

Opinion Gardens

When the rain doesn't come: how to plant for a dry future

Beth Chatto's garden in Essex, with its former car park turned into a drought-resistant idyll, shows an exemplary approach

ROBIN LANE FOX



Beth Chatto's Mediterranean garden near Colchester, Essex © Steven Wooster

Robin Lane Fox OCTOBER 15 2021

Gardens are predicted to become ever drier. It seems a sure bet, though in Britain this year it has not come off. What should we be thinking when we plant for a dry future?

One good principle is to try not to defy local conditions. Great gardens have been built despite them, but usually at a high cost of labour and water. In dry European conditions it is no longer worth trying to transplant the English style envied in our green and pleasant land.

Instead, I recommend joining the [Mediterranean Garden Society](#), dedicated to gardening in keeping with Mediterranean conditions. Its quarterly journal alone is worth the year's current subscription of €45, but it also comes with a pack of five informative leaflets on dry gardening and access to a yearly seed exchange, offering each member up to 15 packets of seed from drought-compatible plants.

Back in Britain we too have experience. Never forget: the 1990s were extremely dry years in which to make a garden. I nearly emigrated to rainy Ireland, but the rain became less regular there too. In 1993 I was glad to read *Plants For Dry Gardens* by Jane Taylor, still an excellent guide: paperback copies are being offered on Amazon for £3.35 plus delivery.

I also became aware of an initiative by Beth Chatto in her Essex garden near Elmstead Market, five miles east of Colchester. While I was bemoaning a dry stony soil and making poor progress, she was turning the former car park of her plant nursery into a gravel garden. Without artificial irrigation it was becoming a tapestry of bushy plants that photographed enviably well. I was struggling to keep my young trees of pink-berried Sorbus hupehensis alive with a hose pipe. They were in intensive care, while her Judas tree flourished.





The renowned gardener Beth Chatto as a young woman © Beth Chatto Education Trust

Chatto has remained a revered figure in gardening. She was always the first to credit her husband, Andrew, with the thinking that shaped her approach to plants. He was a fruit grower, but as a child he had lived in the western US and learnt even then from its wild flora in dry conditions. He once told me, as he often told her, of the impression that California's natural sweeps of annual poppies, blue-flowered ceanothus and wild lupins made on his young mind. Through them he became interested in ecology and an early exponent of its importance for gardening

Her husband's interests helped her to succeed with a very dry garden. In 1989 she published a book, *The Green Tapestry*, setting out her approach to planting and grouping and taking readers round her Essex garden. It was already windswept and very short of water, a major claim to fame. In 2000 she published *Beth Chatto's Gravel Garden*, focusing on her new garden on the former car park, and in 2016 it was reissued as *Drought-Resistant Planting*, an excellent buy.

The Green Tapestry has just been updated too and reissued as *Green Tapestry Revisited* (Berry & Co, £30). It is a particularly worthwhile read as it is even more up to date, thanks to new chapters by those still involved on site.

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Since Chatto's death in 2018, her plants and gardens have been tended and updated by David Ward, her propagation manager among much else, and teams under Asa Gregers-Warg, active on site since 2001 and now head gardener of the Beth Chatto Gardens. They have carried the green tapestry and its book forward.

I have not seen the gardens without her, but some of you write to say how well worthwhile a visit is. Where bone-dry Dorset may be tomorrow, Chatto's bone-dry garden in Essex has already been for the past 30 years.

Green Tapestry Revisited gives some of her main principles and continues the story most interestingly. Of course she recognised the importance of plants with grey leaves for dry positions, as the leaves resist scorching and are slower to lose water. She records her debt here to an expert neighbour, the redoubtable Mrs Desmond Underwood, whose minor classic *Grey and Silver Plants* appeared in 1971. It too turns up second hand, so buy it if you find it: in a dry era it has a future.

Like me, Chatto learnt the value of plants with tap roots for dry places, those long main roots that grow vertically downwards and draw and store water in their fleshy texture. Her garden's many tall yellow verbascums are tap-rooted examples, excellent plants with a vertical emphasis. Also like me, she emphasises the value of what used to be called gaura, now changed to oenothera: the ones with stems of white flowers survive most winters and are excellent in dry sites, as their prominence on French roundabouts attests. I would add the tap-rooted tall Campanula lactiflora in its lilac-blue forms and in its lower-growing deep violet Prichard's Variety.

Like Chatto, I also succeed with pokers, the excellent kniphofias that do not have to glow red-hot at the tips of their flowers. In dry soil we both succeed with agapanthus and with hellebores. She included many more grasses than I ever did, but her eye was better trained from flower arranging. She also saw the beauty of plants that would grow into green humps, continuing to enliven the winter.

However, to screen her dry gravel garden she planted a hedge of Leyland cypress, a free-growing monster which I spent my first years pulling out by the roots. She clipped it repeatedly but eventually it spread too wide, a warning to her imitators.

Where Chatto really scored was in her preparation of the car park site. Thanks to the family's surrounding farm, she could call on JCB diggers to excavate her new borders to a significant depth. With the machines she and her nursery staff then refilled them with manure and good compost

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~~Before toppling them off with a deep layer of gravel. I cannot over-emphasise the importance of this first step, even if you do not command workers and diggers. Thirty years later, I am digging and resoil my dry beds one by one. She is an excellent exponent of how to avoid doing so.~~

In dry summers she advised early pruning and cutting back, preferring the use of secateurs to constant use of water from a hose. She has become famous for the phrase “right plant, right place”, arguing against random planting to discover if an unlikely choice will grow in unfavourable conditions. I am not such a fan of this slogan. Often I have found something right by experiment, whereas what is thought to be right goes wrong and dies. In gardens, plants do not always like what they like in the wild. Sensible experiments are worthwhile.

Over the years, as the reissued *Green Tapestry* explains, plantings with which Chatto began have often had to be replaced. In 2018 her garden had no rain for 50 days in a row. Nor did mine, in 1990. She championed sustainability, but even she used plants that were not always sustainable for decades. I find that reassuring, not an argument for growing nothing but weeds.

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