

THE BRITISH GARDEN: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE ON A YEAR OF GARDENING IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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ABSTRACT

The Royal Horticultural Society/Garden Club of America Interchange Fellowship was established in 1952 and is awarded to one American and one British student annually. It was formerly known as the Martin McLaren Scholarship and was created to help encourage the exchange of ideas and information in the horticultural world. Terry Huang was selected as the American 2013–2014 Royal Interchange Fellow. His travels and placements solidified for him the important role that botanic and public gardens play as interpreters of the plant world. He describes some of his experiences and examples of excellence that he saw while in Britain. He goes on to explain that the work placements have influenced and inspired the work he does today in the Botany Greenhouse at the University of Washington.

RECEIVING THE GOLDEN TICKET

In 1948, the Hillsborough Garden Club in California proposed the idea of creating a grant allowing a British student to study horticulture in the US. The idea evolved and in 1952 the grant became a reciprocal exchange (Seale, 2012). Every year the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) and the Garden Club of America (GCA) select one candidate each to take part in the RHS/GCA Interchange Fellowship, which was previously known as the Martin McLaren Scholarship. Once selected, the two fellows spend an immersive year travelling and gardening in the other's country. It was established as a way to strengthen the bond between the US and the UK; today the programme still encourages the exchange of ideas and information in the horticultural world (McLaren & Farrell, 1998).

Like Charlie Bucket dreaming of seeing Willy Wonka's chocolate factory, as a child I dreamed of visiting and working in the famous gardens of the UK. In March 2013, the GCA gave me the golden ticket to enter the 'chocolate factory' of my childhood dreams. Even today I have to remind myself that in fact it wasn't a dream. It was the perfect opportunity for me to experience British horticulture, and I saw how gardens in a country which has been gardening for longer than the USA have attracted and engaged the public. It also helped me to see how the British public perceive botany, horticulture and garden design.

RHS Bursaries Manager Lizanne O'Connor helped me to arrange eight voluntary work placements at some of the most prestigious gardens in the world. To begin my

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year abroad I was placed at RHS Garden Wisley for three months. Thereafter I had a two-month placement at Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE) and Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (RBG, Kew). After these I spent a week at Winfield House, the official UK residence of the US Ambassador, a week at RHS Chelsea Flower Show and a week at RHS Garden Rosemoor. I finished my year with three-week placements at both the Eden Project and Tresco Abbey. My entire year was spent working in different horticultural departments and my responsibilities ranged widely from mounting herbarium specimens to edging garden beds. In addition to my work I was able to travel, visit gardens and attend lectures and events. This is my personal account of a very memorable year.

ENTERING THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY

Like Charlie entering Willy Wonka's chocolate factory, the anticipation of finally realising a childhood dream was almost enough to make my heart burst. I had no idea of what was in store for me: all the grand places I would be able to visit and all the wonderful people I was about to meet. I learned so much and was so inspired during my time in the UK that I still feel the benefits of the experience.

Though modest in size when compared to many other nations, the plethora of gardens that cover the UK is truly amazing. Whether it is a window box brimming with violas or a grand country estate, in Britain it is still a garden. The British love of nature and natural history has helped create a rich gardening culture which permeates many different parts of life – even popular culture. On average the British public have a better understanding of horticulture compared to their US counterparts. For instance, I heard people strolling through the park saying to their friends that the flower they were admiring was “some kind of a veronica”. Another instance was when I was watching a British panel show and was quite surprised to hear one of the comedians make a joke about pelargoniums. In comparison, the average American could tell the difference between a rose and a lily, but it would truly stun me if an American comedian cracked a joke about pelargoniums on national television. I believe this lesser interest in gardening may be a leftover mind-set of the first colonists trying to survive in a new world. Tending ornamental gardens was quite a luxury left only to the wealthiest of settlers, and if it couldn't be eaten or used it wasn't worth keeping. In addition to the more recent austere climate, this may also be why vegetable gardening is experiencing a renaissance in the United States.

What I did find common to both countries, unfortunately, was that much of the general public didn't think much or highly of horticulture. As programmes in botany and horticulture continue to shrink and disappear in both nations, it is increasingly difficult to attract young minds to ensure its continuity into the future (RHS, 2013). Hearing Prime Minister David Cameron equating horticulture to unskilled labour, or secondary schools completely removing plant science in their curriculums is more than heartbreaking and simply compounds the problem (Millward, 2012). This threatens not

only the survival of horticulture, but also the human investment in the survival of nature and its beautiful diversity.

