

HORTICULTURAL HEROINE

Beth Chatto's legacy of pioneering planting lives on in the verdant landscape she created out of stony ground

BY CATRIONA GRAY

GARDENS



LEFT: BETH CHATTO IN HER WATER GARDEN (ALSO SHOWN OPPOSITE). RIGHT: CHATTO'S RESERVOIR GARDEN



Few gardeners have had as great an impact on the horticultural world as Beth Chatto. Her simple philosophy of ‘the right plant for the right place’ might sound obvious today, but in the 1960s, it was groundbreaking. At the time, it was still common practice to force rhododendrons to grow in lime-heavy soils, or to struggle with delicate exotic species in harsh climates. Instead, Chatto encouraged people to consider what was suitable for their own situation, and led by example. Her gardens in Colchester became famous around the world for demonstrating how to create glorious displays in difficult conditions.

Chatto's career spanned six decades, during which she started a highly respected nursery, wrote numerous books and won 10 successive Gold Medals at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, as well as the prestigious Victoria Medal of Honour. When she died last year, at the age of 94, the Garden Museum wrote a tribute to Chatto, describing her as ‘a great, and hugely loved, gardener’.

Born in 1923 in Essex, she originally trained as a teacher, but her interest in plants grew following her marriage to Andrew Chatto, a fruit farmer. She wanted to create a garden of her own, but was faced with challenging circumstances, which she describes in *Beth Chatto's Garden Notebook*.

‘Like many families before us, and since, we were going through a difficult time,’ she wrote. ‘My husband's health was very poor, our fruit farm had to be sold, leaving us with a few acres of wasteland in a hollow between two farms. It was a waste because the soil was too poor for farming: dry stony gravel on the upper, south-facing slope, saturated black silt over clay in the hollow, with a spring-fed ditch running through the lowest level.’

Despite this, Chatto was excited about beginning a garden from scratch – the little stream that ran through the site meant that she could grow a far greater variety of plants than was typically possible in the dry Essex climate. Thickets of blackthorn were bulldozed, vast clumps of bracken were cleared, and Chatto embarked upon the seemingly endless task of eradicating the brambles and bindweed that flourished in wild abandon.

She made a feature of the difficult aspects of the grounds – the dry, gravel slopes became a Mediterranean garden, filled with sun-loving species; further down, a wetland area showcased a variety of damp-friendly plants; while finally, a woodland garden bloomed with hellebores, hostas and rare primulas.

In 1967, Chatto started up a nursery called Unusual Plants, which served as the family's key source of income following the sale of the farm. It soon became popular with

people believed that she was displaying weeds – those same euphorbias and alchemillas are now seen everywhere. Within a few years, Chatto became one of the Chelsea Flower Show's star exhibitors. Her stands were revolutionary – at a time when her peers were displaying plants in pots, hers were massed together as if they had sprung straight out of the earth. The media coverage that resulted led to the publication of her first book, *The Dry Garden*, as well as an upsurge in nursery orders and visitors. By the early 1990s, her gardens were attracting between 20,000 and 30,000 people annually. Forced to move the carpark to accommodate the extra demand, she transformed the old site into a gravel garden, proving that if you chose the right drought-resistant plants, even the most sun-scorched of plots could go unwatered – an invaluable example to the many residents of southern England who were struggling with annual hosepipe bans.

As Chatto grew older, she showed no signs of wanting to retire. ‘Her knowledge was so enormous, and she was always keen to share it,’ recalls her biographer, Catherine Horwood. ‘Even in the latter years, when she wasn't able to get out very regularly, she always knew what was going to look good.’ Chatto's gardens and nursery are now run by her granddaughter Julia Boulton, and they continue to attract thousands of pilgrims each year, who marvel at the sheer beauty that one woman wrought from a barren field, and leave with seedlings to create visions of their own. As autumn progresses, these carefully tended acres blaze with colour. If you sit in the tea-room, you can't help but notice the fiery leaves of the rhus typhina, in vivid hues of orange and red. The great golden larch by the house turns yellow in October, as do the fan-shaped leaves of the ginkgo biloba that stands beside the pond.

Like all gardeners, Chatto was conscious of the passage of time, and her own place within it. ‘We all pass on, our gardens change, many disintegrate and disappear – that is not important,’ she wrote. ‘What matters is the continuing cycle of sharing and learning about plants, and perhaps a little bit of us remains... maybe this is another precious thing about gardening.’ □

‘Beth Chatto: A Life with Plants’ by Catherine Horwood (£30, Pimpernel Press) is published on 5 September.

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF BETH CHATTO GARDENS; RACHEL WARNE