FLOWERING NEWSLETTER

The colour of creation: Gertrude Jekyll and the art of flowers

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Received 25 July 2006; Revised 29 August 2006; Accepted 26 September 2006

Abstract

Flowers were central to the life and work of Gertrude Jekyll (1843–1932), one of the 20th century’s most influential garden designers. Born of parents with interests across a broad range of the art–science spectrum, Miss Jekyll developed an early interest in many arts and crafts, including painting and gardening in particular. During her course at the Central School of Design in Kensington she studied closely the work of JMW Turner. Many of the compositional elements of Turner’s paintings, especially his use of colour, can be seen in Miss Jekyll’s subsequent designs for c. 250 gardens. The use of blue and yellow flowers to create a sense of light, and the contrast of cool blue flowers and grey foliage with vivid reds and oranges are recurrent themes in her planting schemes, but many other aspects of her designs also reflect her broad interest in the art, craft, and science of plant cultivation. She encouraged others to seek the satisfaction offered by gardening as an art, convinced that a life spent seeking perfection would gradually yield ‘the power of intelligent combination, the nearest thing we can know to the mighty force of creation’.

Key words: Arts and Crafts, flower colour, Jekyll, planting design.

Introduction

‘Further up the Fern walk … growing close to the ground in a tuft of dark green moss, is an interesting plant—Goodyera repens, a terrestrial Orchid. One might easily pass it by, for its curiously white-veined leaves are half hidden in the moss, and its spike of pale, greenish-white flowers is not conspicuous; but, knowing it is there, I never pass without kneeling down, both to admire its beauty and also to ensure its well-being by a careful removal of a little of the deep moss here and there where it threatens too close an invasion’ (Jekyll, 1925).

This brief quotation, combining as it does close observation, contemplation, and cultivation, neatly characterizes the fusion of art, craft, and philosophy which led to Gertrude Jekyll becoming one of the most influential garden designers of the 20th century. Her combinations of flowers provided one of the main means by which she expressed her gratitude to the Maker and communicated to others her own awe of the power of creation.

Born of parents with interests across a broad range of the art–science spectrum (her mother studied music under Felix Mendelssohn and her soldier father, a talented flute player, was an engineer with particular interests in electricity and explosives) (Massingham, 1966), Miss Jekyll developed an early interest in many arts and crafts, including painting and gardening in particular.

At the Central School of Design in Kensington, where she enrolled in 1861, as one of the first female students, to study painting, she attended lectures by John Ruskin (Slade Professor of Art at Oxford), Ruskin’s pupil William Morris (who also founded his firm of Morris Marshall and Faulkner in Bloomsbury in 1861), and Richard Dresser (a Fellow of the Linnaean Society and an authority on decorative arts). Miss Jekyll also had lectures from the Principal of the School, Richard Redgrave, on the scientific principles underlying harmony in the composition of colours developed by Michel-Eugene Chevreuil (head of the dyeing department at the Royal Gobelins tapestry works in Paris) (Edwards, 1995).

Ruskin was a great advocate of the paintings of JMW Turner, whom he considered to be the greatest English painter, so Gertrude Jekyll was encouraged to study...
Turner’s paintings. The drama of his subject material and, in particular, his use of colour to highlight that drama, had a profound influence on Miss Jekyll’s art in general and on her garden design in particular, focusing her attention especially on the use of flower colour in planting design.

Gertrude Jekyll combined her formal training in art with close observation of flowers (despite very poor and painful eyesight) and with considerable skill as a word-smith. In her first book, *Wood and garden*, she professed, ‘I lay no claim either to literary ability or to botanical knowledge’, but it is clear that she had a great interest in words and worked as hard to assemble them effectively as she did with her other artists’ materials. *Wood and garden* was followed by *Home and garden* and a dozen subsequent books, but her enduring influence rests on *Colour in the flower garden* (1908), republished in 1914 as *Colour schemes for the flower garden*. This brought together the ideas on colour with which she had been experimenting throughout her gardening life. In 1881 she acquired 6 ha (15 acres) of heathland and secondary woodland at Munstead Wood, near Godalming in Surrey, across the road from the family home. This became her own garden laboratory and, from 1897, her home when her house was built to the design of the young architect Edwin Lutyens (Fig. 1).

