

COLOR

Part 1: A Few Fundamentals

Honey Sharp

“Colour is one of the principal contributors to a flower’s status as a key, companion, massed or backdrop plant; hence colour’s potential role in a garden composition.”
Penelope Hobhouse, “Flower Gardens”

“One of the most important points in the arrangement of a garden is the placing of the flowers with regard to their colour-effect, and it is one that has been greatly neglected. ... Should it not be remembered that in setting a garden we are painting a picture, only it is a picture of hundreds of feet instead of so many inches, painted with living flowers and seen by open sunlight, so that to paint it rightly is a debt that we owe to the beauty of the flowers and light of the sun.” Gertrude Jekyll, “The “Garden” 1882

Gertrude Jekyll, the 19th, early 20th century grande dame of English gardens, is revered as a pioneer in landscape design. In particular, she intimately knew, researched and developed the art—and science—of color in the garden. Approaching it from an empirical point of view based on principles of the color spectrum wheel, she developed “Rules” which she used in a systematic way to create harmonious and dynamic color combinations in her gardens.

Inspired by the painter JMW Turner and by the Impressionists, Jekyll was a prolific painter, writer and garden designer. Throughout her career, she believed nature provides its own canvas. Like artists, gardeners also work with palettes. Parallels can also be found with music. “Placing colors together in a garden is very similar to composing music. The note ‘C’ has a unique sound ... but when you use it in context with a slew of different notes, it often takes on an entirely different tone and sometimes it becomes difficult to even recognize that it is a ‘C,’” says Ketzal Levine, a National Public Radio regular.

Taking this a step further, Sir Isaac Newton, who first split white sunlight into red, orange, yellow, green, cyan, and blue beams, and the inventor of the color wheel, associated each color with a note of a musical scale.

Recently, for the Berkshire Botanical Garden’s annual Winter Lecture, another British expert, Timothy Walker, the Horti Praefectus or Director at the University of Oxford Botanic Garden, spoke about the power and magic of color. Established in 1621, the Oxford Botanic Garden is the oldest in the United Kingdom and the third oldest scientific garden in the world with close to 7000 plant species. In his talk: “Color your Garden, Color your Life, Nurture your Soul”, he shared not only practical tips for enhancing our gardens but also

theories for better understanding and appreciating this fundamental element of the visual world we live in.

For example, in an experiment with the audience where he displayed a slide in a split second and then asked us the color of the wheel barrows, most had no doubt that they were yellow, thereby illustrating how yellow, the strongest on the color wheel, is not hard to miss. Indeed, it may be the first one we perceive. (Glad to be driving a bright yellow VW Beetle!) In addition, “women are more aware and sensitive to color. While men only use the right side of their brain for color, women can rely on both.” An even greater disadvantage that men possess is a far higher incidence of color blindness due to genetic differences, call them limitations...

As both Gertrude Jekyll and Timothy Walker, among others, emphasize, in aspiring to become good garden designers — or painters, or decorators, for that matter, we can only benefit by learning certain fundamental laws inherent to color. First of all, three distinct, primary and opposite components to the wheel exist: yellow, blue, and red. Twentieth century painters from Piet Mondrian to Jasper Johns to Frank Stella explored and celebrated these primary colors and their effect on one another.

Nature is more complex however. And although, it rarely, if ever, seems to get it wrong, when it comes to our own gardens, well ... The key to dealing with the broad spectrum of colors involved is based on how to combine, mix, contrast, offset and play with the vast possibilities provided by the rich hues offered by foliage, stems and flowers. With time and practice, we develop a *vocabulary of color*. Best of all, we make it our very own. When lucky, this vocabulary expresses our own personality.

Ironically, often the most natural, “spontaneous” looking gardens are those that have been carefully designed. Although most of us, including myself, approach this on an intuitive level (with many hits and misses), “plants always need to be placed with careful thought and deliberation,” according to Walker. Or as Jekyll simply put in her analogy of paintings and gardens, colors “should not be dropped in lifeless dabs ... on the palette.”

The role of light is also paramount. Like ever-changing gardens, colors are ephemeral. They depend on the time of day. However, unlike a completed work of art, a garden not only changes day by day but moment by moment. This fundamental constant — and one which makes gardening all the more exciting — might be compared to the philosophical premise that one can never stand in the same river twice.

As artists and in particular, photographers, well know, color is all about light. To demonstrate this, Walker projected a succession of images from the same angle in his own garden on an hourly basis. By viewing a few images from dawn until dusk, we witnessed the extraordinary transformation a garden

undergoes in just the span of a day. The morning garden, touched by dew, was soft and mellow: pastel phlox and peonies were at their best; by noon, they had taken the back seat and shades of the warmer colored daylilies grew barely distinguishable; by the late afternoon, as the sunlight streamed from the west through a mass of pink poppies and billowy grasses, the effect was ... well, magical.

Given the wealth of color combinations, compounded by the dynamic effects of light, designing a garden that “works” would appear to be a tour de force. In order not to grow daft or simply give up, flexibility and acceptance are *de rigueur*. Besides, a garden is never perfect. Just like a particular vista point ultimately presents a garden at its best (and not always the one we might choose), specific times of day also reveal a garden at its peak. As Christopher Lloyd, another preeminent English garden designer, once said: “Gardening is the most impermanent of the arts.”