

LIVE GENTLY WITH THE LAND

By Mary Reynolds, winner of the garden award at Chelsea Flower Show, 2002
Wexford Naturalists' Field Club The Pump House, Wexford Wildfowl Reserve, North Slob, Wexford
2 July 2015

Mary Foley introduced the speaker as 2002 Chelsea winner who has also designed a garden at Kew; and worked with the BBC and RTE..

Mary described growing up on a farm in Co. Wexford; going to college and following a course in Landscape Design. She went on to design gardens for clients in styles of their choice.

Her approach was to ask what people want; think about what the land wants and then marry those. But much of it involved too much poison and artificiality. She soon "lost the why" for it wishing that clients would want wilder forms of garden. But nobody wanted weeds around their houses. Gardening since the industrial revolution has seen a swing from people growing their own food and really relating to the land, to a sort of gardening in which the land must just look pretty.

She started to design a garden for the Chelsea Flower Show in 2001 and asked for an application form. A posh-sounding man told her on the telephone that he had never heard of her; that she sounded very young and naïve and that he was not going to send a form. This really annoyed her and she persisted until a very nice secretary sent her the form, saying that it had to be returned by the next week. The garden was eventually built. Visitors' responses were split: Irish people said it was just like places in Ireland; while people from elsewhere sometimes cried, saying that they remembered places like it, but that all were gone. She won a gold medal.

One of her ideas for gardening is to allow the land to become what it wants to be. Most land wants to become a woodland—except perhaps for mountain tops, floodplains and savannahs. Woodland is the stablest and happiest condition for land to be in. Land seems never to stay the same way that she wants it to be. Cleared land is vulnerable, like a child. Gardening that tries to keep land in one state is like trying to stop a child from developing and telling it that it must look good if it is to be loved. There was a Roman emperor that tried to get a group of children raised with nobody speaking to them—to see what language they came to speak. They soon died. So often now, people want to be and look and wear the same things. All the Chelsea gardens seem the same with a bit of a straight path; then a squiggly path and then a "yoke".

Clays need special care if they are not to crack when dry or puddle when wet. Soil needs to be cooler than the rain if it is to absorb moisture well. Swales can be important in catching and channelling water to reboot the local ecosystem water table. Land wants to be an ecosystem that offers services. Bare soil seems to try to heal itself over with weeds as scabs grow on damaged skin.

She has been inspired by Robert Hart's Forest Gardening with its seven layers. The seven are: a 'canopy' layer consisting of the original mature fruit trees; a 'low-tree' layer of smaller nut and fruit trees on dwarfing root stocks; a 'shrub layer' of fruit bushes such as currants and berries; an 'herbaceous layer' of perennial vegetables and herbs; a 'ground cover' layer of edible plants that spread horizontally a 'rhizosphere' or 'underground' dimension of plants grown for their roots and tubers; a vertical 'layer' of vines and climbers.

The spacing between trees in a forest garden is the average of the projected canopy of two trees that you are placing side by side. So the projected canopies are spaced apart with the average of the two radius's also left between the projected edges. Trees do best when mulched and the chop and drop system of pruning and weeding works well.

Hugelkultur is a system of raised beds up to six feet high with cores of logs (conifer and broadleaf but no allopathic Walnut timber and no treated timber) along with sticks and twigs soil. Then there is a covering of soil on the wood piles a few inches thick and pinned and supported with (preferably organic straw and hazel twigs). They take over a year to produce much—in the 1st year they seem just to absorb water. Later as the wood rots it produces slow-release fertility and the system lasts for perhaps 25 years.

Other inspirations include Masanobu Fukuoka's book "One Straw Revolution". She uses "seed bombs" of seeds and clay, hoping that enough edible plants will grow where it suits them.

It is important to be careful with invasive plants. A garden needs native plants to support pollinators and other species for biodiversity.

But her own garden is not all woodland and Hugelkultur, because her kids need a place for football. It is a rented property and there are limits to what she can do.

Glyphosate is a most dangerous and overused chemical; it's even being used in the car park here at the reserve. We are told that it works just by blocking one enzyme that exists only in plants; that it is non-persistent and is absolutely non-toxic to animals. But concern is growing over its likely damage to our all-important gut flora. Many crops are sprayed with it to allow even ripening and easy harvesting. There are residues of it in wheat, oats, potatoes, etc. and we need to be concerned about this.

Until the industrial revolution, all art had patterns from nature. Circles and spirals were important. Plants like daisies grow in spirals. She can't look at modern post industrial revolution art as it expresses disharmony..

Throughout the talk Mary asked people to ask questions and among these were:

Aren't "Desire lines" paths worn by people across fardens and parks, usually straight, rather than curved or spiral? Only across lawns—not in places like woods, with trees and shrubs.

How does one merge all this sort of thing with a normal garden or a veg garden? Her horrified response was to deny saying anything like this and to question what "normal gardens" are.

How do we feed the world with all this? A United Nations report has said that the only solution to feeding the world in the long term is local, smaller scale production with less commercial greed. It is necessary to degrow and simplify. See:

http://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/ditcted2012d3_en.pdf

How will she ever win Chelsea with such long-term ideas? She has no more interest in Chelsea, the world needs longer term thinking and a more sustainable relationship with land.

Can we come and see your garden? There is little to see at present as it is a rented property and this imposes limits.

Her forthcoming book is: *Garden Awakening: designs to nurture ourselves and our land.* (Her favoured title was "Wild Way")

Further Reading mentioned during the talk.

Fukuoka, Masanobu [1975] — translated into English in 1978 as *The One-Straw Revolution* — Shizen Noho Wara Ippon no Kakumei

Hart, Robert. *Forest Gardening* (Paperback) Published by GREEN BOOKS, United Kingdom (1996)
ISBN 10: 1900322021 / ISBN 13: 9781900322027