If the public feels this way it becomes a greater task for horticulture to command the respect that it deserves. How do we move on from the 'it's just a plant' or 'why should I care?' mentality? Both the RHS and the GCA are working hard to combat this, and public gardens are in a good position to do so too. They can play a pivotal role in answering these dismissive questions. As I made my way around Britain, visiting and working in gardens, I was interested to see how public gardens – specifically botanic gardens – engaged and connected with their visitors. Whether small or big, these places caught my attention with their creativity and sense of fun.

I watched visitors during my work placements, and I found interpretation media that were simple in design and concept. The most effective interpretation caught their attention and left them with a good impression. There is no faster way to lose an audience than with dry, wordy text and I have watched visitors give up midway through text-heavy signage with too much jargon. I saw that the public would read the entire board if it told a captivating story in colloquial language. This method allows the visitors to relate to and easily understand the text.

I thought that the interactive medicine carts at the Chelsea Physic Garden in London were clever (Fig. 1). Tour guides use the carts as a teaching aid and visitors can lift flaps and open doors for themselves, revealing bites of history and exotic medicines. I fell in love with the displays outside the educational building and then it was pointed out to me that the empty tins and jars were converted into containers for growing the plants



Fig.1 Interactive medicine carts at Chelsea Physic Garden. Photo: Terry Huang.

that they used to hold: the olive oil tin contained an olive plant, and the pear juice carton had a pear sapling growing out of it (Fig. 2). I love that these displays are quite easy for almost any age to understand, and don't seem like much at first glance, but then become a wonderful discovery when it all clicks.

During my placement at RBGE I connected with the long history of education in the institution and its current mission to excite the public about plants (Rae, 2011). I loved the diversity of spaces found in the John Hope Gateway visitor centre, but I was most impressed by the interactive educational displays. These were able to accommodate



Fig. 2 Olive oil tin with olive tree and pear juice carton with pear tree planted in them. Photo: Terry Huang.

visitors of every style of learning (and attention span) with topics ranging from foundational botany to current research at the Garden. Of the displays, my favourite was the simple design of a visual representation of plant diversity. Rows of bell jars line a giant glass case, each labelled with genus, species and common name accompanied with a dried specimen representative of the order or clade (Fig. 3). At the centre of the display a sign provides a cladogram of the plant families with a succinct explanation. If the visitor does not read the sign it is still not too difficult to understand the display.

During my stay in Scotland I was able to visit Glasgow Botanic Gardens. After a guided tour of the collections and facilities I stumbled upon a long herbaceous border that was a display of garden plant introductions throughout European history. This long border was divided into equal sections and from left to right each section was labelled with a different century and planted only with garden plants that were available at that time. As one walks along the border, more and more familiar plants appear, culminating in a colourful section representing plants commonly planted today. The origin of the species was also provided, along with a name tag for each plant, demonstrating how as humans travelled and migrated, they carried plants with them. I loved how the planting was able to communicate to the visitors with minimal signage (Fig. 4).

RBG, Kew has an incredible reach, permeating into television, radio and a diversity of online media, giving the Garden access to a wide international audience. Because of this great reach and very public platform, it is clear that the public expects a much higher standard at Kew, and sometimes this pressure can make it difficult for the place



Fig. 3 Plant diversity display in the John Hope Gateway visitor centre at Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. Photo: Terry Huang.



Fig. 4 Chronological Border of plant introductions to British gardens at Glasgow Botanic Gardens. Photo: Terry Huang.

to evolve. I was most impressed by the large events staged, and the influence the institution has to commission celebrities, such as illustrator Quentin Blake, to collaborate with these events.

I fell in love with the creativity and diversity of the exhibits at the Eden Project. Although it is not specifically a botanic or an ornamental garden, it sits somewhere in between the two. Storytelling is the foundation of the interpretive work there, encouraging visitors to think about plants in many different ways. From pictograms to artefact carts, the interactive exhibits weave together art, humour, history and science, engaging people with different interests and capturing the attention of all (Figs 5 & 6). It was an amazing sight to see visitors magnetised by the storytellers and nearly every person who stopped to listen would stay until the end. The stories are mostly fictional but are built around some botanical truth; it was very clear what was fact and what was fantasy. The interpreters allowed visitors to direct the conversation and sometimes it led to very thought-provoking ideas about plant and human interaction. The experience at the Eden Project encourages plant awareness, which hopefully develops into an appreciation for the natural world, ultimately leading to living in balance with nature (Eden, 2014).

FLYING IN THE GREAT GLASS ELEVATOR

Having been through the 'chocolate factory', what do I do with all the experiences I have gained? Like Charlie looking down to earth from the glass elevator, I want to take my passions and all that I have learned to create ways of sharing the vital role that



Fig. 5 The illustrated history of chocolate at the Eden Project. Photo: Terry Huang.



Fig. 6 Interpreters tell stories from the plants showcased on curiosity carts at the Eden Project. Photo: Terry Huang.

plants continue to play in our lives. What better place to share this with the world than a botanic garden?

