

Horticulture Explained: Interpretation of horticultural practice in UK public gardens

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I graduated from the Kew Diploma in Botanical Horticulture in 2018 and for my main research project and dissertation topic I chose to investigate the use of interpretation in public gardens in the U.K. My research focus was on interpretation of horticultural practice specifically, looking at what's being carried out currently and possible developments in this field. Interpretation has been an area of interest for me for a number of years, possibly thanks to my arts background and work in botanic gardens.

From my research, the varied responses about interpretation suggested that there is a mixed understanding of discipline in horticulture. Also, horticultural practice

seems to be a subject that is not well-covered by interpretation in public gardens, but there is a case for doing some 'interpreting' that could benefit our gardens and industry in a number of ways.

The RHS conducted a report in 2014 called 'Horticulture Matters' which assessed the perception of horticulture as an industry and its current skills crisis. The report raised concerns that younger generations undervalue horticulture as a field worth considering for career pathways. A survey conducted for the report revealed that 70% of under-25-year-olds view horticultural careers as unskilled. My point of view is that by explaining more about what we do in gardens, through interpretation, our audiences (included young people) may gain a greater understanding of horticulture and its value as a professional line of work.

Origins of interpretation

Let us briefly look to the origins of the discipline of interpretation which started within the National Parks Service in the U.S.A with Freeman Tilden. Tilden developed six guiding principles of interpretation in his book 'Interpreting our

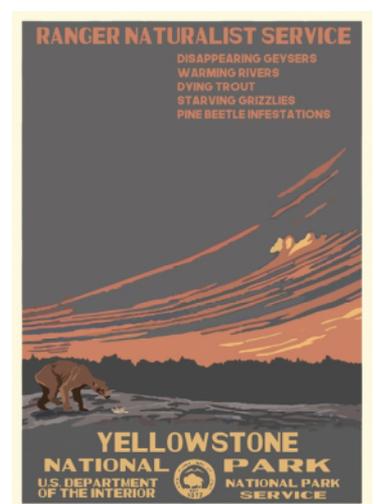


Figure 1: Yellowstone National Park Poster, Hannah Rothstein.

heritage' published in 1957¹ (see end of article for the principles) which continues to resonate for interpretation developers today. The core message of the principles can be extrapolated from the following quote:

*The chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but **provocation**.*

Making the choice to provoke ideas and thoughts rather than simply giving information is the defining purpose of interpretation.

It is important to note that interpretation takes many forms. Common interpretative activities include guided tours, talks, signs, guidebooks, leaflets, exhibits and information centres. Off-site examples include internet-based interpretation in the form of social media, websites and blogs. When deciding which methods to use, the visitor experience should be the influencing factor behind the design of interpretative media.

Most gardens have a variety of educational themes, examples include; conservation, history, plant science or sustainability. Horticultural practice is a relatable and meaningful subject that can fit comfortably into most themes. Telling horticultural stories can provide a 'spark' to connect people to the core messages of a garden.

Looking to the principles of best practice described by Tilden, horticultural practices should be interpreted by relating to visitors on a personal level. Interpreters must relate the subject to the lives of the people in their audience.

This should be taken on board when developing messages and narratives on the subject of horticulture as often communication on this subject is prohibitive in nature (see Figure 2) rather than attempting to engage with visitors, make connections with their experience and bring out stories.



Figure 2: Sign at Royal Botanic Gardens Kew.

The research

I have studied the interpretation methods of a number of gardens, in Europe and the U.S. I found gardens interpret their horticulture to varying degrees. However, for my research I focussed on the National Trust's Sissinghurst Castle Garden and Cambridge University Botanic Garden. Both gardens produce fantastic forms of interpretation with different approaches. Sissinghurst strives to tell the

domestic story of Vita and Harold's vision and development of the garden, whereas Cambridge University Botanic Garden attempts to engage visitors with messages about plant conservation, global food security and taxonomy, among other things.

I carried out a series of interviews and surveys, targeting staff in the two gardens of study, and public garden staff in the U.K indiscriminately (for the latter, PlantNetwork members made up the majority of contributors). This was to discover what interpretation on the subject of horticultural practice was taking place at the time and the professional perception of its implementation.

Additionally, visitors from both gardens were surveyed on a small scale to gauge interest in learning about horticulture during their visits.

