



INTERVIEW

with

Thomas Hoblyn

Garden Designer

Thomas Hoblyn is a designer who knows about plants: having been a Head Gardener in Devon and worked at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. He has also studied plants in their natural habitats around the world, including the USA, Spain, Australia and Indonesia. He is also interested in the gardens of the Renaissance and the Islamic world, and in contemporary land art.

In Thomas Hoblyn, you have a highly knowledgeable designer whose influences and ideas result classical contemporary-fused gardens, as shown by his show gardens at Hampton Court and Chelsea where he won gold in 2008 in the Urban Garden Category and in 2009 for his garden for Foreign and Colonial Investments, and in 2008 with a garden which flowed from wood to water to plants in an endless cycle whichever way you looked at it.

Q: You obviously reject the idea that contemporary gardens have few plants; are the plants there in your mind from the start of a design?



Plant combination

A: Being a bit of a plant-loon, it's all too tempting to start thinking about plant species right away, but I do tend to get a feel for the style of planting needed; quite often existing trees and surrounding landscape will be subconsciously nudging you in the right direction. Sometimes, it's a wonderful experience to re-visit the site at dusk; when the light has removed all traces of plant colour and texture and all you have is silhouetted form to work with. This can be a powerful tool for plant choice.

Q: So are the plants chosen for the conditions on the site or as integral to your concept for the garden?

A: If the site is fairly normal, I go with what my heart is saying for plant choice – this list is normally unfeasibly long and therefore site conditions conveniently slash this list to practical proportions. In tricky areas, such as bogs, the plant palette is limited anyway and I would maybe break the rules by using non-natives to get visual diversity.

Q: How does this fit in with your passion about plants in the environment – and being affected by climate change?

A; matching plants to the environment can be a tricky situation fraught with floral faux pas; this is further exacerbated by climate change. On one hand, exciting opportunities arise: *Echium pininana* blooming in Bury St Edmunds was not a scenario I expected to ever see. However, it is truly sad to think that beech is no longer a happy camper in parts of the UK; climatically weakened they are now easy targets for fungal disorders such as *Ganoderma australe* and *Meripilus giganteus*. As a child, I remember diseased elms being felled and transforming the landscape overnight, now I am worried that beech, horse chestnut and oaks maybe added to that list in my lifetime.



Water and plants

Q: one of your show gardens was inspired by the Villa Lante, Italy, Can you say what that garden meant to you?

A: I suppose that a sort of fascination arose with the fact that some mad, power-crazed Cardinal took pleasure in, not only controlling the inhabitants of Bagnaia through religious fear, but also controlling nature by forcing a river through his back garden. I think he had ideas above his station, but wow, what a result: minimalism in the Renaissance period, not over-egged as at Villa d'Este, pleasing proportions and engineering excellence at its finest.

Q: and how did your mind travel from the Villa to the final design?

A: My sponsors wanted me to portray fine living outdoors and my mind immediately recalled my past visits to the villa. I could picture Cardinal Gambara feasting at the long water table with chilled wine surrounded by other catholic dignitaries - probably relaxing after a hard days' persecution.

I picked a few key elements of the garden i.e. Fountain of the Flood and adapted them to a show garden-sized plot using the golden section rule. Mind you, speaking of floral faux pas, I made a big one here: the Cardinal specified that only box and plane trees should be used for

the planting scheme; in order to create serenity – there he goes again - trying to control moods now. But I used a strong palette of orange, blue and lime green – it was Hampton Court you know.

Q: Do you think that having a knowledge of history and an appreciation of the past is important to a designer?

A: It's not only important - it's essential. Having a good historical knowledge helps establish a rapport with the landscape. When a new project comes in, we thoroughly research the site's background. For example, we've just started a new project that has an amazing past: The Romans thrashed the Catuvelluni tribes here, bronze age tools have been unearthed along the river and there are two important leylines bisecting right in the middle of the land. All these layers add huge values to the project and must be respected (and possibly acknowledged) in the our end results

Q: In your design for Chelsea 2009, you used shapes in wood connected with water – how does this relate to your interest in land art?

A: I am a great fan of 'found art'; whether it be feathery grass seed heads penetrating a low lying morning mist or the glacially sculpted lakes in Snowdonia, Mother Nature is the ultimate artist. However, it's a bit tricky to be re-creating something like this at Chelsea and my 'slices' idea was a sort of simulated natural sculpture inspired by 'found art'. It was the shadows and reflections in the water that really worked for me.

Q: I loved the wire sculpture – was this your design or do you work with other artists in your work?

A: No it wasn't my design, it was more of a collaborative idea: I saw Nikki Taylor's work and fell in love with it some time ago. I felt the Chelsea garden needed someone to 'watch over' it giving it more purpose and managed to persuade Nikki to work with me. It was a great experience as she immediately 'got it' and was able to interpret my brief perfectly. I am in the process of working with another talented artist for Chelsea 2010.

Q: Would you call yourself an artist – or do you think all garden designers are artists – in other words are the terms artist/designer/ architect synonymous (as they were in the Renaissance)?

A: A cautious yes and I think that many designers/architects are true artists. I quite like the term artisan also. I went down the science route at school and university and was so mathematically incompetent, that I spent every spare minute trying to keep up and never got a look in on the creative side of education until I discovered the wonders of garden design during my training at Kew. So I'm making up for lost time

Q: what are you next projects?

A: I've just begun an exciting project in Hertfordshire. At the moment, it is a barren 100 acres of intensively farmed land. But it has a great future: the Woodland Trust are planting 800 acres of trees surrounding the land and we will be working closely with them and Natural England to create a habitat-rich traditional farm that will nestle snugly within the woodland. We plan to re-plant all the hedgerows, sow genetically local wildflower pasture and create a rural garden surrounding the proposed farmhouse.



Water Reflections

Q: Given an open brief and endless funds, what would you like to design, and where?

A: having spent 3 wonderful years at Kew, I would love to get involved in the future Masterplan that is in production as we speak. There are so many dimensions to Kew: a scientific establishment, a massive living collection of plants, an important piece of British history and a recreational haven. Yet it must change in order for it to remain a top attraction in the world. What a job that would be.

Thank you, Thomas Hoblyn.

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