As urban landscapes continue to grow and consume tracts of wilderness, the role of a botanic garden has never been more important. It seems that in this technological age nature is being pushed further away from the people's consciousness and this lack of connection is detrimental to human survival. Nothing can replace the experience of being in nature, but botanic gardens are a distillation of centuries of natural history, research and discovery, the perfect mediator between urban jungle and wilderness. Whether big or small, botanic gardens bring nature and science into the urban jungle, providing a fertile ground to cultivate an awareness and understanding of nature's value.

Humanity is a self-involved species in the sense that care and appreciation for nature truly develops when people can see the effect it has on their lives. Full of beauty and splendour, nature speaks in quiet ways, but it can be easily missed if the viewer does not know when to stop and listen. Botanic gardens can give nature a voice, but communicating its wonders can be quite tricky, especially in a world that doesn't seem to have the time to stop and wonder. However, creating this relevancy isn't impossible; the key is relaying the information in a way that the human mind can easily digest.

Myths and folktales have long been important in human cultures to make sense of the chaotic world, and storytelling is a way to pass lessons down through the generations. Though perceptive as a species, mankind has only relatively recently developed the capacity to think scientifically, and we have to be trained to look at the world in this new way. Why can't revolutionary research be told as an exciting tale? Using a captivating narrative to interpret scientific research helps makes the information accessible while keeping the listener interested. I believe that there is no better way to get the public to care about plants and the importance of botanical research than by appealing to both their emotions and their logic.

A botanic garden is where botany, horticulture and design overlap and an integration of these disciplines is not only vital to the survival of a garden, but also creates a powerful space that can be used to educate. Beauty and function in a garden do not have to be mutually exclusive; instead educational opportunities can be wrapped in stunning displays that will inspire a visitor to want to know more. From the most humble of mosses to the most dazzling of orchids, visitors can see millions of years of evolutionary history play out before their eyes, but without someone to tell their stories all of this can be lost. Growing some of the rare beauties is no easy feat; telling their stories, however, will not only inspire awe, but will allow the public to grow to respect the skill of the horticulturist and celebrate the rare opportunity to see these organisms out of their natural habitat.

Having returned from my golden opportunity, I now work at the University of Washington Botany Greenhouse in Seattle (Fig. 7). The greenhouse was built in 1949 in order to grow *Zea mays* (corn) in our cool temperate climate for genetic research, but since then the greenhouse has undergone many changes and now supports independent research and teaching. At a modest 1,486 m², half of the greenhouse provides space for researchers and the other half houses a teaching collection that contains almost 1 per

cent of the world's flora packed into four rooms encompassing temperate, tropical and arid climates. The exotic plants of the teaching collection are what particularly draw visitors (Fig. 8). After 66 years of service the greenhouse will be taken down in June 2016 and in its place a new Life Sciences Building and Biology Greenhouse will be built. As we make the transition into a new era for the greenhouse, we are assessing our future outreach and educational mission.

As challenges and projects develop, I often find myself calling upon my experiences abroad to help guide the process. From seeing the massive efforts to propagate and relocate the Temperate House plants at RBG, Kew, I have ideas about how to effectively assess and prepare the greenhouse collections for relocation. Visiting the Eden Project has helped me think of new ways to use narrative to communicate scientific concepts and research to visitors. I have created signage about the current research in the greenhouse to help engage the public in all the research projects. These are posted on the entrances to the research rooms. Inspired by the array of events hosted in British gardens, I have organised two campus-wide tours of the greenhouse and Medicinal Herb Garden to generate awareness of the greenhouse and our plans for it. I invited both greenhouse docents and local guest speakers – a member of the Yakama tribe, a chocolatier, a coffee roaster and a tea buyer – to enrich the tours with their stories, creating a rounded picture of how plants have influenced our lives. I draw inspiration from examples of clever gardens that are both beautiful and educational, and this summer the display in front of the greenhouse will double as a Pollination Syndrome Garden, where the colourful flowers will also help teach visitors the floral traits that have evolved to attract specific pollinators.



Fig. 7 Front of the University of Washington Botany Greenhouse. Photo: Paul Beeman.



Fig. 8 Docent leading a tour through the Arid House at the University of Washington. Photo: Jeanette Milne.

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I have to thank the Garden Club of America and the Royal Horticultural Society for selecting me as one of the few to complete this once-in-a-lifetime-opportunity. I have learned so much from the friends and people that I have met on my travels and still today I am amazed by all the places I have been to – there is no substitute for the experience gained from travel. All the wonderful memories and knowledge I have obtained will come with me wherever my career takes me. The thought of sharing plant stories for many more years to come gives me the greatest joy.

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