

Thinking ahead

Barry Grain, head gardener at Cholmondeley Castle, looks to the long term

People often ask me what the "5 year plan" is. I usually reply that the length of time in question is un-realistic. At this they usually look perplexed and assume I am working to a much shorter time frame. Their looks then turn to amazement as I tell them that the 5 year plan is really a 20-30 year plan! Now when considering garden management for any term you need to think big, as the lifespan of the garden will be much greater than your own. I think we should always look at least 20 years ahead as a minimum, in garden terms that is as long as it takes to establish a young tree within a garden or landscape, and no matter how many head gardeners work at the plan during that time frame, the plan should remain constant. Gardens of course should evolve over time and never stand still in terms of management, as by their process of maturation, a garden is always on the move and not always as we would like. Development and tweaking should be continual both on large and small scales, always refreshing interest, and with one eye always on the future.

The gardens at Cholmondeley have been extensively developed by Lady Cholmondeley herself over the past 60 years, indeed when she first arrived apart from an ornamental lake in the temple garden, everywhere else was largely mature trees and lawns. Even now after all this time she still remains a driving force in the garden, and continues to develop it with one eye firmly fixed ahead. Last year for example she instigated the Lavinia Walk project, which is a new feature within the garden, where a long walk of fastigate Yew trees lead you along the path between the herbaceous beds and the Temple Garden. There were, it seems Irish Yews lining this path in the past which were looking very old a bit scruffy by the time Lady Cholmondeley arrived. She had them removed back in the 1950's but felt that it was now time some new ones went in to return this area to former glories.



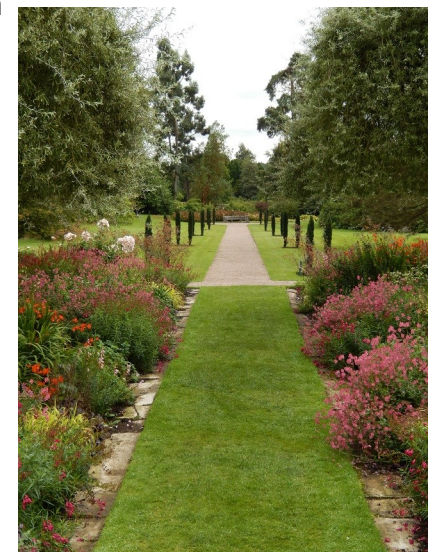
Stone Seat before...



...and after renovation

It is my job as head gardener to continue this spirit forward, and visitors to the garden this spring will see lots of much needed changes to the garden. The team have been working tirelessly over the past two seasons tidying areas up and renovating certain areas that have not had proper attention for some good years. We have many plantings of Laurel and Rhododendron ponticum around the gardens which were planted to give shelter some years ago, but are now in dire need of management. Bit by bit these areas are being renovated which is not only tidying up vistas but also offering new planting opportunities, particularly in and around the Temple garden. Most notable are the beds around the gatehouse to the Temple garden which have long been untidy and overgrown with Lamium. These beds have been completely overhauled and re-modelled to give a better blend of planting, but also to extend the season of interest. Diseased Hydrangeas have been

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The Lavinia Walk project

removed and replaced with Philadelphus 'Mexican Jewel' and P. purpureus, Hemerocallis and Hosta groups have been repositioned and a new range of shrubs are being introduced. And the Lamium here is being removed altogether as it just isn't right for the location, excellent ground cover though it is. There are also fresh plantings to be found through the glade and throughout the Top Terrace with a new blend of interesting plant such as Agapanthus 'Purple Cloud', Leptospermum and Crinodendron to name a few. As well as this new trees can be found at various locations throughout the gardens.



The Silver Garden

However in essence, no matter what scale you garden on, the tweaking and re-modelling are equally necessary, it is only the scale that differs. Indeed I cannot think of a gardener who is content for his or her "patch" to stay just so, and as soon as the promise of spring is with us the creative juices inevitably start to flow, it's just a question of how far ahead to think. I personally am already on spring 2016.

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