

It was 50 years ago that Harold Hillier (later Sir Harold) and his wife Barbara planted a pair of mixed borders at the Hillier arboretum at Ampfield near Romsey in Hampshire. The borders were a celebration of the 100 years that had passed since his grandfather opened a flower shop in Winchester and began a horticultural dynasty that continues to this day (see *The Garden*, April, pp103–106).

The Hillier Garden's Centenary Border then comprised predominantly woody plants, heavy with roses and a backbone of evergreen shrubs. A year before, Harold had planted the Ten Acre Field through which the borders still pass. He included a wide range of choice trees, almost all as whips around 1m (39in) tall. Photographs from this time show the plants in the borders at little more than knee high, the trees around them not much taller. >>

Time for a *Double take*

As long as London's Tower Bridge, the Centenary Border at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens in Hampshire has undergone a dramatic metamorphosis, with planting detail as impressive as the overall impact

Author: Matthew Wilson, garden designer and broadcaster

The Centenary Border, photographed in August last year, is now in its third summer after replanting. The new design by Julia Fogg Associates incorporates some striking hard landscaping and wonderful plant combinations.

SHAUN MATTHEWS



Redesigned and replanted: the new Centenary Border

The elegance of the Centenary Border is easily appreciated from above. Paired beds are separated by a broad grass walkway, bounded with sleek, contrasting paving allowing visitor access year round. At the centre is an ellipse complete with benches, providing a contemplative space where the area may be easily admired. Planting comprises both woody and herbaceous plants (including a few shrubs retained from the earlier planting scheme), allowing dynamic and inventive planting combinations. The choice trees in Ten Acres East and West on either side provide a great backdrop, and the Centenary Border is easily explored due to the way the design encourages access to other parts of the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens.

In 1977 the gardens and arboretum was gifted to Hampshire County Council, which remains the sole trustee of what is now the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens Charitable Trust, and has responsibility for managing and developing the site. Soon after the gift was made, the gardens opened to the public for the first time. The grass between the double borders was widened to aid access and improve spatial layout, but development on the borders was otherwise piecemeal. By the time the Centenary Border was 45 years old, the trees in Ten Acres were established and much-admired specimens. But the knee-high shrubs in the borders were now huge, creating an oppressive, gloomy air to the now mostly shady borders which effectively acted as a barrier, trapping visitors and discouraging interaction with other parts of the garden.

Retain or start again?

With the weight of 45 years of history and dozens of mature plants at stake, the dilemma for Gardens Director Wolfgang Bopp and Head of Collections David Jewell (who in his previous role did much to revitalise

the Mixed Borders at RHS Garden Wisley) was whether to retain as much plant material as possible and opt for a hard prune and revamp, or rip it all out and start again. I recall a similar hard choice when replanning the Main Borders at RHS Garden Harlow Carr when I was Head of Site and Curator there. The Sir Harold Hillier Gardens team came to the same conclusion for their double borders as I had for the Main Borders: the only sensible thing to do was to start again.

Concepts were invited from a number of designers, with Julia Fogg Associates winning the tender. Julia and her colleague Anny Evason increased the width of the grass walkway and introduced contrasting hard landscaping in the form of granite setts and paving. These paths enable the borders to remain open

year round, when previously they were closed once the ground became wet. But they are also a crucial aesthetic component of the new design, forming angled cross paths that encourage visitors to venture through the borders. As David says, 'this is not a design that should be seen in isolation; it integrates effectively with the rest of the garden and its plant collections, which invites people to explore.'

Julia was also keen that visitors should experience the textures and fragrances of the plants in this way, an experience often denied by the design of many large 'institutional' plantings. Although still maturing, yews have been planted to eventually form a series of interludes or 'rooms' in the borders; they also add a backcloth for the plants. In places the yew penetrates forward in



Even as summer turns to autumn, the Centenary Border is full of interest.

broken blocks along the line of the angled paths. This hard landscaping also outlines the shape of the angled ellipse that forms a key focal point in the centre of the borders. A new pavilion has just been completed to the side of the ellipse, a welcome place to sit and admire the planting.

Starting the planting

The colour of the paving against the green of grass and foliage, as well as the intersection of angles and curves, gives the borders a contemporary flavour. One of the challenges for the designers was to meet the criteria that many plants should be new to the gardens to increase the overall plant collection; in fact Wolfgang estimates there are now 400–500 new taxa arising from the replanting, bringing the total in the gardens to 12,000 species and cultivars.

Implementing the new design involved removing much existing planting. Although soil in the borders had been improved regularly, it was thick with roots so it was improved with compost produced in the garden and Pro-Grow, municipal waste compost made from Hampshire green waste. Some specimens, however, were just too choice to lose, such as slow-growing *Xanthoceras sorbifolium* which stands adjacent to the ellipse; a native of China, this shrub produces abundant white flowers in late spring.

In total around 30,000 plants were planted in 2012 including 8,000 alliums. More than 20,000 winter/spring bulbs were added last autumn, including masses of *Narcissus* 'Hawera', 'Thalia' and 'Mount Hood' injecting spring interest. Indeed, David reports he intends to build upon this theme to extend seasonal interest in quieter periods of the year.

Walking the borders on a sunny late-summer day is a revelation for anyone who remembers what was there before. The sense of space, light and drama created by the combined hard landscaping and planting is irresistible. Angled paths frame different views into and out of the borders, altering the perception of the planting and the landscape beyond. One of the big achievements is the way in which trees in Ten Acres are bought into play, and how one moves from the open, sunlit borders to the dappled shade of the trees and

VISITING DETAILS

The Sir Harold Hillier Gardens, Jermyns Lane, Ampfield, Romsey, Hampshire SO51 0QA; 01794 369318; www.hilliergardens.org.uk
 ❖ Open year round, 10am–5pm (to 6pm, Apr–Oct). Closed Christmas and Boxing Day.

back again. The varied collection of mature trees acts as a backdrop to the borders, providing interest in the form of foliage, flowers, fruits, stems and autumn colours. Some, such as a magnificent flowering dogwood, *Cornus* 'Porlock', had been hidden from view for years and are now centres of attention.

The Centenary Border is indeed impressive – at 250m (820ft), the length of Tower Bridge in London – but it still manages to feel intimate. An optical illusion created by the topography of the site results in a noticeable curve, which has encouraged Wolfgang and David to indulge in a little horticultural showboating: visitors are told that the borders are so long, they can see the curvature of the Earth. Probably not, but this revitalised area is a remarkable achievement. ●



▲ From giants to compact selections

Tall *Eryngium pandanifolium* 'Physic Purple' and *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Grosse Fontäne' grass lend height to planting at the back of the border, while a host of front-line performers maintain colourful drama.

Key plants include:

- ❖ *Dahlia* 'Joe Swift': white flowers and dark foliage.
- ❖ *Sedum* 'Red Cauli': purple-red flowers and leaves.
- ❖ *Buddleja* 'Blue Chip': compact and ideal for borders.

◀ Extending the season of interest

Plants have been chosen that appear to draw summer well into September, including ornamental grasses, dahlias and red hot pokers that look superb until the first frosts.

Key plants include:

- ❖ *Dahlia* 'Butch'.
- ❖ *Kniphofia* 'Bressingham Comet'.
- ❖ *Deschampsia cespitosa* with clouds of golden seedheads fills the space below a fine *Acer griseum*, the tree a remnant of the border's earlier planting scheme.