It is clear from her writing that she observed her plants very carefully and, despite her poor eyesight, was able to see plants more accurately than most people with normal vision. In *Home and garden* her description of the wood sorrel extended to more than a page: ‘The white flower in the mass has a slightly lilac tinge; when I look close I see that this comes from a fine veining of reddish-purple colour on the white ground … the white is not very white, but about as white as the lightest part of a pearl. … the delicately-formed calyx is painted with faint tints of dull green edged with greenish buff, and is based and tipped with a reddish-purple that recalls the veining of the petals. … Each little heart [of the trefoil leaf] does not fold upon itself, but each half is closely pressed against the half of its neighbour, so that the whole looks like a blunt three-winged arrow or bolt-head’ (Jekyll, 1901). ‘In the Austrian Copper [brier rose], the vivid scarlet of the inside of the petal is laid on in a thin film over a ground of yellow [and] one can peel off the red surface and show the yellow ground. To get the same powerful quality of red colouring a painter has to use exactly the same artifice’ (Jekyll, 1901).

Elsewhere, she wrote of ‘the bending, berried heads of the wild Iris, opening like fantastic dragons’ mouths, and pouring out the red, bead-like seeds upon the ground’, of adonis flowers ‘comfortably seated in dense fennel-like masses of foliage’, of gypsophila ‘like clouds of flowery mist settled down upon the flower borders [while] shooting up behind and among it is a tall salmon-coloured Gladiolus’ (Jekyll, 1899) (Fig. 2).

In her garden writing there are constant cross-references to other arts and crafts. On the lower part of the trunk of silver birch ‘the bark is dark in colour, and lies in thick and extremely rugged upright ridges, contrasting strongly with the smooth white skin above. Where the two join, the smooth bark is parted in upright slashes, through which the dark, rough bark seems to swell up, reminding one forcibly of some of the old fifteenth-century German costumes, where a dark velvet is arranged to rise in crumpled folds through slashes in white satin’. In her six-page description of the junipers on Munstead Heath she draws analogies with metal-work, as the pewter-like undersides of the needles seemed to be folded over to form the pale margins of the upper surface. The contrasting textures of red antirrhinums and valerian, so similar in colour, are likened to satin and velvet (Jekyll, 1899).
Art and craft in the garden

Significantly, Gertrude Jekyll very rarely used the term ‘garden design’, preferring to think of herself as an ‘artist-gardener’ rather than a garden designer, because it was through the practice of garden craft that the garden as a work of art evolved. In Chapter 2 of Wood and garden, for example, she wrote ‘How endlessly beautiful is woodland in winter! To-day there is a thin mist; just enough to make a background of tender blue mystery three hundred yards away, and to show any defect in the grouping of near trees. No day could be better for deciding which trees are to come down...’. After absorbing the tranquil atmosphere and enhanced perspective of the misty morning, she summoned the woodman to fell any poorly placed trees.

This fusion of art and craft is particularly evident in the main Hardy Flower Border, which was the centrepiece of the garden at Munstead Wood, a border designed to be at its best from mid-July to October. ‘Even when a flower border is devoted to a special season ... it cannot be kept fully furnished without resorting to various contrivances’ (Jekyll, 1925). There were three ‘contrivances’ in particular which she used repeatedly.

‘One of these is the planting of certain things that will follow in season of bloom and that can be trained to take each other’s places’. Oriental poppies were interplanted with Gypsophila paniculata so that the gypsophila would grow to cover the dying remains of the early-flowering poppies. Nasturtiums were sown around the perimeter of the gypsophila so that, when the latter had faded from white to straw-brown, the nasturtiums would provide a third season of bright colour. Elsewhere in the border, spikes of delphinium were cut down as soon as they had finished flowering and white perennial pea, growing on sticks behind the delphiniums, was then trained forward to cover the dying remains. Clematis jackmani was then trained over the peas and, in the latter years at Munstead Wood, Clematis flammula was added to the sequence. Such associations demanded careful management. ‘It must not be supposed that they are just lumped one over another so that the under ones have their leaves smothered. They are always being watched, and, bit by bit, the earlier growths are removed as soon as their respective plants are better without them ... They cannot be hurried ... good gardening means patience and dogged determination. There must be many failures and losses, but by always pushing on there will also be the reward of success’ (Jekyll, 1925).

