



*Achillea 'Credo'*

Following Beth Chatto's death earlier in 2018, CATHERINE HORWOOD examines the life of someone whose approach to growing plants made her one of the most influential gardening figures of the last hundred years



Beth Chatto at home in her garden in Essex.

# Beth Chatto (1923–2018)

Just over 40 years ago, Beth Chatto, VMH, OBE, ten times Gold Medal winner at RHS Chelsea Flower Show, was almost disqualified from her first ever RHS show. A couple of the judges considered that some of her plants were weeds rather than 'proper' herbaceous perennials. The plants she was exhibiting, 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 frowned upon.

Beth (as everyone has always called her

with great affection) was bemused. She had merely gone into her garden and dug up what she wanted to show, hardly realising the revolution she was starting and the enduring influence she was to have on planting. With her death in May this year, Britain has lost one of its greatest horticultural heroes.

## Early years

Beth Chatto and her twin brother, Seley, were born in 1923 in a small village in Essex where her father, William Little, was



Beth Chatto's first RHS Chelsea Flower Show garden with a characteristic lack of highly bred cultivars.



Andrew and Beth Chatto in the early 1960s.

Beth Chatto Gardens

Beth Chatto Gardens

This was also the time that Beth and Andrew were introduced to Sir Cedric Morris, the artist and plantsman who lived not far away at Benton End in Suffolk. Surrounded by Morris's exceptional plant collection, Beth felt 'like a child in a sweet shop'. She later said that Morris became 'spiritual father' to her. She was introduced not only to plants she had never seen before but also friends of Morris and his partner, Arthur Lett-Haines, such as Elizabeth David and Constance Spry, who were to influence her life. However, she was distraught when Morris told her to achieve the sort of garden she longed for, she would have to move to somewhere with more suitable soil conditions. In 1960, the family did just that, going to Elmstead Market to a house built especially for them in the middle of Andrew's fruit farm.

### Unusual Plants nursery

Encouraged by Mrs Underwood, Beth was soon in demand as a demonstrator by flower clubs across East Anglia. They were captivated by the material she used in her arrangements. Wherever she went, she always took her own plant material, rejecting what was available in florists' ➤

the police constable. Both Beth's parents were keen gardeners and while her two brothers showed no interest, Beth was keen to learn and was soon given her own patch where she planted snowdrops.

The family moved to Elmstead Market in 1935, and in 1940 Beth began studying to be a teacher. She always managed to include some horticultural projects in her classes. At the outbreak of the Second World War she met her future husband, Andrew Chatto, a local fruit farmer and scion of the famous publishing firm. A shared passion for plants brought them together when Andrew helped Beth with her study of the native plants on the nearby Essex salt marshes. They married in 1943.

After the war, Beth settled into domestic life with two small daughters in Braiswick, a western suburb of Colchester

## 'With her death in May this year, Britain has lost one of its horticultural heroes'

in the Chatto family home, enjoying domestic pleasures such as flower arranging. She inherited a traditional formal garden from Andrew's parents which brought her little pleasure. Their immediate neighbour was a nursery-woman and keen flower arranger, Pamela Underwood. Later famous as 'the Silver Queen' for the grey-leaved plants she sold through her nursery, Ramparts, Underwood became a mentor to Beth, encouraging her to demonstrate to flower clubs across East Anglia.



Beth Chitto Gardens

*Narcissus* 'Cedric Morris'



Beth Chitto Gardens

*Aconitum carmichaelii* 'Arendsii'



Beth Chitto Gardens

*Kniphofia* 'Little Maid'

shops such as stiff and highly-coloured gladioli and chrysanthemums for alliums and alchemilla she had picked from her garden. After her demonstrations, the audience clamoured for her 'unusual plants' which gave her the idea to adopt it as the name for the new nursery when it opened in 1967.

In the early days of the nursery, many of the plants she raised for sale had been given to her by various horticultural friends but, in particular, Cedric Morris. He was a generous gardener, and also saw in Beth a great skill in propagation. After his death in 1982, Beth had many of his 'Benton irises' in the nursery. However only two were named, though she was later given three more named ones by artist and plantsman, John Morley. Two of Cedric's poppies have survived thanks to Beth's care. She kept detailed propagation notes and one entry in her diary in 1972 notes that she had made '29 plants of Cedric's Dirty Pink Poppy (*Papaver orientale* 'Cedric Morris') while *Papaver rhoeas* 'Cedric Morris' remains a highly desirable annual seed.

One of Beth's most treasured introductions from Cedric Morris was a small *Narcissus* he collected on one of his many winter trips to the Mediterranean. Under Beth's care, it increased in her gardens to the point that in the late 1980s, she was able to consider adding it to her sales list.

Beth always took great care over plant



Beth Chitto Gardens

*Gaura lindheimeri* 'Corrie's Gold'



Beth Chitto Gardens

*Pulmonaria rubra* 'David Ward'

identifications. Her close friend, Graham Stuart Thomas, thought it was a descendant of *Narcissus minor*. However, correspondence with Brian Matthew at Kew confirmed it was an eastern variant of *N. asturiensis*, called subsp. *jacetanus*. It is now sold as *Narcissus* 'Cedric Morris'. *Narcissus pallidiflorus* was also given to Beth by Morris. It is unusual in that the unopened buds face skywards like beaks.

