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The Perennial Problem

Jill Billington and Lucy Gent review the Summer Seminar organised by Brita von Schoenaich and Tim Rees, which looked at new trends in perennial planting design on the Continent.

This was a remarkable event. Two hundred and fifty participants included landscape architects (21 from Germany), garden designers, architects, students, horticulturalists, nurserymen, photographers, gardeners and journalists. There were many surprises. Plants were centre stage, 47 landscape architects - who, as a breed, have looked down on planting as the 'soft' and 'cosmetic' arm of their responsibilities - chose to attend. Most of the talks were given in German, and translated for us sentence by sentence. And, most agreeably, the day's organisation was such as to maximise enjoyment. Every speaker was kept firmly in time, even by 'Stop!' Slide lists had been checked with speakers beforehand, reduced to feasible numbers, and lists handed to participants, together with summaries of the talks. For every picture on the screen, a list of plants used was projected alongside and the particular plant being mentioned at any one time pointed out. Compering was witty and courteous. The result was communication of the highest order.

But what were we all communicating about? A recent philosophy of using perennials in planting schemes where, 'with an artistic eye' - the phrase came up again and again - plants suited to the region and habitat are employed. A result can be achieved, even in a public park, that is beautiful, ecologically well founded and involves low maintenance. The price to be paid for all this is skill: skill in knowing the species and hybrids that can live at home on the site; expertise in balancing one species with another so that the war with expansionist thugs is avoided; expertise in managing drainage and nutrition so as to ensure longevity and peacefulness among plant communities. Expertise is expensive. Professional gardeners need status and commensurate salaries. This needs resolving in Britain.

There was a text behind the day's proceedings: Richard Hansen's and Friedrich Stahl's "Perennials and their Garden Habitats" (Stuttgart 1981; English translation Cambridge University Press 1993) in which all the principles, scientific and to some extent artistic, are

patiently laid out. This book is unlikely to gain the audience it deserves (and that gardening deserves), for it is a long read and the illustrations, on which so much depends today are inadequate. For a number of us, it was Stephen Lacey (in the 'Weekend Telegraph,' 26 June 1993) who by vividly describing the results in public gardens in Germany, showed Hansen's ideas as a revelation. 'Landscape Design' (April 1994) did its bit in propagating the message (and advertising the symposium). Kew was coaxed into producing the venue; and June 29th occurred.

Klaus Wittke spoke of Germany's history of planting design based on ecological and physiognomic requirements of the plants - and an artistic eye. This goes back to 1887. The key figure for today's experiments is the nurseryman Karl Foerster (1874-1970), whose plant breeding, displayed in his own garden, communicated his aims to the next generation. It is now a place of



Professor Hansen created the original trial garden for the study of horticulture and applied plant sociology at Weihenstephan University in Freisingen. Professor Kiermeier is responsible for the current design.
Photograph Schoenaich / Rees

pilgrimage. Slides wistfully conveyed some of its magic. This bit of history, incidentally, suggests the vital role of the private garden, so often dubbed 'amateur' and 'ornamental' by theoreticians and tough practitioners in the

public sphere. For the passionately cultivated garden is the place that fires the imagination of those who visit it. It is the heart of landscape design. Richard Hansen's inspiration was Karl Foerster's work, and garden; his philosophy deserves exposition.

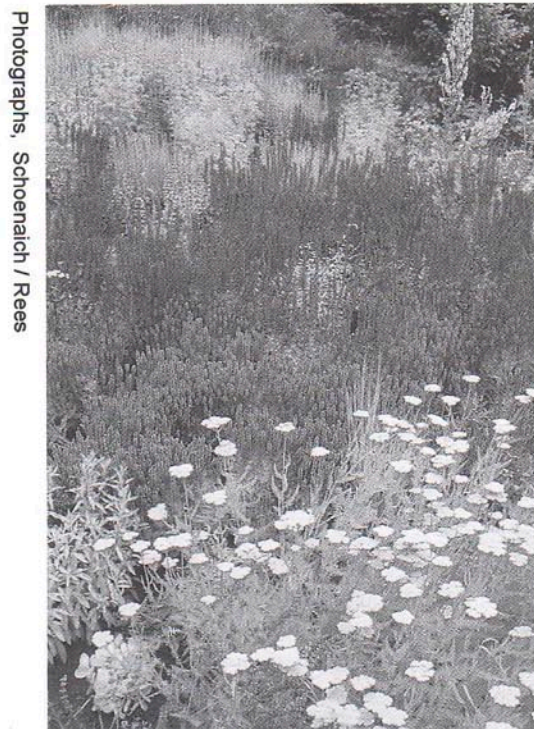
The designer's concern, like Hansen's own, should be with the best association, not the best individual plant. Where planting design proceeds from an aesthetic superimposed on nature, a sort of battle results, with the

perennials in some of Germany's public open spaces, reminding us of the role of Germany's 'Gartenschauen' (Garden Festivals) in bringing such schemes into the repertoire of public landscaping. He demonstrated different types of habitat. First woodland edge, for example: underneath a row of planes, a slide showed massed planting of hellebores. But the plane leaves? You blow them out in Autumn, shred them and blow them back. Next, a less frequented area using extensive patches of a few exotic specimens, "making a bold design



This planting style works well on the large scale. Here Urs Walser combines *Achillea filipendula* "Neugold", *Nepeta x fassenii* and *Salvia nemorosa* "Blaukugel", for the International Garden Festival, Stuttgart.

