

JUNE'S GARDEN

THE ROYAL HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY'S
1999 CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW

England's Royal Horticultural Society was founded in 1804. The Society's founding fathers were primarily interested in collecting information about plants and improving horticultural techniques, but also launched the prototype of today's popular flower shows.

The Chelsea Flower Show has been held on the grounds of the Royal Hospital in Chelsea since 1913. This hospital is now the home of retired veterans who have served in the Army. Chelsea is a district in London bordered on one side by the Thames River. This yearly four-day flower show encompasses about two large city blocks. Inside the Great Marquee (tented area) are displays of cut flower arrangements and stylized gardens by nurseries, growers, horticultural schools, herb societies, and florists, all from many different districts throughout England, from the African Violet Society, to Bonsai societies, and many more too numerous to list. Outside the Marquee are divided areas, each about 10' x 12', where landscape companies and well-known garden designers have created theme gardens. Around the perimeter and interspaced with the gardens are booths selling antique garden equipment, power tools, garden furniture, stoneware, statuary and other ornaments, greenhouses, conservatories, from thatched-roof to steel-structured summer houses, and associated equipment; collectable garden books now out of print, new books, reproduced prints, magazines, anything and everything related to gardening: seven hundred and seventy exhibits in all.

For refreshments, there is a large restaurant along with fast food booths scattered throughout. There is also a picnic area with a bandstand where symphonic music to jazz songs are performed during the four days.

When we joined the Expo Garden Tour, it included membership in the Royal Horticultural Society. This enabled us to attend the show on "Members' Day Only." We arrived at 8:00 a.m. when it opened and already there were crowds of people. I later learned that there are 265,000 members. It seemed like they had all arrived at the same time.

Entering the Great Marquee, we were overwhelmed by the abundance and fragrance of flowers: banks of cut-flower bouquets, daffodils, delphiniums, sweet peas, poppies, begonias, lilies, roses, and so many more. It's unbelievable to imagine the months of planning it takes to force each plant to be in bloom, in perfect form, and at their prime on a definite date in May. In their natural state, these plants don't bloom at the same time.

One of the favorite designs by a grower was David Austin's rose garden. He is known for developing hybrid roses from antique rose forms and fragrances. Each bloom is double-petaled, deeply cupped, and highly fragrant. Through the middle of this display of living plants was a trellised path. The trellis was covered with climbing rose plants in full bloom. Austin's booth was rose heaven. Here in the U.S. his roses are available through Jackson and Perkins' catalog. I successfully grow in my own garden two of his, Heritage (pink) and Graham Thomas (yellow).

English gardeners regard compost as an important ingredient for a healthy garden. A beautiful display of flowers, fruit and vegetables was created by the combined efforts of the National Farmers' Union and the Royal Horticultural Society. Huge trays of fruit and vegetables arranged like appetizers or cone-shaped pyramids or layed out in rows were mixed with large floral bouquets. The colors of the flowers matched the colors of the fruit and vegetables, such as: red peppers, tomatoes, and apples arranged with red geraniums, poppies, begonias. The greens of lettuce, scallions and cabbage matched with bouquets of daisies, lilies, mums and other flowers. In the middle of this display was a large silver metal compost bin mounted on a frame with a turning handle. The theme was that all the material displayed could be recycled into compost matter. One of the members of the Farmers' Union mentioned that a bit of manure added helps to heat the pile of compost. He enthusiastically added, "One only needs a cow, a sheep, or any farm animal." I asked, "How about seaweed and dead fish?" He looked a bit puzzled.

Many of the courtyard gardens featured water: waterfalls created with banked stones or ponds with fountains, and a variety of water-loving plants. Many of these themes reflected a natural setting. One courtyard garden was created for disabled gardeners. Narrow wooden planters about 28" high were filled with textured and fragrant plants for the blind to enjoy. Also these planters were the right height and width for gardeners in wheelchairs. This reminded me of a young man who could not walk because of polio. He became an expert at growing Bonsai. His family had fashioned a potting table about the same height and side bins for soil or other uses.

From formal to whimsical: a whimsical garden was the replica of Beatrice Potter's Mr. McGregor's Garden. It was formed on the principal setting for her much-loved Peter Rabbit tales. Some of the familiar features were: the lily pond and white cat, the water-can in which Peter hid, the wooden wheelbarrow, scarecrow, tool-shed, vegetable patch, the gate Peter squeezed under. Sculptures of the animal characters were placed here and there.

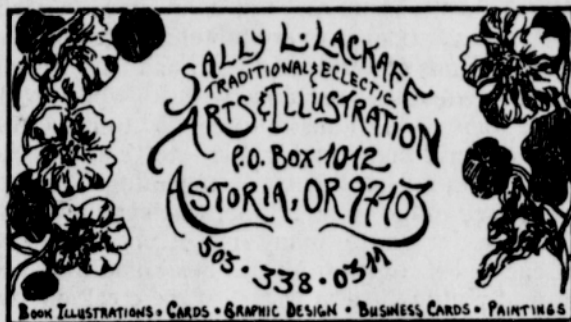
My favorite garden was called, "Undivided Garden." It demonstrated how to grow flowers with crops of a variety of fruit trees, berries and vegetables. This garden could fit in any small back yard. The fruit trees were espaliered to form a low fence on one side. Berry vines were trained on wire the same height as the fruit trees and bordered the other side of the garden. In the middle, paths were formed around pie-shaped beds where vegetables and flowers had been planted. These beds circled a huge strawberry pot. The plump ripe fruit of the red strawberries in this pot looked ready to harvest.

Adding to the festivities of this flower show, the veterans who live in the Royal Hospital milled through the crowds answering questions and giving other information. They were evident, as they were wearing their full dress uniforms: long red coats trimmed in black with metal buttons, pie-shaped black hats trimmed in gold with feather-like emblems, and across the chests of their uniforms rows of ribbons symbolizing their service records. In another area was a marching band of veterans led by soldiers on horseback performing for the crowds of people.

I stayed for seven hours, stopping only once for refreshments, but I still wasn't able to visit every booth or exhibit. To really see everything, you would have to attend the four full days.

If you have an opportunity to visit the Chelsea Flower Show, travel with empty suitcases -- just a few clothes. I later had to buy an extra suitcase to carry home a new thatched-roof birdhouse, and many new books and pamphlets. I sadly left behind sculptures of angels, water fountains and a thatched-roof garden house. The garden house I could visualize in my own garden. To buy plants you need a special permit to bring them through customs. One person on the tour did have a permit, but he still had to wash all the soil off the plants and prune them a bit to fit into his suitcase.

Next month: Meeting the "Queen of Gardening in England," Rosemary Verey.



As matters stand, we are in little better position than the guests of the Borgias,
Rachel Carson



The obligation to endure gives us the right to know,
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