

# Northern European Naturalistic Planting Design as a Prototype for New Zealand<sup>©</sup>

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## PLURALISM IN DESIGN

Modern culture (and particularly design) seems to be heavily concerned with reinventing almost everything. This has been evident in New Zealand gardens, where we have seen a major shift in recent years, especially from a state of heterogeneity towards a more homogeneous industry. There has been a reduction in the range of plants available, and the manner in which these plants are used. As a result, gardens in general within New Zealand are becoming culturally and botanically less diverse.

Rather than enter into further erudite discussion regarding the reasons behind this direction within horticulture, I will just state my position on it right now. I don't like it. In pursuing the simplicity, unity, and cohesion that modernism values highly, landscape designers are increasingly producing bland, over-simplified "products." Dynamism is under-valued. Detail is surrendered in deference to "clean lines" and surface. Beauty is expressed in relation to a limited range of abstract concepts, rather than felt on a basic visceral level.

Similar misgivings have led to re-examination of the domination of modernist thought in other disciplines most commonly expressed in Post-Modern theory. In his book *Intercultural Architecture*, the Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa, describes Post-Modern design as being multivalent; that is, it is derived from a variety of influences which reflect the complexity of our human and natural environments. He also presents the interesting proposition that a high level of dynamism can be achieved out of ambiguity, in which seemingly opposing characters can be expressed within the same thing (whether that thing is a person, building, garden, or otherwise). In the case of gardens, an example may be gardens which express the character of the native landscape, combined sensitively with the best aspects of our introduced horticultural traditions. The tension between nature and artifice can create a dynamic middle ground which is actually more relevant to the modified landscape within which we live.

In my design work, I am particularly influenced by the legacy of the Venetian architect, Carlo Scarpa. Scarpa was outstanding amongst modern architects in expressing pluralism within his work, particularly in his integration of modern design principles and tradition. At the same time as pursuing progressive design, he interpreted and translated local traditional forms and finishes within his work. Through integrating seemingly disparate influences, Scarpa created buildings and landscapes that link the local heritage with more recent aspects of the landscape, thereby bringing tradition forward and making it relevant to contemporary society. Integration, namely of traditional gardening and progressive design, is also the hallmark of naturalistic Northern European planting design.

## EVOLUTION OF PLANTING DESIGN IN NORTHERN EUROPE

At the turn of the 20th Century, gardens and landscapes were mainly divided into the categories of functional landscapes, formal gardens, and flower gardens. Generally speaking, nature was not an important guiding influence. Within this context, Karl Foerster started his work as a plant breeder and nurseryman. Foerster was the foremost pioneer of naturalistic planting design within northern Europe (Foerster, 1988).

Attached to his nursery (and surrounding his house), Foerster planted experimental gardens in which he developed improved selections of perennials (most importantly with *Delphinium* and *Phlox*), and worked on theories regarding planting design. Foerster's greatest contribution to modern planting design was his advocacy of the use of grasses and ferns alongside perennials, to emulate the effect of natural planting associations. His work has been further developed since his death by his daughter, the landscape architect Marianne Foerster, who still undertakes experimental work in the gardens attached to the Foerster family home.

A major advantage of the use of grasses within perennial gardens is an increased sense of depth, due to the fineness of texture they deliver and their comparatively amorphous form. Pseudo-ecological planting associations also provide a connection with outer landscapes (those beyond our built environments). Foerster did not just promote the outcome of his work through the outlet of the nursery. He wrote several books, including 'Einzug der Gräser und Farne in die Gärten' ('Introduction of Grasses and Ferns into Gardens').

German and Dutch designers and plants people who followed Foerster continued to develop experimentation in naturalistic planting design. The Dutch landscape architect, Mien Ruys, was exceptional in her ability to integrate the soft, naturalistic planting style advocated by Karl Foerster with more structured planting, and progressive design of the "hard" elements within her gardens (that is, the paving, walls, furniture). A figure that many will be familiar with is the Dutch designer, Piet Oudolf. Oudolf is one of the foremost figures within contemporary European landscape design. A particularly impressive aspect of his success is that he is a designer who has developed his style on the experience of having bred plants within his own nursery at Hummelo. He assembled plants from far afield to gather the base for his propagation and breeding work, including material from the German plantsman Ernst Pagels, who was a student of Karl Foerster. Pagels was an influential plantsman based in the region of Germany within which I was fortunate to work for a period, close to the border with the Netherlands.