*Ferula tingitana* 'Cedric Morris' was a form collected by him and given to Beth, creating a mound of glossy green, small-lobed leaves topped with large umbels of yellowy green flowers.

Many snowdrops arrived from Benton End, especially variants of *Galanthus elwesii*. One stood out as being distinct and worth naming. It became *G. elwesii* 'Cedric's Prolific', an apt name for this exceptional snowdrop which quickly



Beth Chitto Gardens

*Pulmonaria orientale* 'Cedric Morris'

makes large clumps, 'outstanding for effect'. Snowdrops were a particular passion for Beth who soon acquired a collection of rarities aided by the propagation skills of her nursery director, David Ward.

### Chelsea years

Many gardeners first came across Beth at the Chelsea Flower Show. Her stands won ten Gold Medals between 1976 and 1987 with only one year missed due to illness. The combination of the superb selection of species and species-like plants along with her method of displaying them grouped as they would look in dry or damp areas brought her instant fame. To Beth, this was the norm. When she had started the nursery, she always divided her plants into those suitable for different conditions both in her catalogues and on display. While this has now become the norm at shows, in the late 1970s, many plants were still being displayed in a line with their pots showing.

Chelsea propelled Beth into a different world where one day she was meeting royalty, the next being asked by Beate George Harrison to be his full-time gardener. She refused. An article in *The Sunday Times* by Graham Rose in 1976 brought in hundreds of plant orders and her first book, *The Dry Garden* (1978) soon followed. Its companion, *The Damp Garden* was published in 1982, and over the years several others, many of which



*Phlomis tuberosa* 'Amazone'



*Polygonatum x hybridum* 'Betberg'



*Papaver orientale* 'L'afeur'

remain in print, have become essential garden library items. Her books became classics as readers realised that she wrote with such passion that the plants leapt off the page.

As Beth's fame increased, she was in demand across the world. A natural communicator, she visited the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand on speaking engagements. Her travelling companion was often her close friend, Christopher Lloyd. Lloyd's garden at Great Dixter could not have been more different from Beth's at Elmstead Market. While they may not have shared the same tastes on many plants (bergenias in particular), their depth of plant knowledge cemented their friendship. Their epistolary book, *Dear Friend and Gardener* (1998), remains a favourite for many.

### More plant introductions

Beth was inspired by the research of her husband Andrew into original growing conditions across the world. This research remained unpublished during his lifetime but later became available through the nursery's website. Scornful of the development of 'hybrids', Beth always maintained that species and species-like plants should be the bedrock of every garden with leaf form and shape far more important than flower colour.

Beth applied her detailed knowledge to the plant descriptions in her *Handbook* which has recently been updated and re-

issued (2015). Thus the entry for *Aconitum carmichaelii* 'Arendsii' tells the reader not just the plant's origins – Kamchatka and Amuria – but also encourages the gardener to look closely at the plant. 'If you lift the top petal,' says the entry, 'you will find it is sheltering the stigma while the rest of the petals form the familiar innocent face of the buttercup surrounding the central boss.'

The nursery remains a major source for some of Britain's leading gardens of rare forms that are not available elsewhere. Many of these plants were discovered in the garden. One of the first successes was *Kniphofia* 'Little Maid'. Originally listed as 'Small Maid', by the time it was selected for trial by the RHS in 1975, it had become 'Little Maid'. Beth described it as having 'neat narrow foliage topped by slender stems closely set with narrow tubular



*Hylotelephium* 'Matrona'



Using a hosepipe to lay out the Gravel Garden.

Beth Chatto Gardens



The Gravel Garden hosts a wealth of plants pre-adapted to dry conditions and is never watered.

RHS/Neil Howarth

flowers extending more than halfway down the stem. Green in bud, the flowers open ivory-white. New flowers produced for weeks in autumn. More followed including 'Apricot Sensation', 'Burnt Orange', 'Flaming Torch', 'Green Jade', 'Orange Sorbet', 'Strawberries and Cream', and 'Toasted Corn' but none had the commercial success of 'Little Maid'.

Many finds resulted from the keen eyes of the skilled team working for Beth. It was one of her propagators, Debbie Allcock, who spotted two distinctive forms of *Gaura lindheimeri*. 'Jo Adela' had a two-tone green effect with paler edges surrounding each leaf while 'Corrie's Gold' produces pale, yellow-edged leaves below the showers of pinkish white flowers. Another garden find was *Pulmonaria rubra* 'David Ward'. This unusual form has long, pale green leaves with wide,

white margins and coral red flowers and was found by Beth's eponymous nursery director. He was also responsible for finding *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Rubie's Pink', a strong, bright pink form that was named for his granddaughter.

