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Where have all the flowers gone?

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Abstract

Plants are the vocabulary of the designed landscape. The huge diversity of plants once used by landscape designers and cultivated by craftsmen is no longer used by conservationists. Learning this vocabulary by heart, and applying the years of time and effort necessary to learn the skills of cultivation, requires a strong work ethic.

Over the past 100 years, the much-esteemed work ethic and skills of the Victorian gardener largely have been lost, and with that the know-how with which to cultivate the plants necessary for the conservation of our designed landscapes.

However, this lack of a horticultural skills base is being addressed. School gardens are being revived, and apprenticeships and the skills of the craftsman are being heavily promoted. But, with the exception of the Army, no one appears to be teaching apprentices the traditional work ethic.

Introduction

Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote: 'Plants are fashioned by cultivation, man by education' (Rousseau, 1726). The 18th-century French philosopher was the first to define designed landscape in *Julie, ou la nouvelle*

Héloïse (1761). He was also emphatic that contrasting cultivated plants in the designed landscape with the natural world was pivotal to the art of gardening. For Rousseau plants were the vocabulary of the designed landscape.

However, in comparison to the diversity of plants used in the gardens of the last three centuries, today's conservationists use a short list of plant varieties and species that would barely interest, let alone enthuse, the great landscape gardeners and head gardeners of the recent past. The mother plants are still available: they have been stored by specialist nurserymen, botanical gardens, Plant Heritage, the Association of Garden Trusts, and by amateur collectors. Amateurs are largely responsible for housing the collections of the National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens, now renamed Plant Heritage, which brings together the talent of botanists, horticulturalists and conservationists, and the dedication of keen amateur and a few professional gardeners. Over the last half-century, a tradition has been established of immensely knowledgeable amateur gardeners who are often more informed than the experts. These amateurs are also likely to be the paying visitors so essential to the economic viability of historic gardens and designed landscapes, where repeat business is crucial. This expert gardening public know their plants – they know whether or not plants have been chosen correctly and if the plants are being tended correctly. If displays are not up to scratch, return visits are put off for a year or so and income from visitors decreases significantly.

Why is the huge diversity of garden plants – the very vocabulary of landscape gardening – no longer used, let alone cherished, by conservationists?

There are two reasons for this neglect. The only means of assimilating the characteristics of several tens of thousands of plants, in order to identify which plants

should be used, is learning them off by heart. This philosophy is by no means popular with contemporary educationalists, who adhere to the idea that their students can get the same level of knowledge from the Internet. Don Tapscott sums up their argument in his book *Wikinomics* (Tapscott and Williams, 2008): 'Learning by heart is pointless for the Google generation. For generations of pupils, learning key historical dates, places, and names off by heart has been the bastion of academic success. But for today's youngsters, tedious rote learning is pointless because such basic facts are only a mouse click away via Google, Wikipedia and online libraries.'

How wrong he is! Tapscott has put the cart before the horse. As Simon Carr says: 'It is like saying you do not need to know many words if you own a dictionary' (Carr, 2013). It is, of course, a question of the articulation of vocabulary. The Internet is unable to make original decisions in terms of composition and design despite its ability to accumulate extensive lists. In other words, creativity does not happen by painting with numbers. It is only the human mind that has the ability to articulate creatively and only if it has learned a vocabulary on which to base that articulation. The enormous language of landscape and garden plants is being reduced to a tabloid dialect; if this continues, it will be text-speak within a generation.

Assuming the plant has been identified, it takes years of experience and hard work to learn the skills of its cultivation: starting work at 7.30am, only to finish at 5pm, often in the wet and cold. This is currently considered neither appealing nor academically fashionable. In short, we have lost the craftsman's work ethic, or, as Benjamin Franklin wrote, 'the principle that hard work is intrinsically virtuous or worthy of reward' (Franklin, 1748).

Consequently, while the plants are still available, ineffective shortcuts, created for expediency and to avoid hard work, have for the most part eliminated the use of the diversity of planting that once gave the so-admired character to those gardens that we now think worthy of conservation. Instead, it is now deemed necessary only to learn the genus, or at best the family, which is not much use in making the choice between a rose and a rhododendron, let alone in deciding whether that rose should be 'Félicité Parmentier' or 'Félicité et Perpétue'.