Oudolf's public plantings are often composed of massed drifts of perennials and grasses, which blend into each other. However, within his own garden and in various private commissions, he arranges plantings in a more intimate fashion, with diverse ranges of plants put together in the manner of natural landscapes. Oudolf describes plant characteristics based on the overall effect of plants, rather than on conventional manners of describing plants, which tend to be far more direct. Plants are valued for such characteristics as their diaphanous nature, or the way in which they project from a planting, in addition to the usual perception of plants in terms of flower colour or foliage form. For such an approach, it is valuable to understand how plants grow within their natural habitats, and the aesthetic orders that develop through ecological relationships.

Critical assessment of the ecologies and growth forms of plants within their natural habitats (or situations that emulate natural environments) has been the subject of extensive research within German landscape design. Professor Richard Hansen and Friedrich Stahl made the ecological analysis of perennials the subject of their book, *Die Stauden und ihre Lebensbereiche (Perennials and their Habitats)*, based on experimentation at the University of Weihenstephan (Hansen and Stahl, 1997). The landscape architect, Rosemary Weisse, carried out interesting research in Munich's Westpark, based on a regime of neglect, in order to better understand the natural tolerances of plants and develop more sustainable paradigms for ornamental plantings. Public gardens such as this have played an important role in the development of naturalistic gardens within Germany. Two other major public gardens where progressive work has been undertaken for a long period are Hermanshof garden at Weinheim, and Hamburg's "Planten un Blomen."

It is interesting to note that the name of the latter is simply a dialectal translation of "Plants and Flowers" — an expression of intent that the park is primarily about plants and flowers, in combination with providing usable spaces for the people of Hamburg. Upon visits to "Planten un Blomen," I was struck by just how well used this park is. Aside from the innovative plantings, spaces are organised very well within the park. Various areas of different size and aspect allow for differing uses, such as the terrace which had a large number of in-situ chess tables, lawn expanses, or more intimate spaces in which movable garden furniture is placed (so that people can define their own use of the space and feel like they are in a garden of their own). Through experimentation in the design of gardens within public and private spaces, and extensive plant breeding, German and Dutch designers have developed the naturalistic style to be one of the most exciting informal design movements in the world, and one which is flexible in how it may be applied. Due to the sensitive nature of this garden style, it has interested me as inspiration for garden-making within New Zealand, where the basic elements of our natural landscapes and traditional gardening are relatively sensitive in character.

## **ADAPTATION OF THE NORTHERN EUROPE NATURALISTIC MODEL TO NEW ZEALAND**

Germany had its chief pioneer in Karl Foerster. Designers and plants people who followed him developed variations upon a garden style which is informed by (and respectful of) nature. New Zealand has been fortunate in being the scene of the pioneering work of Terry Hatch, who has applied similar effort to the evolution of garden style within New Zealand through the observation of native plants within their natural ecologies, exotic plants within their own habitats (as in his extensive studies on South African plants), and the performance of exotic plants within the pseudo-ecologies of our own gardens. I am interested in further developing the example set by Terry's work to lay down a really satisfying paradigm for New Zealand landscape design. This paradigm would combine an appreciation of the natural character of our indigenous landscapes with the seasonal interest/variation of selected exotic perennials, trees, and shrubs.

Time spent within natural landscapes in New Zealand and abroad provides a sound basis for understanding the rhythms and orders of plants within their natural habitats. For adapting an integrated garden style to New Zealand, one needs to consider the character of the region of New Zealand in which one is making a

garden. Within New Zealand, we do not have many natural grasslands, like the prairies or Caucasian grasslands that the work of many German or Dutch designers emulates. Even South Island grasslands have a shrubby component to them. Therefore, the composition of our gardens needs to reflect the nature of our own landscapes. Many native shrubs, such as *Melicytus obovatus*, *Sophora prostrata*, or *Olearia nummularifolia*, have a natural fineness and scale which is similar to many of the grasses favoured by northern European designers. These kinds of shrubs can actually improve the integrated garden by providing informal structure, the lack of which is a common problem with flower gardens. London-based landscape designer James Fraser has developed a style of garden which utilises both the northern European tradition and more substantial elements, such as his trademark usage of lancewoods and New Zealand trees and shrubs. Interestingly, James hadn't seen toothed lancewood (*Pseudopanax ferox*) in the wild until recently, but the ecology within the wild shows marked similarities with the compositions of James' designs, particularly in the depth established through various levels of vegetation.

