



Rachel de Thame: 'What we need more than ever is the pleasure and comfort we find in beauty'

# Visions of the future

Although the new decade will put different demands on gardens, don't sacrifice beauty for sustainability, says **Rachel de Thame**

**W**hat to do with our gardens in 2010? Certainly, I've got practical plans for my own in west Oxfordshire, and my focus for the future could remain firmly rooted within this corner of the Cotswolds.

However, I'm also thinking in a wider context: how might all our gardens change during the next decade? Some current trends seem sure to continue: we have become a nation of committed vegetable growers, and climate change remains at the forefront of the national consciousness, with sustainable and eco-friendly garden practice now second nature for all but the most resistant sceptics. But I sense a shift in mood, a yearning to combine common sense with the equally important business of feeding the soul. In challenging times, what we need more than ever is the pleasure and comfort we find in beauty.

What constitutes beauty in the garden today? Human beings are apparently drawn to regularity, symmetry and repetition. We look for these physical characteristics in the human face. On a subliminal level, they suggest good

health and genes worth combining with your own. It can be no coincidence that this ingrained desire has translated into garden design for as long as there have been gardens. Even classical Japanese ones, which lean towards asymmetry and "naturalistic" form, combine restraint and clarity of line to achieve the same sense of satisfying, even comforting, serenity.

The plantswoman and nursery-owner — and one of my heroines — Beth Chatto writes in her classic (though sadly out of print) book *Beth Chatto's Green Tapestry* of "the asymmetrical triangle between earth, man and heaven — which is so beautiful and gives such a wonderful feeling of balance. The art is in making everything flow together in harmony". This she certainly displays in her own triangle of beauty at Elmstead Market, near Colchester in Essex.

Good contemporary garden design remains true to many of these ancient and instinctive principles, while making use of unusual landscaping materials, a seemingly limitless palette of plants and complex engineering. Many display considerable ingenuity and panache and can be thought-provoking, even challenging. What makes the best



Beth Chatto's garden in Essex demonstrates her ethos of 'making everything flow together in harmony'



The sculptor Maryanne Nicholls's garden at High Hall, Suffolk

## Beauty secrets

- Embrace the setting: don't fight the fields or the tower blocks.
- Allow the scene to breathe: be aware of the spaces between the plants and other elements.
- Consider the effects of light: low sunlight shining through grasses, for instance, brings them to life.
- Repetition creates harmony, but make use of the unexpected, too.
- Follow your muse and grow what you love: passion always shows.

of them memorable, however, is that they are also indefinably but undoubtedly beautiful.

It may seem frivolous, in the current economic and environmental climate, to emphasise beauty as an essential reason to create a garden. We have become used to hearing gardens described as an extension of the house, an outdoor room or a child-friendly space, somewhere to

entertain your friends and, ideally, productive enough to feed your family. And gardens can be all of these things. But if you want to truly enrich your life, make your garden beautiful. Create something that makes you catch your breath as you step outdoors — and tend it yourself as much as you are able.

Remarkably, beauty cannot simply be bought, as the lavish grounds of many a

footballer's or hedge-funder's mansion frequently demonstrate. Heaving with ready-made avenues of pleached limes, weighed down with monumental statuary and trays full of bedding plants, and surrounded by immaculate bowling-green lawns, they display the money thrown at them. Yet where is the beauty? Of course, if your budget can stretch to commissioning one of the

leading designers such as Ulf Nordfjell or Tom Stuart-Smith, it will be there. But few of us can afford this luxury.

What we are searching for can often be found in modest places; gardens that have achieved the rare alchemy of shape, form and colour that makes your heart skip a beat. Nature provides most of the input, and a skilful gardener will understand how to harness that power, add something unexpected, or simply allow the merest hint of disarray to light the touchpaper that turns something lovely into something heartbreaking.

It's good news that beauty can be achieved without breaking the bank. After all, retail therapy is so passé. Comfort gardening — the physical act of tilling the soil — is the latest recommended route to emotional health and stability; it is certainly cheaper than booking into the Priory. If concerns about gratuitous air travel and a general tightening of belts mean staying at home is preferable to travelling, surely we'll need a garden worthy of holidaying in?

What will be most interesting is how we gardeners learn to reconcile the need to think and act with sustainability in mind with the urge to create a space that looks good. Climate change and the

resulting seesaw between surfeit and shortage of water is likely to narrow the choice of possible long-term plants. Sticking to organic principles is unlikely to be a problem for young gardeners who have never known anything else, and for whom it is second nature to tackle the garden in a certain way. For them, blasting everything with weedkiller is as alien a concept as needing to get up to turn over the television channel.

If, like me, you remember having to do just that, you may struggle to adapt to the new way of doing things. But adapt we must, and by way of encouragement, I recommend a visit to Garden Organic Ryton, near Coventry in Warwickshire. If you doubt that sustainability and beauty really can coexist in an entirely organically managed plot, here is living proof of what can be achieved without the use of pesticides, chemical fungicides and weedkillers.

Beauty is most often found in the melding of plants with passion. Roger Scruton, the philosopher and writer, said it all brilliantly in the recent BBC series *Why Beauty Matters*. "I think we are losing beauty, and there is a danger that with it we will lose the meaning of life." It is true that other imperatives

have supplanted beauty as being one of the central aims of creating a garden.

In today's world, it seems frivolous to concentrate your efforts on something that has no real practical purpose. There are now so many things to consider: gardens are spaces for a table and barbecue, with a vegetable patch, composting bays, play areas and storage for toys, tools and recycling bins, and parking for the car. This long list of requirements is a fact of modern life, and highly desirable if you are to garden with the planet's future in mind. But it must be possible to achieve a better balance, to reopen our eyes and accept the importance of beauty in making our lives worthwhile. As Scruton says: "Beauty has been central to our civilisation for more than 2,000 years." Why should we need it any less today?

☛ *Beth Chatto Gardens*; 01206 822007, [bethchatto.co.uk](http://bethchatto.co.uk). *Garden Organic Ryton*; 024 7630 3517, [gardenorganic.org.uk](http://gardenorganic.org.uk)

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