**Continental connections**

Beth was always generous in her acknowledgement of her plant sources – she brought back many fine examples particularly on visits to Holland and Germany. One such trip was to the nursery of Ernst Pagels in Leer, East Frisia. She visited it for the first time in 1987 with Romke van de Kaa, nurseryman and former head gardener at Great Dixter. It was, she said, 'a nursery after my own heart'. Some of the plants that she introduced from Pagels's nursery include *Achillea* 'Credo', *Aubrieta* 'Silberrand', *Papaver orientale* 'Laffueur', *Phlomis tuberosa* 'Amazone' and *Symphytum ibericum* 'Blaueglocken'. She was particularly struck by a number of forms of *Miscanthus* selected by Pagels, many of which she made available to British gardeners through her nursery. The admiration was mutual and Pagels later named a miscanthus for Beth because it was 'small and elegant'.

In the 1970s, she had been introduced

to Countess Helen von Stein-Zepplin by Alan Bloom of Bressingham, who, quite correctly, thought this would be a friendship made in plant heaven. She also maintained a friendship with Isbert Preussler, the Countess's head gardener who had previously worked for Karl Foerster in East Germany, hampered only by his lack of English and Beth's German. She was particularly fond of *Polygonatum* × *hybridum* 'Betberg', collected by Preussler and named after a site in the Black Forest.

Another contact she made during her visits to stay with the Countess at her home and nursery at Laufen, near Basel, was with Ewald Hugin, who was later to have his own nursery at Freiburg in Germany. During a visit, Beth spotted one of Hugin's seedling selections, *Hylotelephium* (then *Sedum*) 'Matrona', and was one of the first to make it available in the UK. Later, a sport appeared at Beth's garden on a clump of *H.* 'Matrona' which is now offered as *H.* 'Matrona' darker form.

**The gardens grow**

In 1987, Beth created her last Gold Medal-winning garden at RHS Chelsea Flower Show. But this was far from her swan song. The devastation of the Great Storm

**Selected books by Beth Chatto**

- The Dry Garden (1978)
- The Damp Garden (1982)
- Beth Chatto's Notebook (1988)
- Beth Chatto's Gravel Garden (2000) (now published as Drought-Resistant Planting)
- Beth Chatto's Woodland Garden (2002) (now published as The Shade Garden)
- Dear Friend and Gardener (with Christopher Lloyd) (1998)
- The Beth Chatto Handbook (2015)



RHS/Neil Howarth

The Water Garden takes advantage of a spring-fed ditch and was one of the first projects undertaken by Beth Chatto in her dry Essex garden.

of 1987 created the opportunity to develop a woodland garden. But for many, her greatest achievement was the Gravel Garden created on the compacted ground that had previously been the garden's public car park.

She was inspired by visits to New Zealand and, somewhat surprisingly, Ireland where she was taken to see the Burren, a rare example of a wild landscape formed of karst hills – large limestone boulders with Mediterranean and alpine plants growing incongruously together in the cracks. 'I hung over a little bridge looking at one of the few small rivers showing above the ground,' Beth later wrote in her diary. 'Suddenly it gave me an idea for the design of my gravel garden, so I made a little sketch to remind me of the gentle outlines with promontories here and there concealing little bays, and tiny islands of sedge with outlines of *Iris pseudacorus* – and odd large boulders – all this could be made with small groups or isolated plants like lavender or ballota for the boulders – grasses instead of sedge.' Beth rarely made plans on paper and used hosepipes to create the layout of the beds in her gardens.

The Gravel Garden, which has not been watered since its initial planting in spring

1992, has spawned thousands of imitations. Few will have benefitted from the expert layers of preparation Beth insisted upon. An avid note-taker and record-keeper, Beth often liked to remind visitors that Essex regularly has lower levels of rainfall than Egypt.

### A legendary legacy

Beth Chatto claimed she did not originate the phrase 'right plant, right place'. But it is for that ethos she will always be remembered. She was heaped with honours during her lifetime, including two honorary doctorates, the OBE, many Lifetime Achievement awards, the RHS Victoria Medal of Honour and the Lawrence Medal (for the best floral exhibit at an RHS Show) for her final exhibit at Chelsea in 1987. She remains the only person to have received both these honours in the same year.

Piet Oudolf, himself famous around the world for his planting schemes, sees Beth's impact as being truly international and crucial to the development of the so-called Dutch 'new perennial' movement.

### Acknowledgements

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At a tribute to Beth at the Garden Museum this summer, James Hitchmough, professor of horticultural ecology at Sheffield University and mastermind behind the naturalistic planting at London's Olympic Park, expressed his belief that Beth's garden was perhaps the most original British horticultural creation of the 20th century. It will, he feels, continue to have a profound effect on designers across the world in the 21st century.

The gardens continue to thrive, run now by Beth's granddaughter, Julia Bolton, and a loyal team many of whom have worked there for years. Beth's legacy continues not just through the Gardens but also through the Educational Trust set up in her name that runs a variety of courses on site. It was Beth's wish, ever the teacher, that young people should be able to learn about the joys of nature. But any gardener today owes so much to her for encouraging everyone to look more closely at plants and to consider the right way to grow them.

**Catherine Horwood** is an author and broadcaster whose biography of Beth Chatto will be published in 2019 by Pimpernel Press