For today's professional, flowers have become unfashionable because it is too much trouble to learn which is which and because they take too much effort to grow. It has been left to the amateurs to collect and cultivate.

Accordingly, while our conservationists live in a sea of green (Fig. 1), the question is not where have all the flowers gone, but rather where are those with the skills of cultivation. Indeed what has happened to the craftsmen?



FIG. 1 Iford Manor, near Bath, Harold Peto's rose garden. Once a sea of green, over a period of 20 or more years the informed owners of Iford Manor have found the original labels marking the old hybrid tea roses that Peto planted in his rose garden from 1900–1930. A specialist nursery was commissioned to search for propagating material from the same clones, which were found in (sometimes obscure) European collections. Skilled craftsmen are now propagating new plants with which to re-establish the original varieties. It can be done!

The Craftsman – 'learning how' as well as 'learning that' (Pring, 2012)

While standing in the midst of a throng of schoolboys one Tuesday at teatime, I was surprised to be asked, not when they could return to the cricket field, but how one got a new rose? And how did my late father, R.H. Mattock, manage to get the white into the strawberry red of the 'Summer Fields' rose?



FIG. 2 Rose 'Summer Fields', bred by Mattock (UK 1971) and named for the eponymous preparatory school in Oxford

Fortunately, I was standing next to a 1950s shrub rose whose flowers were in full maturity. Carefully picking off the petals (so that insects would no longer be attracted), I sent a boy off to find another variety. I showed them how to cut off the male part of the plant (the anthers and stamens) to leave the female stigma. The boy returned with a flower full of pollen and we brushed it onto the stigma of the other. That, I explained, was invention. Horticulturists had to decide which pollen to use, based on what they wanted to create. I explained that looking after the plant we had

hybridised – the cultivation of the plants – was the job of the craftsman. The craftsman takes his time; he is meticulous in his attention to detail and it is his experience, not that of the inventor, that permits the successful outcome of the hybridisation, the new plant, of which he might justifiably feel proud. It is that pride in his work that enables the craftsman to incentivise himself to do the best he can. It is the same pride that enables him to respect not only his own work but that of others. Mutual respect for each other's work is a sound, practical basis for mutual respect for each other's cultures, particularly for a school full of boys from across the world (Pring, 2012).

In *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennet (2008) encapsulated this practical demonstration where, using Hannah Arendt's model, *homo faber*, *animal laborans* (Arendt, 1958), he eloquently explores the reasons why contemporary culture denigrates the hands-on apprentice and the sheer hard work it took to eventually become a craftsman.

'We have lost it, the systems broke!' said John Watkins, head of gardens and landscape at English Heritage (Watkins, 2008). 'It's a sad fact of life that we have perilously few craftsmen, head-gardeners in the true sense of the term, let alone under-gardeners, who are equipped with the skills necessary to maintain our historic gardens and cultural landscapes.'

The rise of the Victorian head gardener

Before seeking a solution, conservationists might well consider why the zenith of the gardening star was the Victorian head gardener and to examine how and why this craftsman rose to such prominence before his descendants allowed his cultivation skills to dwindle. Lacking the advantages of electronic communication, horticultural skills were disseminated through literature before being passed on to the illiterate (Musgrave, 2007). From as long ago as the 10th century through to the literate head gardeners of the 19th century, horticultural development was primarily disseminated by word of mouth: from the literate employers to the illiterate hands-on gardeners, the craftsmen.

A literature review over nearly 10 centuries reveals a progression from descriptions of plants towards evermore exacting details of practical cultivation. The first books generally available that aimed to disseminate horticultural knowledge came in the form of herbals, which were by monastics and physicians, and characterised by *Gerard's Herbal* (Gerard, 1597).