A major difference between New Zealand and northern Europe is that a large number of our natural landscapes are still intact in a relatively original manner. Gardens within New Zealand can play an important role in awakening people to the nature of our wild landscapes, and to the existence of the wide range of plants that exist in the flora. Ironically, there is potentially more chance of advocating for rare and endangered species within a garden style that is not exclusively native. That is because there is less pressure on the plant to be exceptional. Contemporary gardens are full of "star" plants; plants that tick all the boxes when viewed in isolation. However, what is really important is how plants are viewed in association. That is what provides the profound beauty of natural landscapes; the unspectacular sedge at the base of an *As-telia* which has a strong form, or the quietly creeping *Nertera* and unassuming divaricate *Coprosma* which stand next to the remarkable *Dracophyllum*. Classical music composers utilise adagio, andante, and allegro in balance to produce profound works. Natural planting associations have equivalent rhythms to them, which we read when we view them. Many native species which are endangered in the wild do not have appeal as star plants, yet deserve to be known, not just for their conservation values, but for the quiet charm that they can lend to planting associations. The best example of a change in perception within recent times is the manner in which divaricate shrubs have risen from anonymity to becoming widely used.

One of the most difficult problems of native plant conservation concerns the restoration of herbs. Herbs usually have less robust systems than woody plants, and are often relatively short-lived. To add to their problems, they often prefer comparatively open habitats that weeds and humans prefer. Colin Meurk, of Landcare Research, Lincoln, has carried out a good deal of interesting work regarding conservation of the New Zealand herb flora, some of which concerns their inclusion within the human landscape. This is an interesting approach that acknowledges the central place of people within so much of the New Zealand landscape. Meurk goes as far as to suggest that even stone walls within cities can provide habitat for significant native species. Such perception is inspiring, as it looks to bridge the problem of relevance; presenting people with native plants in such seemingly artificial circumstances has a dynamic quality to it, in the vein of the philosophy of Kisho Kurokawa (Kurokawa, 1991). Acknowledgement of the legitimacy and inevitability of the modified landscape actually progresses us beyond simplistic arguments regarding the ideal nature of our landscapes.

An important point regarding the making of integrated gardens within New Zealand is that exotic flowers that are utilised within a style need to meet the criteria of having zero or negligible potential as a weed, and being ecologically appropriate. This involves striking a difficult balance between being able to survive under pseudo-natural terms, without the instinct to disperse further and affect significant natural landscapes. It is in providing a better understanding of this that Terry Hatch has taught me a lot. In looking for plants for this role, it makes sense to look towards regions with similar ecologies to ours. For this reason, South Africa (a special interest of Terry's), and more specifically the Cape region, is especially appropriate. Geophytes (bulbs, corms, and tubers) can handle emerging through or beneath a framework of native vegetation. Plants such as *Albuca nelsonii*, *Gladiolus* species, *Freesia* taxa, or *Haemanthus* make excellent additions to a native framework, as they present flowers whilst not dominating in form. A category of plants over which caution needs to be exercised is exotic climbers, as this plant type presents some of the worst culprits for environmental weeds. However, one category of climbers that I have a special interest in (particularly in association with divaricate shrubs) is the viticella type of *Clematis*, and its many selections. Their shades of white, red, pink, or purple can provide another dimension to native shrubs and trees. Seasonal flowers can also be introduced through the use of certain exotic trees or shrubs, such as species and cultivars of *Magnolia*, *Lagerstroemia*, or *Gordonia*. Such species do not need to be mixed into native tree plantings, but may be used as specimen counterpoints, within adjacent lawns, or above lower plantings. There are also exotic species, such as *Luma apiculata* (syn. *Myrtus luma*), *Acer griseum*, or various species of *Lagerstroemia* whose magnificent bark can provide contrast to native plantings.

There exists a huge range of plants that can be used in sensitive association with natives, but landscape designers need to develop work integrating significant exotic species, as lack of commercial interest is making many excellent garden subjects increasingly rare. We have a quandary with regards to exotic species, as conservation is also necessary with the magnificent range of garden plants that visionary nurserymen have introduced to New Zealand (many from travels to the wild in other countries). An integrated garden style is not just concerned with conservation of native plants and ecologies, but also with continuing the horticultural heritage that we are fortunate to be part of. In this way, it can form a middle ground between nature and culture, and provide us with a stimulating paradigm that values diversity within gardens.

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