



A Doctor's Garden

Chris & Lorna Page took over their 1000 sq. metre garden in the Artisan's Quarter in 1981 and have spent 25 years creating a delightful escape from the stresses and strains of modern life. Being a corner site, the garden surrounds the house on three sides; steep banks rise up from the terrace and huge mature trees fringe the site on the eastern boundary.

Many of you will have seen this garden as each May Chris holds a garden party in aid of the North London Hospice and has raised many thousands of pounds for charity.

Chris comes from a long line of gardeners. He fondly recalls getting lost in his grandfather's garden as a small boy and the smell of fish, blood & bone in the garden shed. "I always swore that I would break the mould and not do gardening," but, following in his father's footsteps and guided by this strong genetic pedigree, Chris has emerged as a

traditional hands-on gardener. Another strong influence was his Suburb mentor, Wynne Russell, a prizewinner in the Horticultural Shows in the 50s & 60s. He hates 'designer-speak' and the trappings of TV-led garden design – no decking or plastic balls here!

The lawn has receded in favour of herbaceous borders, a pond and a greenhouse, all evidence of Chris's passion for gardening. He sees it as a form of therapy: "Gardening is very compatible with medicine. It's something you can do on your own and it teaches you a kind of humility. Once you think you know it all, once you start to get arrogant, you'll get found out." In spite of this, gardening at its best is predominantly collaborative and social. Although there are many competitive activities arranged by the Horticultural Society, Chris is happiest working in the garden on his own or with Lorna. "We may not talk much but somehow there is a companionship in working together."

The thick, claggy clay has been improved with many tons of organic muck. Chris avoids the lime-lovers; the soil is on the acid side of neutral and plants flourish with liberal dressings of homemade compost. The colour palette is quite restrained, with blues, purples, whites and subtle pinks predominating. "The most important colour is green," says Chris, although cannas & heleniums add a touch of gaudy in the autumn.

Chris insists he is not a planner and the garden has evolved over the years in a fairly haphazard way: "It's all down to correcting failures, I suppose, or happenchance. There's something looking quite good at the

moment – some bright orange lilies juxtaposed with Euphorbia Griffithsiae Fireglow, but it certainly wasn't planned."

The pond was created about 14 years ago and is much loved by the family. It is a haunt of dragon and damselflies, over 100 newts, and frogs. Birds use it as a watering hole – including mallard and heron. The goldfish have to be renewed fairly frequently!

The heated greenhouse (to 4°C) was put in about four years ago and enables Chris to grow more exotic plants such as tree ferns and mimosa. He raises most of his own vegetables from seed.

Chris doesn't use insecticides. "I don't pretend to be truly organic, and I have some problems with people who are rigidly organic. Some people think chemical equals bad but this is not always so. Glyphosate, for example, is a very safe weed-killer that does not leave harmful residues in the soil. Tomato blight is impossible to control without Dithrane."

Slug-bait is used in moderation, particularly round the hostas, which are something of a speciality here. Chris pointed out that even if birds or hedgehogs eat it, it isn't as dangerous as some had feared. "The decline in

the hedgehog population has exactly paralleled the rise in foxes. Last summer, a fox in my neighbour's garden attacked a family of three hedgehogs. One was killed, one badly injured and one escaped."

The mulberry tree was planted 18 years ago for sentimental reasons: "My father had one in his garden and I liked it" – but it has to be hard pruned to keep it from getting too big for the garden. Chris relishes what he calls "the continuum of gardening"; the circle of life, and his grandmother's honeysuckle still growing strongly in this garden is a happy reminder of past times.

The garden is at its best from early March until June, but Chris aims to have something of interest throughout the year. His list of favourite border plants includes hellebores, hardy geraniums, salvias, penstemons, hardy cyclamen and a wide variety of hostas.

Chris is self-sufficient in fruit and vegetables in summer, bananas, grapes and avocado pears excepted. Excess produce is given to neighbours and friends.

He has been raising his vegetables on raised beds for more than two decades. "It's the lazy gardeners way to do it. You don't have to dig, you can plant things close together and they tend to mature quicker."

Homemade compost is fundamental to his success; there are 8 heaps spread around the garden and the two allotments.

Chris admits that while the garden is essential to his peace of mind, he does not particularly enjoy the individual, tedious tasks that we all sigh over: cutting the grass, pruning, mulching. However, the sum is greater than the parts and "ten hours a week out in the garden is better than in a sweaty gym."

Looking to the future, Chris feels that "I've almost gone as far as I can with this garden, given the restraints of the trees, the steep slopes and the clay. The fantasy is to move to a walled garden, about – an acre or so, with beautiful borders and a big vegetable plot. Somewhere I can see the sky, away from the frenetic pressures of this North London life." Maybe it is time to stand and stare, Chris.