Signage

Signs can be read at any time by anyone through passive engagement which makes them a useful interpretative device. Positioning of signage is an important consideration to communicate messages successfully and to be read, signage must be relatively prominent. Throughout this investigation, interviewees expressed that there should be careful use of signage in a garden setting demonstrating a general awareness of these considerations.

A less imposing format, popular within garden settings, is that of chalkboards or slates with messages written in chalk or paint-marker. Sissinghurst Castle Garden had a small series of blackboards situated in the garden, of which the garden team keep to a minimum to explain what they do. The weekly update on the 'Head Gardener's Notes' board (see figure 3), features just as you enter the garden. This positioning works well as it tells you just enough to whet your horticultural appetite before embarking on the garden experience. Also, it frames the work in a positive way and the tone of writing is personable and direct, following interpretative principles. Furthermore, it subtly guides the visitor to non-disrupted areas of seasonal interest.



Figure 3: Head Gardener's Notes board at the entrance of Sissinghurst Castle Garden

The journalist Harry Mount gave a passionate rallying call against the use of interpretative signage in National Trust sites in his lecture for University of Buckingham in 2017². Often he simply refers to 'interpretation' when he means signage specifically which shows a misunderstanding of the wider practice, but his message was clear. This is why properties such as Sissinghurst refrain

from over-communicating via signage to avoid disturbance of their 'spirit of place'.

At Sissinghurst they have decided to do further interpretation in a building at the entrance to expand the interpretative offer for visitors outside the garden.



Figure 4: Visitors reading an interpretation board at Sissinghurst Castle Garden

At Cambridge University Botanic Garden the interpretation available is well-developed and varied. Whereas Sissinghurst uses a consistent style of interpretative signage, the boards at Cambridge University Botanic Garden have different qualities, depending on the information that is being delivered. On the subject of horticulture, the signage is often printed and laminated by the horticultural team rather than produced by a signage production company. It is also more instructional as opposed to interpretative. This is a different story when you consider the well-produced hand-held boards situated in the Dry Meadow at Cory Lodge (Figure 5). The information provided takes a scientific approach (the meadow is James Hitchmough designed following his principles) but it describes the method of planting the meadow and the reasons behind the species choices (i.e. local climate).



Figure 5: Section of a hand-held board in the Dry Meadow at Cory Lodge at Cambridge University Botanic Garden

Guided tours and informal conversation

Direct communication, such as verbal interaction, provides other methods with which to interpret messages and stories. I found that guided tours are most typically used for explaining horticultural practices in gardens. However, guided tours can be time consuming activities, requiring good preparation. This is an important consideration when there are time restraints on staff in public gardens. It is of great importance that guides are equipped with appropriate knowledge of plants and horticulture and express passion for the subject which will aid the success of the interpretation.

Guided tours on the subject of horticulture by horticulturists would appear to be a natural fit but not all staff are experts in interpretative

communication. The trained guide or live interpreter may better connect to their audience and get messages across in a clearer, more engaging manner. Therefore, it is key that the guide and horticulturist share knowledge to ensure accurate information is given.



Figure 6: Horticulturist giving a tour of the Bamboo Garden at Royal Botanic Gardens Kew

The message of a garden should be presented by people with different perspectives and backgrounds to ensure that communication pathways stay relevant to audiences with varied interests and reasons for visiting.

One interpretative method that is often over-looked, is informal conversation between horticulturist and visitor. Joanne Connell noted in her 2005 paper on Britain's garden visitation that speaking with a professional gardener could be a poignant, special event for a visitor³. Perhaps it's the casual quality of this discourse that could be appealing, and the fact that the gardener is not a salesperson. It is a spontaneous, unique experience with a professional at work. A study of public garden interpretation in the U.S found that many horticulturists

were encouraged to interact with visitors by management, but only a small proportion had been given training in personal communication for interpretative purposes⁴.

Are visitors interested?

Although my sample size for visitor surveys was very small, some gardens (or organisations) have carried out large surveys to define their audiences and review their services. The National Trust visitor surveys reveal that 80% of their visitors primarily visit their gardens to 'appreciate the beauty'.

