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Is your garden perfect? Sheila May

Fig. 1 View across the pond and bog garden, May 2017

I recently re-watched an episode of *Around the World in 80 Gardens*, in which Monty Don visited Giverny, Monet's garden in France. His guide, from the organisation 'Fondation Claude Monet', who are tasked with running and maintaining the garden, made a remark in the course of their conversation, which really resonated with me. She said (and I am paraphrasing here) that the garden visitors expect it to be perfect for their visit, whenever that might be. And she added, with a great deal of feeling, "...you know that's not possible".

In my experience too, this is not what a real garden is supposed to be. At Giverny, keeping up appearances for the approximately 500,000 visitors per year involves a great deal of work: early in the morning before the garden opens, any plant that

is looking a bit rosey is hoiked out and replaced; all weeding, pruning, tidying, deadheading and watering are also carried out at this time – an enormous investment of resources. While I know all gardens are human artifice, bending nature to our will, this makes Giverny more of a stage set even than somewhere such as Hampton Court Palace garden, caught in a time-warp from William and Mary's era, not only in layout but also in the choice of plants.

My train of thought after watching this interview followed the idea of perfection in gardening, particularly in relation to my own garden. I write a blog for the Hardy Plant Society called *On a Chalk Hillside*, using photos from my garden. When I first started, I realised I wasn't just searching through my

photos for shots to illustrate the particular plant or garden feature I was discussing; I was looking for ones that didn't show that the lawn wasn't cut, didn't feature bindweed or a bramble somewhere in the composition, an empty pot lying in a corner, or the washing line in the foreground. So I was looking for photos where the flowers were prominent, implying I had taken good care of the plant, and that it wasn't straggly or misshapen. Why?

I am an amateur gardener – self-taught – who gardens an acre of steeply sloping chalk hillside that came with ground elder, bindweed, brambles, ivy, misshapen elderly shrubs, scrubby grass etc, which my husband and I are gradually turning into different garden rooms, planting up and maintaining.



Fig. 2 Plum blossom, mid-April 2018

The reality is that it doesn't look like a show garden; we have a lot of pernicious perennial weeds, poor soil and straggly plants, and limited time and resources to spend on it. Cathy Rollinson, who commissioned me to undertake the blog series, wanted a series that was inclusive, of interest to other amateurs wishing to garden,

as well as people who had been gardening for years. So I try hard to show 'the reality' of the garden, (with photos slightly edited to avoid showing too many weeds).

I am pleased with the design and composition of the planting in May 2017 (fig. 1): the acid green and bronzy tones of *Equisetum hyemale* and Yellow Flag Iris (*Iris pseudacorus* 'Variegata') in the pond; the two rogersia relatives, *R.* 'Irish Bronze' and *Astilboides tabularis* (syn. *R. tabularis*), the foliage of *Lysimachia ciliata* 'Firecracker' in the bog garden; the big leaves of *Gunnera manicata* starting to develop; and Bowles' Golden Sedge, *Carex elata* 'Aurea' on the patio above; with an accent of magenta from *Rosa* 'Roseaie de l'Hay' at the back. But the path on the right is full of weeds, which I didn't notice

when I took the photo, being so pleased with the different foliage textures and colours in the garden at that moment. Perhaps I should not have shown you this picture, as it's not 'perfect'?

As followers of the blog will know, the view in fig. 1 is best in May; as summer progresses the foliage of the rogersia and variegated iris becomes less interesting, and the pond gets overgrown. So this particular patch doesn't look as good in April, or October. May is its apogee of design, form and colour. Seasonal changes are, after all, a given for anyone who gardens with hardy herbaceous perennials. The real skill of the gardener is to manage them well.

At other times of year, different plants in other parts of the garden have their moment to shine. In April it might be the orchard (fig. 2). In October it might be the acers (fig. 3); the red one is *A. palmatum* 'Garnet', and the caramel-coloured one is *A. palmatum* 'Seiryu'. Behind them are seedheads from *Veronica longifolia* ripening for collection – I leave seedheads on herbaceous perennials both for me to collect, and for the birds. I am one of those 'untidy' gardeners who doesn't clear away herbaceous top-growth in autumn, trying to leave it all winter for the mini-beasts and the birds



Fig. 3 *Acer palmatum* foliage, October 2018

to make use of; and I often don't start clearing up until late January or February. As a result, while many of the beds are looking great, around them are others which are going over, or have gone over, and this is quite apart from the weeds!

Where did this idea of show-garden perfection come from? I note that I rarely take pictures of plants that are not in flower – even though many have good foliage for much of the year. I must have a picture in my mind's eye of what is 'all right' to show of the garden, which suggests therefore that I also have a picture of what is NOT all right to show.

