

November 2012 James Fox: Garden editing- making sense of a passion

Jim exhibited a wry sense of humor throughout his talk, but first began with thanks to RGC for inviting him to our culinary and garden club meeting. The passions we have for "collecting" plants--as defined by "greed, lust and the desire for expansion"--may be either for sticking with one type of plant or tree or a "whatever strikes me at the nursery" type assembly for the landscape. He described himself as "a plantaholic and my name is Jim" and described his collection of 700 pots on a 7 ft. x 10 ft. patio. Trained as a teacher, Jim has learned how to bring order out of plant chaos throughout the years, with the help of some guidance counselors along the way. World renowned gardeners such as Graham Stuart Thomas, Christopher Lloyd, Gertrude Jekyll, Vita Sackville-West, Rosemary Verey were referenced, as well as their famous gardens, which Jim has had the privilege of visiting over time. Included in those collective garden styles, was our own Heronswood Gardens, which Jim mentioned are being restored.

First and foremost, he set out 5 rules for Garden Editing, including: 1) Bring order through color, 2) Structure can be man-made or a plant, 3) Punctuation equals accent, excitement and contrast, 4) Unity through the background (i.e., fences, walls, and hedges), and 5) Layering--both physically and in the 4th dimension of time. "Gardening is not meant to be a contact sport" is his motto, but rather to be pursued for the enjoyment factor. Listening to your plants is one of the foremost lessons he's learned. If they appear happy where they are, then find out about other "like" plants that can be placed by them. Graham Stuart Thomas was a big proponent of seeing no bare ground--essentially keeping the ground covered with plants. However, if your style (and temperament for weeding) is more geared toward the open ground look, then go for it. It's basically your garden, so create whatever makes you happy. The NW garden communities have been much politicized horticulturally, but that doesn't mean it needs to be competitive.

He pointed out the need to mulch gardens according to their nature: Woodland Gardens, meaning trees and plant need wood based composts; while predominately herbaceous gardens need mulches of composts or manures to encourage the appropriate microorganisms such plants need. Also, the determination of which type you'd like to design helps you make sense of your site and plant selections. Thus, planting to your site and its sun/shade requirements are uppermost in the configurations. Jim defined sunny as at least 8 hours per day.

Color: Bring the color wheel into play in your design: starting with red at the top of the wheel, you can stay on the blue side of red or the yellow side of red with your plant/floral choices. Blues are tasteful and calming. Slides of famous sites that use color to strike a pose--Sissinghurst with its warm reds, as well as its famous white gardens were magnificent examples of color. Jim reminded us that green and white are often overlooked as colors. A coral garden slide highlighted the use of shades and hues of a tint to an effective creation.

Structure: Rosemary Verey's knot garden was displayed as a fine structure in the garden example. Jim recommends starting your design with the winter look in mind first, then the autumn plants, followed by summer and lastly spring. Structure can mean man-made trellises/arbors, walls, yew hedges (not a good idea to use Leyland cypress for hedge

strategies), rock paths, etc. that the garden can build upon. Sissinghurst was again shown, but it was described as an "illusion", since its design looks simple and eloquent, but is hard to keep up due to soil and other conditions. Gravel paths and lawns equal a carpeted look.

Punctuation and Accent: Gardens are never finished. Once you feel that you've accomplished some comfortability in the landscape, then it's time to break the rules. Upright punctuation marks, like trees, work well to take the eye in different places-so you're not always looking down at the garden. Adding whimsy is strongly encouraged. Empty pots can strike different poses in winter than in summer as one slide exposed. Moving pots around can also achieve different looks. Kitsch art can be found or easily converted with paint or cement-like covers.

Unity: Colors are great unifiers. White and Silver are great unifiers that offer calmness and reflect light. Purple-leaved plants belong in the sun. Jim recommended that we plant for the season that we are most often home. In order to figure out whether your design has unity, take a black and white photo. With the color removed, other design elements become obvious-height, texture, layers, etc. Then it becomes easier to figure out what to add or subtract. Layering: Layering plants can create the 4th dimension of time, which can also mean an undulation type of feeling. Great plant additions to achieve this design element include grasses and bulbs in great numbers. The addition of these should match your home or your place in the environment. Listen to your climate too. By layering selected plants you can also end up with a "collection" (the best of all worlds), as Jim did with 175 different snowdrop cultivars.

Jim wrapped up with slides of famous gardens (Sir Roy Strong's The Laskett garden and Christopher Lloyd's Great Dixter Garden) as some examples of how to make the garden your own-whether it's a mix of styles, color or design. In Lloyd's case, who was an opera lover, his garden became dramatic and surreal as if he was the conductor of his site. Jim's final thoughts on the process were "Just go for it...but think about it". Your particular personality should shine through, as many beautiful slides of famous gardens revealed. Much of horticulture is about translation-thinking of what it is and doing it yourself. However, in the case of Stonehenge-Jim pointed out that the "adults" who built it were really late teenagers, so don't be afraid to use them for the heavier call-to-arms. Simply listen to your plants, relax and enjoy your gardens was the overall humorous message we took home with us. Included below is a picture of Stong's spray-painted antlers, which seemed to epitomize great garden fun.