The Restoration brought with it an explosion of horticultural treatises marked by the publication of Robert Morison's *Historia* (1680) and *Plantarum umbelliferarum* (1672). Published in three expensive and lavishly illustrated volumes, these tomes were purely the domain of the rich and educated. 'Things had to change,' stated Ralph Austen in his *Treatise of Fruit Trees* (1665). He was the first to note that botanical and horticultural books were only available to the educated and wealthy, and stated categorically that books on gardening should 'be of small bulk and price; because great volumes ... are of too great a price for mean husband-men to buy'. This sentiment was taken to heart

by John Evelyn in his successful one-volume *Compleat Gardener* (Evelyn, 1693).

The tending of the plants was left to more-or-less illiterate gardeners until William Curtis, a great horticulturist known for his meticulous and beautifully illustrated 18th-century publication, *Flora londinensis*, first produced *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* in 1787 as a monthly periodical for gardeners, featuring ornamental plants complete with botanical descriptions and cultural details.



FIG. 3 *Rosa centifolia muscosa* 'Common Moss', by S. Edwards in *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*, 1788

Progressing from the 18th to the 19th century, horticultural literature, including practical details of cultivation, was published at a pace matched only by the increase in literacy among head gardeners. These early Victorians gardeners had become sufficiently literate to be able to read the 'gardening press' and, with it, to learn a gardening vocabulary and a horticultural skills base hitherto only taught by practical demonstration and verbal communication.

Learning the skills of cultivation

The problems in horticulture are the result of changes in the way skills have been developed and applied within the socio-political context of the last 100 years. Historically workmen aspired to become hands-on, productive craftsmen rather than inventors, a small population who promoted new ideas or products. The millennia-old regime for the dissemination of horticultural skills was the apprentice-craftsman-journeyman-head gardener system.

The apprentice learned his skills and work ethic over a period of five years to become a junior craftsman under the tutorial direction of the head gardener (Fig. 4). The apprentice was to spend time working under the supervision and tutelage of a journeyman or senior journeyman in the different departments of the garden or nursery. Literacy was taught in order that he could

study in the evenings. Once skilled and considered sufficiently mature by the head gardener, he would be promoted to journeyman status and sent off to work elsewhere to gain further experience, often returning to his alma mater carrying the respect of the experienced craftsman to pass on his newfound skills to the apprentices.



FIG. 4 The 'boss', foreman, journeymen and apprentices at Robert Mattock Roses, summer 1906

The *Gardeners' Chronicle*, later *Horticultural Week*, published a series of charts illustrating skills together with a weekly calendar of operations. The apprentice was required to keep a diary of what he did each day and would often learn or be taught from the charts (Fig. 5).

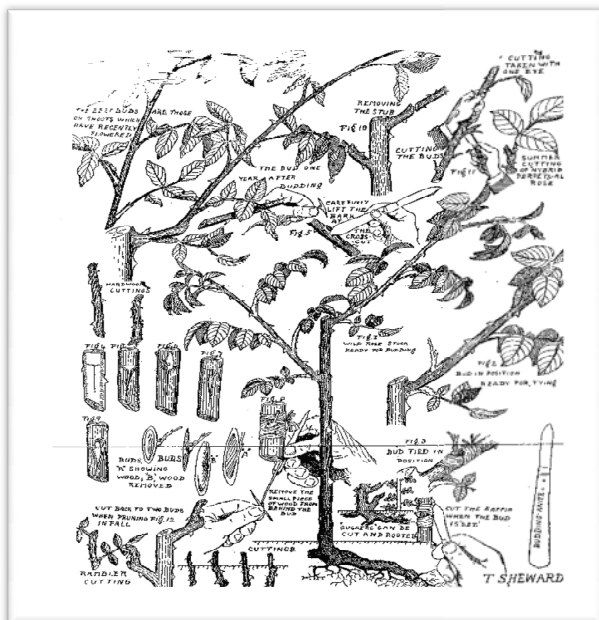


FIG. 5 Sheward's 'Budding Roses', an 1888 chart illustrating a specialist propagating technique for apprentices

After three years of working through the garden departments the apprentice would be promoted to the position of journeyman. He would travel so as to work in different gardens or nurseries with a view to broadening his experience sufficient to gain a reference.

