

A world of inspiration

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In the second extract from her new book, Ursula Buchan hails our foreign influences

The English garden, in one or another of its forms, has been transported far and wide across the temperate world; but the traffic has by no means been all one way.

We have always recognised that we can learn from others. In the past, we have drawn on ideas from the French, Dutch, Italians, Persians, Indians, Japanese and Chinese; and these days we are influenced strongly by Germans and Americans as well.



Abroad brush: Piet Oudolf's Millennium Garden at Pensthorpe

The first foreigners to have an impact on English gardens were the Romans, who introduced a great many plants, such as the beech tree, the grape vine and ground elder, into this country. More importantly, they also made enclosed, formal gardens. In the late 15th-century, Italy brought us the knot, which we embraced with alacrity; and at the beginning of the 17th century, the French style became important, influencing the gardens of the great and the good in England for a century.

Charles I's wife, Henrietta Maria, was French and her gardener, André Mollet, introduced many French garden features to England. At one royal residence, Wimbledon Manor, he replaced the knots with elaborate embroidered parterres; replaced the orchard with a maze; and he put in a patte d'oie of five avenues radiating from a point close to the house. French influence brought many statues, often made of lead, to big gardens, as well as intricate ironwork gates and water in the form of canals.

After William and Mary arrived in 1688, a simplified version of the French style, now known as Dutch, made headway. Parterres were simplified and topiary common. The important feature of all these gardens was that they were governed by axial geometry. All that came to an end with the rise of the landscape garden in the 18th century, but French influence crept back, perhaps in a self-consciously nostalgic way, in the 19th century. The most notable example was Waddesdon, where the garden was laid out by a Frenchman, Élie Lainé, in the 1880s, in line with Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild's passion for all things French.

During the 1800s, a number of styles jostled for attention and approbation, but the Italian garden was certainly a favourite with many big landowners. Sir Charles Barry designed a succession of Italianate terraces at Trentham Gardens in Staffordshire from 1833 and Shrubland Park in Suffolk in the 1850s. Elements of this style included statuary (of course), elaborately balustraded stone terraces, broad walkways and formal water gardens.

The Chinese garden never enjoyed great popularity here, even though aspects of Chinoiserie were fashionable in the 18th century. There are "Chinese" buildings in a number of landscape gardens, including Shugborough, Staffordshire and Studley Royal, North Yorkshire. Most famously, there is William Chambers' pagoda built in 1761-2, and recently triumphantly restored, at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

At Biddulph Grange in Staffordshire there is a garden of startling eclecticism and great interest, laid out in the 1840s and brilliantly restored by the National Trust in the 1990s. As well as a formal Italian terrace and an Egyptian Court, there is a fascinating Chinese water garden, complete with a pagoda, pool and bridge, whose design was influenced by the willow pattern story, as well as a miniature Great Wall of China.

Japanese gardens became all the rage from the 1890s onwards, helped by the writer Josiah Conder, whose books gave people in England some understanding of the symbolism of true Japanese gardens. English gardeners also had the opportunity to plant some of the marvellous hardy trees and shrubs which were pouring in from the Far East at the time.

Cliveden, Buckinghamshire, was probably the first place to acquire a water garden in the Japanese style, while Heale Garden, Wiltshire, has an important one, with a thatched tea house and red-painted Japanese bridge. The most impressive, however, must be that at Tatton Park, Cheshire, restored in 2000-2001; it has a tea garden with a kasatei (rest house), a lake with an island, which contains a Shinto shrine, and a representation of Mount Fuji, surrounded by a bamboo fence.



Pelargoniums, such as 'Ardens', and kniphofias were introduced from South Africa

In the past 15 years, the foreign style that has had the most impact is, without doubt, the New Naturalism, thanks largely to the enormous influence of Piet Oudolf, a Dutch garden designer and nurseryman. His reputation and influence rest on a show garden he made with Arne Maynard for the Chelsea Flower Show in 2000, and a number of high-profile garden projects in England, most notably the RHS Gardens at Wisley, Pensthorpe Waterfowl Park in Norfolk, Scampston Hall in Yorkshire and, most recently, with Tom Stuart-Smith, Trentham Gardens in Staffordshire.

His long experience as a nurseryman means that, more than most designers, he understands the habits and needs of the plants that he uses. Indeed, he has selected and named some of the cultivars he uses in his schemes, such as *Stachys officinalis* 'Hummelo', and has popularised others, for example *Cirsium rivulare* 'Atropurpureum'. This is extremely important in the New Naturalism style. If too vigorous (or too fragile) species and cultivars are employed, they will either swamp or be swamped.

Since Oudolf's interest is in echoing the dynamic of nature, his gardens are designed to delight through most of the year. Although most of the perennials and grasses flower between July and September, they are not cut down in the winter so their seedheads can be properly appreciated (and provide food for birds), especially after frosty nights. The plants are often grown in great, bold drifts - far larger than anything Gertrude Jekyll designed - or planted in blocks or curvilinear diagonals (as at Scampston Hall).

The liberal use of evergreen and deciduous grasses as buffers means that the eye happily accepts daring colour clashes, where they occur. Grasses are central to Oudolf's schemes, and a number have found enormous favour in English gardens as a result. Examples include *Deschampsia caespitosa*, *Sesleria nitida*, *Stipa gigantea* and *Panicum virgatum*. North American prairie perennials feature prominently, notably *rudbeckia*, *monarda*, *liatris*, *veronicastrum* and *asclepias*.

Form is also hugely important to him. Strong verticals are provided by, for example, *eupatorium* and *veronicastrum*, and groundcover by *Salvia x sylvestris* 'Rügen' and herbaceous geraniums. Oudolf uses predominantly perennials, but also bulbs such as alliums, ferns, small shrubs and even self-seeding annuals such as Shirley poppies.

Oudolf is prepared to countenance more wildness than Gertrude Jekyll. He appears to be conscious of the potential tension between "natural" and "garden", and his approach is principally concerned with atmosphere, but also influenced by fashion. He does not specifically exclude indigenous plants, but he is

wary of them, since low maintenance is a very important consideration. A valid criticism of his planting - and indeed that of all the New Naturalists - is that the reliance on herbaceous perennials makes these summer gardens, with little to see in spring.

It would be wrong to think that Oudolf does not use formal and permanent elements at all. At Scampston Hall, you will find a grass pyramid, axial lines formed by clipped hedges and gravel paths, a circular pool and avenues of trees. Even the meadows are confined by mown paths. At Bury Court, Hampshire, there is even a knot garden of clipped box.

- 'The English Garden' by Ursula Buchan (Frances Lincoln) is available for £23 (rrp £25) + £1.25 p&p. To order, call Telegraph Books on 0870 428 4112.

Thinking global

The international nature of modern illustrated publishing means that contemporary garden designers have been well exposed to their foreign counterparts, such as the Americans James van Sweden and Wolfgang Oehme, and the Belgian Jacques Wirtz and his son Peter (their work can now be seen at the Alnwick Garden in Northumberland as well).

Other foreign designers currently collaborating with English garden owners include Pascal Cribier, François Goffinet, Isabelle van Groeningen and Brita von Schoenaich, all contributing to a lively exchange of ideas. And, of course, Arabella Lennox-Boyd brings an Italian flair to her garden designs, including her own garden at Gresgarth Hall, Lancashire.

The preoccupations of gardeners and garden designers everywhere seem to be converging. They are, at present, absorbed by notions of achieving a light environmental footprint in the garden, in doing the least harm to nature and yet achieving something individual, even individualistic, and permanent.

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