I expect many of you watch the coverage of the RHS Chelsea Flower Show and other flower shows on TV, or perhaps even attend, so we know what show gardens look like. I always used to go to the RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show when we lived in London. My husband and I went back in 2018, and figs 4 & 5 show a couple of examples of show-garden planting from that trip.

How marvellous and inspiring – but as a novice gardener it took me several years to understand that show gardens are not 'real'. I don't just mean that the plants are often still in their pots under a mulch or covering, or sunk into the ground, or



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Fig. 4 The RHS grow your own garden with the Raymond Blanc cooking school, 2018 Hampton Court Palace Flower Show

that 1,000-year-old olive trees are craned in to give instant height. I also learned that growers force or hold back plants to be at their peak of perfection for the shows. I will give you one small example. I once saw a planting combination in a show garden that I

have tried to replicate ever since, and failed. And I always assumed I was doing something wrong. This consisted of a hedge of English lavender (in my case *L. angustifolia* 'Munstead') in flower, but cut low enough so that evenly spaced plants of



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Fig. 5 Piet Oudolf's garden at 2018 Hampton Court Palace Flower Show



Fig. 6 *Allium christophii* and lavender synchronicity (or not) at Mottisfont, June 2019

Allium christophii were flowering above it. I loved that feature. However, having visited Mottisfont Abbey Gardens regularly to see the roses every year since we moved to our chalk hillside in 2004, I

eventually realised that their *A. christophii* have always finished flowering by the third week in June (which is when we visit), leaving lovely seedheads admittedly, but their lavender hedges are only just coming into flower (fig. 6). So it wasn't me, it was nature!

I think the expectation of show-garden perfection is exacerbated by our visits to gardens where you pay for entry: those which are regularly open to the public as well as private gardens open for charity. They are neat and tidy: lawns are bright green, newly mown and edged (unless they are 'wildflower meadows'). The beds are weed-free,

mulched, and there are lots of plants in flower. Indeed my husband complains if a garden is not very colourful, or if there are scrappy bits of worn lawn, etc. As a gardener though, I look at a border and 'read' what is there; from the foliage I can tell what has been and gone, and what is still to come. And I can see if there is progression from month to month, which to me is the sign of a proper garden, rather than a set piece that is only good for two weeks of the year. I understand though that less knowledgeable visitors may not be able to do this, and if colour is lacking during their visit they may feel short-changed.



Fig. 7 Mediterranean garden, East Ruston Old Vicarage Gardens, June 2019

One of the most inspiring gardens we visited last year was East Ruston Old Vicarage Gardens. We were there on 13 June. By the end of the day we were almost punch-drunk with all the garden rooms we had seen; all the plant combinations, vistas, and the brilliant ideas it gave us (fig. 7). This is a garden that is loved and cared for constantly by its owners, one of whom we saw several times in different parts of the garden, actually gardening. In several garden rooms there were little plants in pots and trays waiting to be planted out. One small room with four beds had been emptied of all of its spring planting, and tray after tray of new plants were waiting to be planted out (fig. 8). It felt like the garden was alive, growing, developing, and it generated excitement and delight in us, giving us lots to talk about and consider for our own garden.

That visit reminded me of the reason why I garden. I do it because I enjoy it. I like to be outside, to see the sunshine and shadows scudding over the valley, to hear the birdsong, to

welcome the changing seasons and smell the fragrances. I look for beautiful foliage, flowers and planting compositions.

We grow as much of our own fruit and vegetables as we can. I enjoy propagating plants, either by seed or cuttings. I like to design and build new garden rooms, to 'paint' with plants, to develop planting schemes and colours for different times of the year. I look for the mini-beasts, find the first frog spawn, delight in the first snowdrop coming out, and the first daffodil; I make sure I detour to see the tree peony for the two weeks of the year that it's in flower.

Gardening is my joy, not my job; it relaxes me rather than bringing me stress. It is good for my mental and physical wellbeing.

In order for this to be the case I have had to come to terms with the fact that while gardening is a big part of my life, isn't the entirety of it. I don't spend every waking hour gardening in all weathers – not even when it's lovely gardening weather. For most of the year I work the ornamental garden, as well as harvesting, processing and storing crops,



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Fig. 8 Trays of potted plants in the background, East Ruston Old Vicarage Gardens, June 2019

and I cannot be everywhere at once. I have had to train myself to accept that the garden is my hobby, not my master; there will always be parts that are less tidy or even unkempt; something will always need pruning, tying back, or deadheading. I may get to it, or I may not. But I won't stress about it. My garden is for my fun and enjoyment, and is something I am proud of. It is not perfect by any external criteria you would care to name, but it is perfect to me, and for me. 🌸

Sheila May started practical gardening in London, developing two different tiny gardens on London clay before moving to a chalk hillside overlooking the Avon valley in 2004. Her efforts to understand, tame, develop and enjoy a garden on this steep plot are shared with HPS members via her monthly blog on the HPS website *On a Chalk Hillside*.