



BERKSHIRE BOTANICAL GARDEN

2020 WINTER LECTURE

Presenting Tom Coward, Head Gardner, Gravetye Manor

“The Legacy of Wild Gardener William Robinson”

February 22, Duffin Theatre, Lenox Memorial Middle/High School

In a recent interview with BBG Communications and Marketing Director Robin Parow, Tom Coward reflects on his work at Gravetye, the legacy of William Robinson, and the inspiration behind the legendary gardens.

How has William Robinson's gardening style shaped your own approach to gardening?

As part of managing a heritage garden, understanding the concepts and principals of its creator is essential. As well as trying to understand Robinsons vision for his garden it is also important to try and get an insight into his personality and this aspect of research has been particularly fun. He was quite a strong character and sometimes I confess I have the feeling of his critical eye watching, although we must never let this sense of history hold us back.

The work Robinson initiated in the late 1880's has evolved so much and influenced so much of our gardening today, all over the world. Some of the modern wild gardens that are being developed today and are so exiting, particularly in the USA. It is important for us to try and keep Robinsons wild garden abreast with this development and so we are always trying to keep the garden moving forward. Robinson would have never wanted his garden to become a mausoleum to a moment in time and so we feel that the best way to care for our heritage is to keep in developing.

What about the Gravetye gardens inspire you most?

The history is, of course, very special and the surrounding landscape and wildlife are always an important element. But probably the biggest inspiration is the interaction between the garden and the guest. I feel there is a subtle difference between viewing a garden and using a garden. Because most people are using the garden as part of their experience of a stay or a meal there seems to be an intimacy between the guest and the garden which is quite unique. When this works well it truly inspires what we do.

What elements of Gravetye could a backyard gardener bring to their own landscape?

William Robinson was very keen of finding the best plants to thrive in the conditions available. Once plants are allowed to naturalise happily, most of the work is controlling them rather than nurturing them and this is an important principal which can be applied in any garden.

Contrast between the wild and the formal is also an effective element which can be used in the back yard. It is a fine line between a beautiful wild garden and a mess, particularly on a smaller scale. Because of this, architectural elements can become very important in the wild garden.

But probably the most important element for any garden is to concentrate on what you enjoy and have fun with it!

If you had to name three favorite, reliable plants or trees (that would also be amenable to zone 5b or are annuals) what would they be?

Erigeron karvinskianus, as an annual to spread through walls and paving.... Need a June cut back in your climate.

Camassia leichtlinii, which is so wonderful naturalised in meadows, especially under blossom trees such as *Malus hupehensis*.

Leucojum 'Gravetye Giant', such a lovely plant which Robinson selected here on our estate.

Through your work, you are quite an expert on William Robinson. Can you describe your impressions of him that you've learned through your work at Gravetye?

William Robinson was a most incredible man who battled adversity to leave the legacy we have today. He was born in Ireland during one of the worst times in the potato famines, where he learnt his trade as a gardener before leaving to find work in London in the 1860's. He started working at the new Regents Park Botanic garden and it was here that he started his writing career. He must have been a very charismatic young man and he soon developed friendships with many of the leading gardeners and botanists of the day. He never forgot his humble roots and was very concerned with the social improvement of the country and the plight of the post-industrial revolution poor. He was particularly passionate about how access to plants gardens and green space can help solve some of the challenges faced by urban poverty. In his own words all of his work was based around improving the world around him "aesthetically, practically and socially". When he died he was not only the most famous gardener in England, but one of the most famous people in the country, and that is testimony to his charm and hard work. There is another side to this coin as he did love to pick a fight with his contemporaries and could be quite cantankerous, but after studying him for some time I prefer to concentrate on the softer side of his character.