This training had to be funded. The down payment to secure the position was the 'apprentice fee' levied by the head gardener. If he was fortunate the fee was paid up front by his family but, more often than not, the fee was deducted from his wages at the rate of 1s.6d per week. Wages were low before the deduction; typically in 1850 an apprentice started on 8s. per week, rising to 11s. per week after two years. The regulations ruling an apprentice's life were harsh. Life was not, as they say, a bed of roses.

The working hours were onerous. A 60-hour week, Monday to Saturday, (6.00am to 6.00pm) was the generally accepted norm. The 'bothy', the accommodation available to apprentices, was not exactly homely. Quoting from an anonymous diary of 1884: 'There are two beds of coarse unplanned deals. All the sheets and blankets must be provided by the lads themselves, and all bowls, plates and spoons. Their food consists of milk when it can be got, and oatmeal. Beef, mutton, pork or fish or flesh of any kind they rarely taste.'

At the end of his working life the under-gardener, despite his craftsman status, had little to look forward to. He was normally obliged to move out of his tied accommodation, and for those fortunate enough to not fall ill or suffer disability, the workhouse or starvation on the streets was a reality.

It took 10 years to achieve the rank of head gardener. He had learned his practical skills during his time as an apprentice and journeyman, and his scientific and artistic skills from evening classes and periodicals. Head gardeners' pay was comparatively low, although being paid a salary complete with tied accommodation, albeit on four months' notice, gave a degree of seniority that made most other trades envious. The salary for the mid-19th-century head gardener amounted to some £100 per annum, compared to £36 for a journeyman and £20 for an apprentice. Nevertheless, after a rough and tough adolescence and early manhood learning the skills of the craftsman, the head gardener could expect a well-respected, albeit only a tolerably financially rewarded, life of running a team of gardeners in order to cultivate the huge diversity of ornamental plants that were used as a matter of course to build what are now our historic gardens.

Revolution and a socio-political experiment that failed

Despite his status as a craftsman, and in common with his fellow tradesmen, the gardener's lot in the 19th century was not a happy one. Job and housing security was tenuous; free welfare, health and education, and a pension-funded retirement were virtually non-existent. Britain's welfare was characterised by voluntary provision, with mutual and friendly societies delivering a whole range of benefits. Living on charity was the unacceptable name of the game and a change in culture was required. The welfare state was conceived in the early 1900s. Notionally the prize was security 'from the cradle to the grave'.

The problem was and still is, it appears, that the welfare state experiment did not work for the craftsman.

We have now had three generations of a hands-on workforce and management who have learned that, should they not want to make the effort of learning their craft by heart or by job experience, the welfare state will supplement their income, pay for their health, their education and pension regardless.

What is the solution?

The problem has not gone unnoticed; indeed, over the last decade there has been a proliferation of initiatives designed to attract young people into apprenticeship schemes. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) has made a great effort to improve the levels of skills in the hands-on workplace through vocational training. Regrettably, and along the way, the term 'apprenticeship' has been bastardised by extending the commonly understood definition – that is, hands-on learning towards becoming a craftsman – into any workplace learning, even up to graduate and professional levels. Much thought and financial support have been given to these upper levels of 'apprenticeship' at the expense of support for the lower levels which, of course, is where the majority of our manual workforce lie.

Pursuant to his 'No Stone Unturned' report (Heseltine, 2012), which suggests devolving decision-making and spending controls to the country's regions, Lord Heseltine is firmly of the view that garden festivals should take a pivotal role in promoting regional regeneration. Furthermore, the labour trained in growing, constructing and planting the festivals could be set to work for the community. People are living much longer, and in their latter years are physically unable, despite their love for colour and floral display in their front gardens, to undertake all the work. Gardeners are going to become much in demand. (Heseltine, 2013).