A second and similar technique involved pulling tall plants forward, sometimes to cover early-flowering plants which had finished their display, sometimes to vary the outline of a plant group or to correct mistakes when a seedsman had supplied a tall rather than a short variety. Helianthus orygalis [H. salicifolius] for example, ‘is one of the perennial Sunflowers that are usually considered not good enough for careful gardening. It grows very tall, and bears a smallish bunch of yellow flowers at the top. If this were all it could do, it would not be in my flower border. But in front of it grows the fine Tansy-like Achillea eupatorium, and in front of this again a wide-spread group of Eryngium oliverianum—beautiful all through July. When the bloom of these is done the tall Sunflower is trained down over them—this pulling down, as in the case of so many plants, causing them to throw up flower-stalks from the axils of every pair of leaves; so that in September the whole thing is a sheet of bloom. Thus a plant that was hardly worth a place in the border becomes, at flowering time, one of the brightest ornaments in the garden’ (Jekyll, 1925).

The third technique was ‘dropping in’. A supply of plants was kept in the reserve ground or in pots so that any temporary gaps in the border could be filled with plants of appropriate colour and height. Lilies, campanulas, antirrhinums, hostas, and many other plants were used in this way, but one which was always called upon was the hydrangea. The pale pink flowers of hydrangea were ideal for reinforcing the greys and blues at the ends of the border but its bright yellow-green leaves were at variance with the soft colour scheme. The gardener’s craft came to the rescue of her art: ‘we get them so well bloomed that but few leaves are seen, and we arrange as cleverly as we can that the rest shall be more or less hidden by the surrounding bluish foliage’ (Jekyll, 1925).

Although not a plantsman in the acquisitive, stamp-collecting sense, Miss Jekyll was, in her younger years, a regular visitor to nurseries and flower shows (with some success as an exhibitor). She was an early cultivator of Romneya coulteri (introduced in 1875), and is thought to be the first in Britain to flower Carpenteria californica, for which she received a First Class Certificate from the Royal Horticultural Society in 1888 (Tooley, 1995a). She also selected and bred many plants, including antirrhinum, aquilegia (‘Munstead White’), foxgloves (‘Munstead White’), lupins (‘Munstead Blue’, ‘Munstead White’ and the light purple ‘Munstead Beauty’), love-in-a-mist (Nigella damascena ‘Miss Jekyll’) and, especially, the Munstead Strain of bunch-flowered primroses, or polyanthus (Fig. 3). Enchanted since childhood by the wild primrose, Miss Jekyll was an acknowledged expert on primulas by 1886, when she helped to organize a Primula Conference. Even in 1933, the year after her death, Carters’ Seeds were ‘honoured with the distribution of Miss Jekyll’s famous re-selected MUNSTEAD STRAIN ...’ (Tooley, 1995b).

Gertrude Jekyll was an Arts and Crafts gardener long before the Arts and Crafts Movement emerged with a clearly defined identity and name in 1888. She selected, bred and wove plants together to create the required effects, embroidered one plant with another, added
a brush-stroke of colour where it was most needed by dropping plants into the border and ensured that the effect would be maintained by engineering the staking of unstable plants. She adopted the word ‘drift’ to describe the long, flowing groups which she used for most of the plants in her borders (Jekyll, 1925) and her plans show clearly the painterly transitions from these long brush strokes of background planting to the short stabs of colour of the accent plants: yuccas, kniphofias, cannas etc (Bisgrove, 1992) (Fig. 4). It is, though, for her use of colour and colour schemes that she is most remembered.

**Colour in the flower garden**

The main lesson that she had learned and which she taught in use of colour was the importance of harmony, but the equal importance of injecting an element of contrast to emphasize that harmony. She knew, from her training and experience as a painter, of the ‘relativity’ of colour perception and the significance of complementary colours. ‘There are well-known scientific toys illustrating this law. A short word, printed in large red letters, is looked at for half a minute. The eyes are then shut and the image of the same word appears, but the lettering is green. Many experiments may be made in the open garden. The brilliant orange African Marigold has leaves of a rather dull green colour. But look steadily at the flowers for thirty seconds and then look at the leaves. The leaves appear to be bright blue!’ (Jekyll, 1925). One of the most amusing examples of this law of complementary colours occurred when she was focusing intently on her painting of an old grey horse. After working closely for some time on the canvas, she looked up and was ‘amazed by the sight of a blue horse with a large orange spot on his flank. I can never forget the shock of that strangely-coloured apparition. A knot had dropped out of one of the boards [in the barn], and a round spot of warm afternoon sunlight came straight through on to the horse’s white coat that was blue-lighted from the large north window’ (Jekyll, 1901).
The surprise engendered by ‘that strangely-coloured apparition’ was put to use many times in garden colour schemes. ‘Perhaps the Grey garden is seen at its best by reaching it through the orange borders. Here the eye becomes filled and saturated with the strong red and yellow colouring ... This filling the eye with the strong, rich colouring has the natural effect of making the eye eagerly desirous for the complementary colour, so that, standing by the inner Yew arch and suddenly turning in to look into the Grey garden, the effect is surprisingly—quite astonishingly—luminous and refreshing. One never knew before how vividly bright Ageratum could be, or Lavender or Nepeta ... The purple of the Clematises of the Jackmani class becomes piercingly brilliant, while the grey and glaucous foliage looks strangely cool and clear’ (Jekyll, 1925).