The flat plates of *Achillea filipendula* "Neugold" provide strong visual interest against *Salvia nemorosa* "Superba".



Photographs, Schoenaich / Rees

gardener 'often working against the natural requirements of a plant.' The results can be wonderful; but if intensive maintenance fails, so does the entire planting scheme. There is another way. If you work with plant communities, harmonising 'the artistic ideal and plant habitat requirements', then you have schemes that can flourish with low -but skilled - maintenance. This depends on abandoning the long tradition of 'piling on the muck' that creates corpulent plants replacing it with a sympathetic understanding of the needs of a plant group. The corollary is nutritional restraint and excellent drainage.

Beth Chatto's talk was about creating beautiful, feasible planting schemes in windy and drought prone East Anglia. Twinning the ecological wisdom of Andrew Chatto with her own planting expertise has brought the Chatto gardening philosophy close to Hansen's, and to Rosemary Weisse's work in Munich. It was a pleasure to hear Beth Chatto talk at first hand about the recent creation of her gravel garden. But hers, we were reminded later, is an amenity garden. Implementing Hansen's - or Chatto's - principles in the public domain, with tyrannical financial constraints is a tougher proposition.

Urs Walser filled in detail about planting schemes using

statement and conveying a generous sense of space". Other examples included planting in areas prone to trampling by visitors - using mostly native species but including some exotics; moisture loving species thrived under a Robinia; species-rich plantings around mature woodland areas, that required 'only 4 minutes per square metre per year for maintenance'. And many other types, such as prairie planting.

James Hitchmough was fascinating on the scientific skills needed to naturalise non-native herbaceous perennials into sites otherwise comprising native species. He also broke a taboo, by pointing out that appreciation of a natural meadow is class-based. Indeed! Living in a poverty stricken housing estate is unlikely to make you love an ordinary looking field of grass with the odd fleeting flower. It was inspiring for the topic of planting to be taken into such a domain; one that city-based garden designers observe around them much of the time. Most symposia deal either with private gardens - that is, garden design backed by adequate money - or landscape architecture - where the concerns are often underfinanced schemes in the public arena.

Rosemary Weisse's simple exposition of her work in

Munich Westpark was enchanting. Few or no words, but the sequence of spaces and seasons was spread before us, with an amazing flowering climax reached roughly every four weeks in the growing season. We were silenced in admiration. Gardens that reach one solitary peak of perfection pale before these continuous ever-changing plant communities. She provided cogent, economical explanation of practical factors such as drainage and nutrition. These gardens sprang from Weisse's 'Gartenschau' work on hemerocallis collections, in which



Photographs, Schoenaich / Rees

the prime task was to satisfy all the plant breeders. Red day lilies were therefore a must. To see schemes of the highest aesthetic merit emerging from commercial constraints was most encouraging, especially as they are clearly adored by the local inhabitants.

One of the issues arising from the final discussion was how, in England, to encourage tolerance of planting schemes, such as meadows, that use few or no exotics. Why shouldn't people prefer municipal carpet bedding, which brings colour to dreary environments and proves to users they are worth the expense of such palpably extravagant schemes? A fascinating example of this is the Victorian walled garden in Glasgow's Bellahouston Park, cheek by jowl with exceptionally deprived housing estates. Brita von Schoenaich - whose contribution to the whole event was outstanding - pointed out that the task of re-tuning the sensibilities in Germany was easier because of all the ecological legislation. The law is there and being law abiding, people follow it. What we see as beautiful is largely a matter of what is inculcated culturally, and the landscape designer's task - or burden - or challenge - is to extend their clients' perceptions of what is beautiful. There are files of letters written to adventurous local councils, complaining of unkempt and colourless schemes. And the vandals? Even new trends in designing with perennials can't solve all the social problems. But these dedicated planters never give up.

How will this affect us in Britain? Our gardening 'excellence' depends so much on the wide range of plants made possible by the plant hunter and our climate. This has fostered the unbalanced emphasis on the perfection of the individual plant. Hence the garden shows around the country and indeed at Chelsea, where the best individual plant is seen as the ultimate gardening award. But maybe things are changing. Remember the first gold medal award to Beth Chatto? She displayed not only perfect plants but also vividly revealed the best in association planting. ♦



Beth Chatto's gravel garden near Elmstead Market provides the closest British example of this design philosophy.