'The Richard Review of Apprentices in England', commissioned by the government, was published in November 2012 (Richard, 2012). His brief was: 'What should an apprenticeship be in the future, and how can apprenticeships meet the needs of the changing economy?' He recommended that there should be:

1. A move to employer ownership of apprenticeship and its delivery
2. A focus on outcomes, not content or process
3. A narrowing of the definition of apprenticeships and an end to signing up existing adult workers
4. A new qualifications system and assessment regime to be set up via open competition, and that assessment should involve employers
5. A rise in information, advice, guidance and awareness standards

Will Hutton, writing in *The Guardian* (Hutton, 2013) the following spring, while not entirely dismissing the review, felt that 'it had dropped into a cultural and business wasteland'. In the same piece and much in the same vein, Hutton comments on the fallout from Alan Sugar's attitude to apprenticeships. 'It is the British disease in microcosm. The crisis through which we are

living is more than the aftermath of a near financial collapse. The long credit boom disguised the degree to which British capitalism and society have completely lost their way. We do not have a productive business culture. Of course, apprenticeship has become devalued and degraded.'

The Richard review was discussed in depth at a conference organised by the Economic & Social Research Council on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE) at the University of Oxford (March 2013). This author raised a cheap laugh when he posed the question: 'How does the Army instil the work ethic in its apprentices?' But it is not a laughable issue; it is, in fact, the most serious issue facing employers, certainly in the land-based horticultural, agricultural and construction industries in the UK today. Under its disciplined regime, the Army is highly successful in retaining the apprentices that it trains as tradesmen, losing only some 20% of its intake – and that largely through drug abuse – compared with a 47% loss nationally (Cirin, 2009). Why, then, should the Army not be approached to see how many of those soldiers, coming to the end of their commission, might like to take up a horticultural career instead? We could do with their spirit. The Oxford conference went on to discuss how our de-incentivised workforce has lost its role models. Might our apprentices aspire to emulate these soldiers in the same way that young sportspeople seek to emulate their Olympic heroes?

'Would such role models inspire children? I don't know about that, but come and look at these children's gardens,' said the ever-energetic and distinguished horticulturalist, journalist and broadcaster, Peter Seabrook, at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2013. Seabrook, together with *The Sun* newspaper and the Royal Horticultural Society, supported and encouraged some 200 schools to compete for a place to build a small garden at the show, the children having honed their gardening skills in their own school gardens. The results were remarkably articulate.



FIG. 6 Peter Seabrook of *The Sun* supported this children's garden at the Chelsea Flower Show 2013

The author asked several of the children who had most influenced them. There was absolutely no contest and no debate: mummy, teacher and Prince Harry!

Attendance at master classes and workshops is poor in the author's experience when school-leavers are introduced to the notion of work through work-

experience schemes. Furthermore, rather than offering encouragement to their offspring, parents are all too ready to give the wrong message, typically asking: Do we all have a right to work or is it an obligation? Are employers simply getting something for nothing when there is absolutely no incentive to work at all?

Having been taught how to work in only six weeks, something a 19th-century grandmother, mother or, indeed, a crown prince would have learned at home anyway, the allegedly work-experienced progress towards apprenticeships with stints at work and stints at college.

It is the experience of the author that it is here that the educational plot becomes muddled because the level of skills taught at college is not adequate for the reality of the workplace. Why? Hands-on skills are not taught because, with few exceptions, the lecturers are not skilled themselves. Just how many lecturers are adept at or even aware of basic gardening skills? How many, for example, teach that their students must know which plants flower on the current year's growth or last year's? How many teach that if once-flowering plants are pruned in the spring the flowering growth will have been cut off? Little wonder that there is so little flower in our historic gardens. The wood on which the plants would have flowered has been cut off before it had a chance to come into bud! Thus, the municipal 'clip and trim' regardless of the type of plant has become the norm; the result a sea of green haircuts. Master classes and workshops, where available, are enthusiastically attended by students but very rarely by lecturers who are too embarrassed to be shown up by their lack of knowledge. Yet it is these workshops that are so essential to teaching apprentices the very basics of their craft.

On top of this, candidates for apprenticeships are slow in coming forward because of horticulture's public image. The Royal Horticultural Society's 2012 survey revealed that: 'Horticulture is for dropouts; it's unskilled and unfulfilling, according to young people. Almost 70% of 18-year-olds questioned believe horticultural careers should only be considered by people who have "failed academically". Nearly 50% of under-25s think horticulture is an "unskilled career"' (Royal Horticultural Society, 2012).