ANNE CRAWLEY



Chelsea Diary

Everyone knows by now that we at the Hampstead Garden Suburb Horticultural Society have decided to try and enter a small garden for Chelsea Flower Show 2006. After watching Dermaid Galvins efforts on TV last year we must be mad, but we thought we would have a go.

This diary will be a humorous record of how we get on. The plot size is only 4 x 4.5 metres – at the moment it feels like an acre. We have decided on the theme for it but are having trouble in putting our ideas down on paper

to produce a suitable design to submit to the RHS. Do any of our readers have any experience of garden design and planting schemes and would like to help us? We are also looking for a water colour artist to produce a picture of our final design to use (sorry no fee just the kudos). We are also looking for sponsors big and small.

If you think you can help with any of this please contact Michael Franklin at 94 Oakwood Road, NW11 6RN or you can email Mike at mikefrank@onetel.com

THE GARDEN CALENDAR

Your Garden in August

- ✿ Prune summer-flowering shrubs and rambler roses when they have finished flowering. Take out old dead wood and trim to a tidy shape.
- ✿ Deadhead border flowers regularly to prolong the display.
- ✿ Take semi-ripe cuttings of shrubs and climbers: forsythia, honeysuckle, fuchsia, lavender and hydrangea.
- ✿ Buy winter and spring flowering bulbs. Plant up specially prepared hyacinths for Christmas.
- ✿ This is the month to trim hedges and shape topiary. Use secateurs for large-leaved shrubs (bay, holly, Elaeagnus) and aim to complete the jobs before bad weather sets in.
- ✿ Cut back strawberries to 2 cms. Compost 3-year-old plants and pot up rooted runners to replenish your stocks.
- ✿ Keep tomatoes well watered and fed with Tomorite. Tie in stems and shoots to supporting canes. Pinch out the growing tips to concentrate the plant's energies on fruit already formed.

Your Garden in September

- ✿ Take 8cm cuttings of tender perennials: Penstemon, Coleus, Fuchsia, Pelargonium & Verbena.
- ✿ Lift, clean and store gladioli in crumpled newspaper in a clean, dry, frost-free shed.
- ✿ Lift and divide congested flag irises.
- ✿ Order bare-rooted roses, fruit and deciduous trees and shrubs from mail-order nurseries.
- ✿ Move tender plants, like pelargoniums and fuchsias, indoors before first frosts. Protect outdoor specimens with fleece wrapped around a cane wigwam.
- ✿ Plant hardy spring bedding such as forget-me-nots, Primula, Polyanthus, Viola (which flower more freely than pansies in winter) and wallflowers.
- ✿ Plant up window boxes, pots and hanging baskets for autumn, winter and spring colour. Underplant with bulbs (iris, crocus, and miniature daffodils) and add a slow-release fertiliser such as Osmocote. 2 cms of grit at the top of each pot will deter mice & squirrels.

Your Garden in October

- ✿ Plant lilies & spring bulbs such as crocuses, daffodils, hyacinth, scillas & winter aconites. Leave tulips until November to reduce the risk of fungal disease.
- ✿ Plant bare-rooted roses & shrubs.
- ✿ If frost is forecast, harvest tender veg. such as chillies, courgettes, tomatoes and peppers.
- ✿ Lift, clean and store dahlias once their leaves have been blackened by frost.
- ✿ Scarify lawns and apply an autumn fertilizer.
- ✿ Cut down spent perennials, remove frosted annuals, lightly fork borders and apply a bark mulch.
- ✿ Clear fallen leaves from borders, lawns & gullies. Compost in black, plastic bags to make leafmould.

Hose ban looks likely!

Everyone knows by now that we have had an exceptionally dry spring. This year's total in the first six months has been 8½ inches, less than two thirds the average for the period. For the period since November last year, rainfall has totalled 12 inches compared with an average of 19½ inches in North London. No wonder the water companies are threatening hosepipe bans and begging us to use less water. The previous lowest total for January to June was in 1996 when just over 9¼ inches fell. This was followed by less, but not much less, than the average for July to

September. Indeed, from studying figures over the past 25 years, there is a higher chance of a similar outcome this year than of having a wet summer. So those bans are really pretty likely.

May has been the driest month so far this year, with only ¾ inch of rain. June, with 2 inches, certainly had more, but it came near the end of the month when 1½ inches fell in the last week with a lovely thunderstorm and an inch of water in the last three days. This meant gardens really suffered but it was wonderful to be able to enjoy being out in them.

DIANA IWI



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