting the plants was effortless in the sand. The roots systems I observed were really very impressive and emphasised how sand allows for roots to grow deeply and freely in their search

for moisture below ground.



Once lifted, we took the plants to a bench to be pruned back and divided. This showed me how one clump can give you tens of individuals which will all grow on perfectly well once replanted. After lifting and dividing for the week, Peter predicted that we had around 10,000 plants for the job in Stockholm, all put into plastic bags for travel and costing Peter absolutely nothing. The plants we were working with were as follows:

- *Aeonium* sp.
- *Anthemis* sp.
- *Anemone* sp.
- *Arctanthemum arcticum*
- *Artemisia* sp.
- *Aqualiga* sp.
- *Aster* 'Twilight'
- *Centaurea nigra*
- *Chrysanthemum* 'Mary Stoker'
- *Dianthus* sp.
- *Echium vulgare*
- *Euphorbia cyparissias* 'Fens Ruby'
- *Geranium cantabrigiense*
- *Geranium sanguineum*
- *Geranium* sp.
- *Hypericum* sp.
- *Iris sibirica*
- *Linaria* sp.
- *Miscanthus* sp.
- *Nepeta gigantea*
- *Salvia* spp.
- *Seline* sp.
- *Solidago cutleri*
- *Veronica teucrioides*
- And many more



We were also to be planting some trees and shrubs in Stockholm. Rather than grow these himself, Peter buys them in from other suppliers. Before they are ready to be planted, they require their roots to be washed and cleaned of the nursery compost, ensuring there is absolutely no organic matter around the roots. Doing this, I observed how nursery compost can be of quite poor quality, and how constricted plant roots become when they are containerised and not potted on at the correct time. The trees and shrubs were working with were as follows:

- *Chaenomeles superba* x 'Orange Storm' PBR
- *Hippophae rhamnoides*
- *Liquidambar styraciflua*
- *Pyrus communis*
- *Tamarix tetrandia*

I found the work in the nursery a fantastic holistic education of Peter's whole approach to growing resilient and strong plants, and how these are prepared for his planting jobs.



Work: Week Two

On Monday morning we spent the day driving up to Stockholm, a 6-hour drive. On the way we stopped off at a number of Peter's past projects. This was a brilliant example of how well the small plants we had prepared were going to grow on once planted. This gardens we saw all looked full of life and colour, again a brilliant expression of how providing a plant with its preferred conditions will reward you by growing very well indeed. The number of species was quite incredible, with self-seeding allowing for plants to find their niches in pockets within the space which Peter had created. Peter's combination of planting and seed sowing on his projects

gives such richness to them and thus creates thriving ecosystems where both plants and animals can exist, even and especially within the centres of urban places.



The site we were planting up was a housing estate consisting of a central area surrounded by flats with beds around the flats themselves on both sides.

The next three days were spent planting the plants we had prepared in the nursery. To ensure the roots are kept cool and moist, and to give the plant good anchorage, Peter asked us to plant much more deeply than we normally would. It was really interesting to see how Peter positions plants. There was no planting plan as Peter much prefers to physically experience the spaces he is planting into, observing factors such as aspect and wind direction to more suitably and

appropriately place the plants.



After two very long and wet days we had planted everything. Given the time of year, and the fact that we had already cut back a lot of the growth, the only plants visible were the grasses, shrubs and trees, the others were all underground in the inorganic gravel that we had planted into. The last task we did was to broadcast unique seed mixes which Peter had made for each aspect. With the plants that we planted, and the seed we broadcast, the species richness of this

relatively small area will be fantastically high. It gives me great excitement to think what this site will look like next spring and into next summer.



Learnings

I have come away from my time with Peter in Sweden a better horticulturist than I went as. During my two-week stint with Peter Korn in September, I gained invaluable hands-on experience in sustainable, low maintenance planting techniques. Under his guidance and willingness to share his own learnings, I learnt the absolute importance of providing plants with the conditions of where they grow in nature, enhancing my understanding of how to create resilient and thriving plant ecosystems. Peter's garden is a living showcase of botanical diversity, with an impressive array of plants from different climates and habitats all coming together to create a beautiful space. The stunning beauty of the plants he grows, from delicate alpine flowers to robust perennials, was a constant source of inspiration and I have come away with much better plant knowledge. Peter's innovative approach to using minimal water and fertilisers was particularly enlightening, demonstrating that effective plant care does not always require extensive resources. I also honed my skills in plant propagation and transplanting, which will be instrumental in future horticultural projects. Overall, the experience was a profound dive into a pioneering horticultural approach, and I left with a real desire to share his methods with colleagues, friends and family and one day implement them myself to grow resilient, low maintenance and beautiful spaces, just as he has done and continues to do.

Conclusion

I genuinely think that as we face greater extremes in weather, Peter's approach to growing plants will be the answer to challenging circumstances, with plants managing to thrive in seemingly poor conditions. I only hope that his name and work gains greater recognition than it already rightfully has, and more horticulturists around the world embrace and adopt his approach to growing plants. I have found myself thinking long and hard about how to best implement Peter's practices in gardens and spaces here in the UK and am committed to heavily involving these logical and environmentally sustainable techniques throughout my own career following this eye-opening trip. Reflecting on this trip, I have undoubtedly achieved the intended purposes of it and more, learning about plants and gardening every day.

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