

# BEST VALUE?

How do we weigh up the values that come into play when selecting and evaluating planting design? Rowland Byass believes a multi-faceted approach is required

What is meant when designers discuss 'value' in planting design? Author Ian Thompson defines it, in relation to landscape design, as the "relative merit or status according to the estimated desirability or utility of a thing."<sup>1</sup>

'Utility' is easy to understand: it includes practical virtues such as the appropriate species for a site's conditions. 'Desirability' is less straightforward, however, involving the slippery concept of taste. Is it unnecessary to think in such philosophical terms when thinking about ornamental plants? For some, the value of aesthetics (does it look good?) and practicality (will it grow there?) are all that need to be considered. Even here though, conflict can arise between two ways of valuing plants, and perhaps even more importantly the 'estimated desirability'. In the end, resolution can be sought with reference to the same cultural and ethical values that shape every other aspect of our lives.

It is important to discuss values of planting design for two reasons. Firstly, there is the intimate relationship between practical and aesthetic values that is unique to the evolving organism that is a garden. Secondly, there is the uniqueness of the material itself — plants are a living fabric.

## UNDERSTANDING PLANTING

When we view a planting plan, it is easy to forget that it does not represent a 'natural' outcome for a given piece of ground. The nature presented is selected and edited. How then, do we ascribe value to such planting? How do we resolve potential conflicts between values and achieve consensus on different kinds of 'good' in planting design? The answer is by understanding the range of values.

### *Practical planting*

Above all else, a planting design succeeds or fails according to its relevance to the brief and its suitability to the conditions. Successful garden design has to be practical. Unlike a flower arrangement or picture, planting unfolds in the fourth dimension of



PASSION FLOWER BY JOHNSONS SEEDS

time. It is both a pattern perceived in a single moment and as a continuous process. To varying extents, it is also a self-sustaining community of living organisms. Practical considerations therefore determine its form and appearance from the beginning.

### *Controlling the situation*

From practical matters of maintenance, it is easy to slide into the more subjective issue of control. The need for evidence of control is vitally important for many people when they look at ornamental planting and it forms one of the main stumbling blocks to the acceptance of naturalistic planting. Garden designer Dan Pearson cites a client who "always wants to neaten everything up", yet who is also "very attracted to this romantic idea of the naturalistic garden".<sup>2</sup> Here, practical and aesthetic concerns are inextricably linked. "Sometimes you need to provide someone with something that's very highly maintained — like a beautifully kept lawn — alongside a very naturalistic planting," Pearson adds. ➤

Right: This *Passiflora caerulea* represents different things to different people — interpretation and value is at the core of understanding plants and planting design.



YULIA BADIAN

“Without recognising the complex roots of aesthetic preferences, we cannot understand the apparently fickle nature of our clients’ tastes.”

Above left: Planting by Anna Costa and Carlo Contesso in their garden ‘Logic of the sunflowers’ at the Chaumont-sur-Loire Garden Festival, France in 2004. Chaumont is often a hotbed of ideas where new ways of planting associations are explored.

#### *Aesthetic demands*

One can say that everything which does not relate to the strictly practical in planting design can be labelled aesthetic. However, the danger of lumping everything under this catch-all is that we reduce the aesthetic to the merely superficial. Yet the basis of aesthetics is deeply rooted in our personal and cultural experience. At the most simple level, if evolutionary-based theories of landscape aesthetics espoused by authors such as Jay Appleton are to be believed, aesthetics are our biological inheritance.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Symbolic associations*

We make sense of our experience by comparing it with others stored in our memory. Representation and association summarise the ways in which our experience of plants makes us aware of other feelings. As we experience the qualities of plants through more than one sense — be it visual, tactile, olfactory, aural — the best aesthetic experience of plants is the “whole experience . . . cerebral, sensual, physical”, according to Pearson.<sup>4</sup>

Visitors to James Hitchmough’s late summer flowering prairie-based garden in Sheffield provide him with a wealth of anecdotal information with responses to the planting design. The most common comment, says Hitchmough, is that he has “let it go”.<sup>5</sup> He believes such responses relate to the associations that tall, rank-looking vegetation hold in people’s experience. “Especially before it flowers, they’re completely mystified by it and they feel it’s about dereliction, not about order,” he explains.



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#### *Ecological endeavour*

Ecology is an essential part of planting design. It is significant in both its original scientific meaning (the interaction of living things and their environments) and its contemporary sense (as a source of political and cultural value). The physical processes of ecology operate on any planting, whether highly formal or naturalistic, in everything from climatic conditions to weeds. Ecological values also increasingly condition attitudes towards the use of plants in gardens. A single plant, or planting design, may be perceived as beautiful because it has ecological worth.

#### **WAYS OF SEEING**

Clearly the potential exists for some of these values to come into conflict in the design and evaluation of planting schemes. The desire to create sustainable planting that benefits wildlife can easily clash with the human aesthetic desire for order and ‘cues to care’ — evidence, in a horticultural context, that we are looking at something intentional.

Aesthetic preferences themselves are far from simple — clients don’t often see planting in the same way as designers do. For garden designers, it is tempting to dismiss objections on the basis of the clients’ lack of imagination, knowledge or taste. But this can fail to recognise that aesthetic preferences are directly related to our personal experience and history. Without recognising the complex roots of aesthetic preferences, we cannot understand the apparently fickle nature of our clients’ tastes.



How then, do we deal with such conflicts? The solution lies in setting out the different values — practical, aesthetic, symbolic and ecological — in parallel. Planting schemes operate on several different levels simultaneously. It follows that a planting scheme will only be successful when devised and assessed in a similarly multifaceted way.

### REASONS FOR CHANGE

Hitchmough and Nigel Dunnett from the University of Sheffield are both involved in the synthesis of novel forms of naturalistic herbaceous planting, primarily for public spaces. They are acutely aware that the long-term success of their schemes depends on them being both 'culturally sustainable' (accepted and even cherished by the general public) and 'ecologically sustainable' (beneficial to wildlife and capable of regeneration under simple maintenance). Hitchmough's priorities are, he says, "multi-headed". His motivation is to create what has meaning to people in more than one way.

Ultimately this is why it is worth considering the values that shape planting design and our responses to it. By conscious reflection, it is possible to look anew at plants. In so doing, we can create plantings with a very different basis to the tried and tested formats. Such thinking can be seen at shows such as Chaumont-sur-Loire, France. Planting such as this makes people sit up and take notice.

The lamentably dull, homogeneous appearance of much public planting design in this country is in

evidence everywhere, along roads, in parks and car parks. It results from the consideration of planting (usually by landscape architects) in terms of just two values, and at the crudest of levels: the structural role of planting and ease of maintenance.

To fully engage with plants, garden designers need to consider planting as something more than green infill. Planting design has undergone great changes, but its evolution need not stop. By thinking about planting and values in a more culturally informed, conscious way, we can explore some of the many possibilities beyond the stale binaries of formal and informal, traditional and contemporary. Plants are more than just another material in the palette of landscape design. They constitute both our biological and cultural inheritance, a mirror in which we see our own human nature.

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### REFERENCES

- 1 Thompson, I. *Ecology, community and delight*, E and FN Spon, 2000.
- 2 Interview with Dan Pearson, July 2003.
- 3 Appleton, J. *The experience of landscape*, John Wiley and Sons, 1996.
- 4 op. cit. 2.
- 5 Interview with James Hitchmough, May 2003.

Above: A view across the landscape of Cliveden, Berkshire, where the geometric parterre contains cotton lavender and seneccio. This formalised and stylised layout has references to both personal, and social, history.