



BETH CHATTO

Beth Chatto's Gravel Garden has become synonymous with growing plants suited to local conditions.

Right Plant, Right Place

Catherine Horwood remembers Beth Chatto, the renowned nurserywoman, planting expert and author, who died in May this year

IMAGE CAP/ANDREA JONES

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It seems incredible now but, just over 40 years ago, Beth Chatto was almost disqualified from her first-ever RHS show. Some judges considered that she was showing weeds rather than 'proper' herbaceous perennials. The plants she displayed, such as *Helleborus foetidus* and euphorbias, are so much a part of the gardener's lexicon today that it is hard to imagine a time when they were so frowned upon. Beth (as everyone always called her) was bemused. She had merely gone into her garden and dug up what she wanted to show, little realising the revolution she was starting and the enduring influence she was to have on planting. With her death in May this year, we lost one of Britain's greatest horticultural heroes.

Beth Chatto was born in 1923 in a small village in Essex where her father was the police constable. Beth's parents were keen gardeners and while her two brothers showed no interest, Beth was

Above *Pontederia cordata* and waterlilies in the Water Garden. **Below** Beth Chatto in her garden at Elmstead Market.



keen to learn and soon had her own patch where she planted snowdrops. By the time the family had moved to Elmstead Market, she was studying to be a teacher and always managed to include some horticultural projects in her classes. At the outbreak of World War II, while still a student, she met her future husband, Andrew Chatto, a fruit farmer and scion of the famous publishing firm. A shared passion for native plants brought them together when Andrew offered to help with Beth's study of native plants on the nearby Essex salt marshes.

After the war, Beth settled into married life with two small daughters on the other side of Colchester in the Chatto family home. Here she inherited a traditional formal garden from Andrew's parents, which brought her little pleasure. Their immediate neighbour was a nurserywoman and keen flower arranger, Mrs Pamela Underwood, who encouraged Beth to demonstrate her own beautiful arrangements across East Anglia.

It was also at this time, that Beth and Andrew were introduced to Cedric Morris, the artist and plantsman who lived not far away in Suffolk. Surrounded by Morris's exquisite irises and delicate pastel poppies, Beth said she felt like a child in a sweet shop. It was Morris who told her that to achieve the sort of garden she longed for, she would have to move.

In 1960 the family did just that, moving from Elmstead Market to a house in the middle of Andrew's fruit farm. The farm was struggling, and Andrew was happy for Beth to develop the areas close to the house. As well as working on what was to become the Damp Garden, Beth also started a small nursery and wherever she gave flower-arranging demonstrations, she always took her own plant material. The village halls soon echoed with requests for her 'unusual plants' encouraging her to use this as the name for her new nursery when it opened in 1967.

Once she started exhibiting at the RHS shows, Beth's rise to fame in the horticultural world was meteoric. An article in *The Sunday Times* by Graham Rose in 1976 brought in hundreds of plant orders. Her first book, *The Dry Garden* (1977) soon followed. Beth was a natural writer but also a perfectionist. Her books went on to become classics, as readers quickly discovered that not only did she know exactly what she was talking about, but she also could write with such passion that the plants leapt off the page.

As Beth's fame increased, she found herself in demand across the globe and her chosen travelling companion was often her close friend, Christopher Lloyd. In so many ways, Lloyd's garden at Great Dixter could not have been

more different to Beth's at Elmstead Market. But while they may not have shared the same taste in many plants (bergenias were a particular

Below Alliums thrive in the compacted ground of the Gravel Garden, a former car park, in the Beth Chatto Gardens.

Beth Chatto's SIGNATURE PLANTS

These plants hold lasting appeal in the garden



HELLEBORUS ORIENTALIS

Helleborus orientalis is a very hardy plant that makes a significant contribution to the garden, with leafy green foliage remaining long after the winter and early spring flowers have passed. Beth preferred deeper, clearer toned flowers to the murkier shades that often emerge.



GERANIUM MACULATUM 'BETH CHATTO'

Beth was especially fond of cranesbill geraniums, and even had one named after her (above). This is a robust variety with a profusion of pale-pink flowers in spring and summer. Grow in full sun or semi-shade, taking care to plant it in well-drained soil.



EUPHORBIA WULFENII

The bright, lime-green bracts and flowers of *E. characias* subsp. *wulfenii* are a handy foil for deeper colours. Unusual, narrow-leaved foliage is blue-grey in tone. Reaching a height of 1.2m, with a spread of 90cm, it prefers light, well-drained soil with some wind protection.



ALLIUM HOLLANDICUM

This is a tremendously popular plant that offers superb globes of vibrant purple in early summer. After flowering, its seedheads, first a fresh green, then brown, will add continued height and interest to garden borders. Grow it in well-drained soil in full sun.



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sticking point), their depth of plant knowledge cemented their friendship.

In addition to the plants that Beth discovered herself and those she was given by great plantsmen such as Cedric Morris, she collected many to propagate at her nursery. To this day, it remains a key source for some of Britain's leading gardens keen to track down treasures unavailable elsewhere. Scornful of the development of hybrids, Beth always maintained that species plants should be the bedrock of every garden, with leaf form and shape being far more important than flower colour. She was inspired by her husband Andrew's research into original growing conditions across the world. Both were increasingly conscious of the ecological consequences of over-management with chemicals at a time when few people knew what 'ecology' meant.

In 1987 Beth created her last gold medal-winning garden at Chelsea. But this was far from her swan song. The Great Storm of 1987 handed her the opportunity to create her Woodland Garden. But her greatest achievement was the Gravel Garden, created on the compacted ground that had been the garden's public car park. Based on Andrew's work and her own encyclopaedic knowledge, Beth chose only those plants that she felt would survive the arid conditions of this area, contrasting sharply with the lower Damp Garden, which has always been fed by a natural spring. Never watered after the initial planting, the Gravel Garden has spawned thousands of imitations, but few will have had the layers of preparation Beth insisted upon.

Above Mounds of eupatorium thrive in the margins of the Water Garden. **Right** Beth and her husband, Andrew. **Below** Varied perennial texture and form points to Beth's planting skills.



When Beth started her nursery, she divided her plants into categories matched to their differing growing conditions. This method had also been the foundation for her 10 gold-medal winning gardens at Chelsea. While this seems so natural to us now, when Beth started planting in this way, most gardeners would try to grow rhododendrons in limy soil and moisture-loving astilbes in dry beds. I spent hours interviewing her, and she claimed she did not originate the phrase 'right plant, right place'. But it is for that ethos she will always be remembered – and quite rightly so. She received so many honours during her lifetime, and after her death many of the great names in horticulture – Dan Pearson, Alan Titchmarsh, James Hitchmough among others – spoke not just of the affection they had for her but the debt they owe Beth.

Thankfully, the Beth Chatto Gardens still thrive, run now by Beth's granddaughter, Julia Boulton, and a loyal team, many of whom have worked there for years. Beth's legacy continues through the Gardens and the Educational Trust set up in her name. It was her wish, ever the teacher, that young people should learn about the joys of nature. But gardeners today owe so much to her for opening our eyes to the plants around us and how to grow them.

Catherine Horwood's biography of Beth Chatto will be published in 2019 by Pimpernel Press. For more information about Beth Chatto, visit bethchatto.co.uk