The National Trust and English Heritage are at the forefront in promoting apprentice schemes in the heritage sector. The National Trust Academy provides vocational qualifications, claiming, and refreshingly so, 'that not all training takes place in the classroom or lecture hall'.

Their flower shows and open gardens are arenas where apprentices might display mastery of their craft, where it would not require a great effort in educational direction to promote winning apprentices as role models.

Over the last three or four decades there have not been sufficient UK working nationals, let alone apprentices, to meet demand. This gap has been filled with workers largely from Eastern Europe, who bring with them an enviable work ethic.

In comparison to the UK, in Poland, Germany and the Punjab, where traditional respect for the craftsman and his work ethic still prevails and where there are different combinations of on- and off-the-job learning, young people can attain high standards, which enable them to get employment in the UK for which local youngsters are not qualified.

Conclusion

Rousseau's philosophy – that plants are fashioned by cultivation, man by education – is as relevant today as it was in his time. Plants, and by extrapolation their cultivation, are pivotal in determining the designed landscape. Furthermore, propagating material is still available from mother plants that were introduced in every era of the development of designed landscapes.

The tradition of dissemination of expertise by plantsmen and gardeners through their publications continues, not least in the form of Haymarket's *Horticultural Week* and The Royal Horticultural Society's *The Garden* and *The Plantsman*. Ignoring the 'celebrity gardener–immediate effects brigade', television and the Internet have considerably extended accessibility to techniques once considered the domain of the specialist.

The problem remains the lack of craftsmen and, more so, the craftsmen who have been taught the work ethic, know how to do a good day's work, and know how to teach practical, manual horticultural techniques, both in the workplace and at master classes and workshops. As a result it seems that we were not going to find, in the immediate future, the skilled labour force required to maintain our heritage of historic gardens from the sectors of the community from where they once came. Notwithstanding the myriad of schemes aimed at encouraging young people to take up apprenticeships, it seems that the working community is now so entrenched in its ways of 'industrial betterment' that it will require generations of re-evaluation of their socioeconomic education before seeing their way to working 'on the land' once again.

In the interim we have in the midst of our highly integrated, cosmopolitan and multiracial UK society significant sectors of the population from cultures that continue to regard the manual skills as both honourable and respectable, and a very satisfactory way of life.

There are large numbers of these people who are horticulturally gifted. What is more, their forebears have been growing 'our' garden plants for a thousand years at least.



FIG. 7 Skilled Punjabi horticultural craftsmen and craftswomen planting out rare varieties of roses at an Oxfordshire nursery

It is in our power to rescue our heritage by using this workforce, by encouraging gardening skills in schools and by employing apprentices at provincial garden festivals, and we must do it now. Time is of the essence; we have the requisite science and culture, not only at our fingertips but also recorded for posterity. The problem is that we are losing the old men and women of traditional gardening who, virtually alone and now in their 80s and 90s, hold the all-important practical and artisanal skills. The opportunity is fast disappearing to impart their skills to our new generation of gardeners, skills that are essential to managing and maintaining the all-important role of plants and horticulture in our historic gardens and designed landscapes in the future.

It is not all gloom, though. There are institutions that are prepared to employ craftsmen of the highest calibre and offer apprenticeships to those aspiring to be so. The following pictures depict the restoration of Alfred Parsons's garden at Worcester College, where the work was successfully undertaken by college staff.



FIG. 8 The restoration and conservation of Alfred Parsons's rose garden in the provost's garden, Worcester College, Oxford. Lacking the craftsman's vocabulary, the garden displayed a paucity of plants in July 2006



FIG. 9 Restoration by head gardener S. Bagnall and his apprentices, November 2006. Note the good craftsmanship: metal edging, double digging incorporating manure and the large specially prepared specimen roses



FIG 10. The restored and underplanted rose garden (Mattock 2007)

As Rousseau said: 'Plants are fashioned by cultivation, man by education'.

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