Visitor data obtained through my research showed that visitors to Cambridge University BG expressed a slightly greater interest in learning about horticultural practice than Sissinghurst ones which could indicate different educational expectations of botanic and horticultural garden visitors. Anecdotal information from staff at both gardens also provides evidence that there is a perceptible level of interest in horticulture by visitors.

Visitor management

Visitor management is a topic that people who are involved with the day-to-day running of a garden consider constantly. Can interpretation play a part? Possibly, but more research needs to be carried

out to determine how much of an impact it can have. Carolin Göhler, NT Gardens & Parks Consultant for London and South East Region from 2016 to 2021, expressed the opinion that positively phrased horticultural interpretation could be used before and whilst works are undertaken to explain (potentially disruptive) garden renovation activities to prevent adverse comments from visitors. As an example, she raised the issue of visible plant damage by diseases such as *Phytophthora* species, citing the use of interpretation to explain biology, damage and subsequent remedial works and plantings. Interpretation could be a successful vehicle to explain unpleasant sights within a garden setting, turning a negative occurrence into an opportunity to share information and create a positive learning experience for visitors. By shedding some light on the reasons behind a less than perfect scene, interpretation of this sort could be well received.

The future

It's important to continually evaluate interpretation to decide whether it's still relevant and engaging. There are many options to consider when embarking on updating and potentially improving our interpretation of horticultural practice in gardens.

For a subject such as horticultural practice, with temporary, ephemeral

activities, smart phone applications could provide platforms for sharing information on demand and reduce the need for interpretative signage in a garden, reducing visual intrusions, which is an important consideration in an outdoor environment. Although this would put the burden of discovery on the visitor as only people signed up to the phone application would receive the information. Interestingly, I found that very few public gardens provide interpretation of horticulture through mobile phone applications at the moment, although some public garden staff think that this method could be an effective means of communication. A great example is currently in place at Chicago Botanic Garden (U.S.A), where they have a smart phone app with locations identified on an interactive map depending on where you are in the garden, providing information about the plants and their cultivation (Figure 7 below).

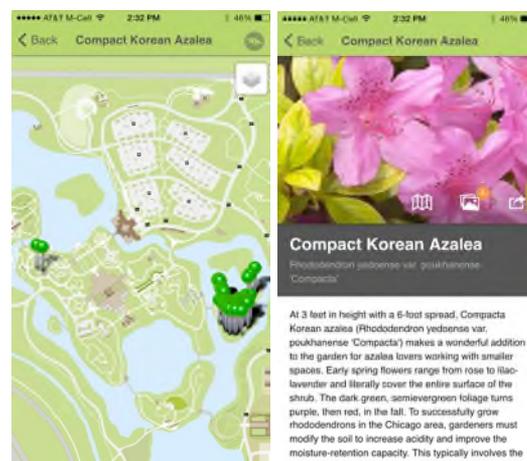


Figure 7: Images of GardenGuide app. Copyright Chicago Botanic Garden.

The team behind the gardening app Candide are implementing augmented

reality in public and private gardens by providing plant labels which are viewable through a device when the camera is scanning a border or landscape. This exciting new technology could be harnessed for interpretative communication in the future.

Many people feel that greater involvement of horticulturists in creating the interpretation of their practice could be beneficial. I believe this also, however interpretation is often best developed and designed in consultation with interpretation specialists. Head of Interpretation at Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, Sharon Willoughby said in a recent article⁵:

*The best interpretation that I have seen in recent years has been where **interpreters, horticulturalists and landscape architects** have worked together to tell stories. they have used the principles of place making to create spaces and collections that work together to enable a visitor to extract meaning from their experience of the garden.*

Horticultural practice is a subject worth interpreting in public gardens. Public gardens could take opportunities to use the subject of horticultural practice to grab the attention of audiences to entertain, delight and surprise. Instead of saying 'Keep out- work in progress' we could explain what we are doing, and in

turn show our visitors how important the role of horticulture is in our gardens. Telling the horticultural stories of a garden might cause that 'spark' which ignites interest and perhaps a deeper bond to a place.

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If you would like to read the full dissertation, please request the PDF by emailing the author:
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TILDENS SIX PRINCIPLES

1. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
2. Information, as such, is not Interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However all interpretation includes information.
3. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
4. The chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
5. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part,

and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.

6. Interpretation addressed to children (say up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program.

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