At Munstead Wood, Lutyens’s north court with its overhanging gallery was embroidered with *Clematis montana* and furnished with ferns and hostas, *Campanula pyramidalis* and lilies, all plants with pale, fresh green foliage and, if flowering plants, with cool white flowers (Fig 5). The effect was to create the atmosphere of a woodland clearing or a mossy cave, a soothing environment for Miss Jekyll’s painful eyesight. But such an effect would soon lose its impact and become the norm without suitable contrast. From a seat in the courtyard, one looked across the architect’s steps and water tanks to terra cotta planters filled with red geraniums, red penstemons, bronzy-leaved cannas, and other fiery colours (Jekyll and Weaver, 1920) (Fig. 6). The fire looked hotter and the cool cave even cooler by their juxtaposition.

Although Miss Jekyll used the full spectrum of colours in her planting schemes, there are two recurrent themes which occur at Munstead Wood and in many of the 250 gardens which she designed for other people (Bisgrove, 1992). In both the influence of Turner is very clear.

The Hardy Flower Border at Munstead Wood was the most elaborate example of her colour-graded borders, progressing from blue flowers and grey foliage at one end, through soft pinks and pale yellows to fiery red, scarlet, and orange, then receding once again to blue and grey (Fig. 7). This echoes the effect of Turner’s ‘Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, October 16, 1834’ in which the reds, oranges, scarlets, and flashes of white of the conflagration are intensified by contrast with the cold grey-blue of the night sky (Fig. 8). A similar colour association is found in his ‘Fighting Téméraire’ of 1838 (Herrmann, 1975).

The other recurrent theme was of pale blue, pale yellow, and white. This is already discernable in Turner’s ‘South view of Christchurch [Oxford]’ (1799), but is progressively more obvious in his ‘San Giorgio Maggiore from the Dogana [Venice]’ (1819) (Fig. 9) and his series of ‘Norham Castle, Sunrise’ (c.1840–1845), showing the ethereal, luminescent effect created by these pale colours
yellow, and white lupins and iris, edged with grey-leaved pinks and Cerastium tomentosum (Fig. 10). A coloured illustration of this garden was used on the dust jacket of Gardens for small country houses, written in conjunction with Lawrence Weaver, the architectural editor of Country Life and first published in 1912 (Jekyll and Weaver, 1920). No colour scheme could have been better calculated to create a sense of rejoicing at the resurrection of life in the garden after winter.

While the main emphasis of Colour schemes was, of course, on colour, this did not negate the importance of form and texture. In the last chapter of Colour schemes Miss Jekyll began, ‘If in the foregoing chapters I have dwelt rather insistently on matters of colour, it is not that I under-rate the equal importance of form and proportion, but that I think that the question of colour, as regards its careful use, is either more commonly neglected or has fewer exponents.’ It is significant that her book on Colour schemes was illustrated by 120 photographs, including several of her own, all but the frontispiece in black and white.

Creativity and creation

Balancing colours, forms, and textures through time and given the vagaries of the English weather was not an easy task. Gertrude Jekyll spent her life seeking perfection while knowing that perfection would never be achieved and she sought to encourage others to seek the satisfaction offered by planting design as an art. ‘Let no one be discouraged by the thought of how much there is to learn. Looking back upon nearly 30 years of gardening … I can remember no part of it that was not full of pleasure and encouragement. … Each new step becomes a little surer,
and each new grasp a little firmer, till, little by little, comes the power of intelligent combination, the nearest thing we can know to the mighty force of creation’ (Jekyll, 1899).

In this, she was echoing the thoughts of another of her formative influences, John Ruskin, who, in rather more abrupt and aggressive tones, declared, ‘Composition may best be defined as the help of everything in the picture by everything else … the other name of life, therefore, is help’ (Landow, 1993). With her interests in the science as well as the art of garden making, however, she refrained from repeating Ruskin’s subsequent strong inference that lack of help—in a painting or in society—or the pulling apart by the analytical scientist, was death.

References