The Eden Project

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Abstract

Most people in the developed world know, and care little about horticulture. It is hard to see how issues like food security can be tackled without fostering a greater level of respect for growing, and a more literate constituency that supports a political and economic system that safeguards the plants, places, people and practices without which we could not exist. Unless we have that understanding, our infrastructure and investment in horticulture, as well as research and education in one of the most fundamental sciences of all, will continue to be dismantled. The Eden Project presents horticulture to the public through a rich narrative, rooted in history, exploring the timeless and essential nature of growing and our dependence on plants and, by extension the natural world. Funded as part of the UK Millennium celebrations, since opening in March 2001 the project has had over 12 million visitors contribute more than £1 billion into the local economy. The gardens and interpreted displays are designed to bring people face-to-face with an enhanced awareness of the need to work with the grain of nature.

The philosophy behind the development of the Eden Project was simple. The restoration of the 18th Century Lost Gardens of Heligan, near Mevagissey in Cornwall, which opened to the public in 1992 and became the most visited private gardens in Britain, demonstrated that there was a hunger in the public to have horticulture presented to them in a new way, one rich in narrative, rooted in history, but hinting at the timeless and essential nature of growing and our dependence on plants and, by extension the natural world.

VISION

Our vision was to take the most derelict place we could find, with the maximum potential for theatre. We envisaged a “lost world in the crater of a volcano”, actually a disused clay mine transformed by the creation of 85,000 tons of “man made” soil, the assemblage of possibly the greatest variety of economically useful plants ever gathered together in one place under roofs of glittering and iconic architecture, designed to reflect a distinctive culture—“Picasso meets the Aztecs”. We set out our stall. Our fundraising, £145m came out of a base of nothing in the poorest county in Britain and is an epic story in itself as was the radical approach to creating a design team where the constructor and design team became proxy clients and built it on time and on budget, winning dozens of awards along the way. Since opening in March 2001 we have had 12 million visitors and Eden has contributed more than £1 billion into the local economy. We have over 400 permanent staff and an unusual way of managing ourselves. We are a Social Enterprise and have pioneered a wide range of sustainable operational protocols copied elsewhere.

Eden’s approach to procurement, marketing and social engagement are rooted in the personal and we use our status as one of the most powerful brands in the UK to champion projects outside our destination. All our projects have sustainability at heart and range from projects with the homeless and ex-offenders, to horticultural projects for the socially-excluded. We put on major rock concerts, including Live 8, “Africa Calling” and we...
launched Europe’s first environmentally focussed car show; “The Sexy Green Car Show”, “The Big Lunch”—a national campaign to get people out into the street meeting their neighbours and eating together which has turned into an annual event; twinning with the Maldives to be their partner in becoming the world’s first carbon-neutral nation and have also become partners in a proposed “Eco Town” for 5,000 houses and facilities around St Austell in Cornwall, a £1 billion development over 10 years.

Eden is about attitude, partnerships and creating teams of people from a wide range of disciplines that believe change is possible through example and that “Big” is not a dirty word but a description of the problems we need to overcome and the thinking necessary to do so.

At its foundation are the gardens and interpreted displays that juxtapose wild nature and ordered land use. They are designed to bring people face-to-face with an enhanced awareness of their dependencies on the natural world, and the need to work with the grain of nature. Our remit is educational—to grow people’s understanding of the world they live in and their relations to it—but our challenge is to use that understanding as platform for ambitious change.

We have no idea how old horticulture is as a human activity. The first settled agriculture is generally dated at around 10,000 years ago, but humans are roughly twenty times older than that and we were doubtless interacting with plants long before settlement. Who knows when the first moment came when perhaps a strangling vine was pulled away from a valuable fruit bush? It could have happened as the first dawning of objective thought and empathy awoke in our brains.

The transition to settled farming would also not have been a simple “event” where suddenly a whole raft of new technologies came into play. The first farmers would have been building on generations of gradually developing insights, techniques and skills to favour those plants most useful to us. For almost the whole of our history we would have been deeply conscious of the contribution that plants made to our survival and well-being, and harvest and some form of thanksgiving would have been woven into our lives for millennia.

Even as fossil fuels and industrialisation began to remove the need for people to work the land, most people would have maintained a basic literacy about the key plant derived foods and raw materials that sustained them. But the most recent generations have lost even this basic understanding.

**ENGAGEMENT**

Skills (and interest) in horticulture live on now in two domains that are at best loosely connected and becoming more divergent. On one hand horticulture exists as a common body of knowledge and practice, an understanding and a set of skills open to all derived from our common heritage of interest in, and dependence on, being able to grow. It is sustained by an almost folklore based tradition of knowledge shared from person to person or through popular books. To a large extent a gardener from a contemporary allotment would be able to share ideas and principles more successfully with a Victorian head gardener than with the manager of a modern greenhouse salad production unit. They understand “growing”, but have almost no understanding of the realities of the system that delivers our food.

On the other hand there is an ever evolving body of highly advanced knowledge-based professional practice, informed by scientific advances and technological innovation. Much of this knowledge doesn’t pass into popular understanding, in fact it has little reason to since it increasingly relies on technology to replace the work of skilled horticulturists. Occasionally there are even flash points of conflict between different worlds, such as regarding the value and potential threats of biotechnology.

Within this world, professional horticulturists find themselves drinking deep from the various poisoned chalices that come with free market capitalism ranging from privatisation of
public goods (from patenting of life forms to corporate ownership of knowledge), concentration of opportunity towards those with deep pockets, weakening of government interest in strategic intervention such as planning for food security, a lack of allegiance to any specific places or communities of production, and even a dwindling in the need for horticulturists. In short we get to invent the technologies and processes that will replace us.

But most people in the developed world do not belong to either of these groups. They know or care little about horticulture. If they do any “gardening” it is more about the lifestyle and leisure choices promoted by most popular media; in a garden centre they hurry past the seeds to get to the patio furniture and candles. They show no interest in understanding anything of the living world around them, unable even to put names to crops in the fields or to the trees that we live alongside in towns, even those long lived giants that dwarf us and have stood for generations, witnessing the tide of history.

Part of this disengagement is attributable to urbanisation, distancing ourselves from contact with the land. But it was also given impetus by globalisation in two ways. As the landscapes and farmers we depend on became global, often at the end of bewildering complex chains of food supply and processing, it was no surprise that understanding fell. At the same time the explosion of abundance in supermarkets, where almost any food imaginable has become available at any season and in bulk quantities, has erased some of the wonder of the natural diversity and made extraordinary feats of cultivation seem commonplace and everyday. Even given these trends it is hard to understand is how we haven't maintained a strong cultural interest in the plants that give us foods, medicines or raw materials given the absolute dependence we have on them for our daily survival.

We might be bemused or appalled by the stark lack of curiosity that these behaviours betray. We may wonder how it is possible to create a society that is so disengaged from the world that it has almost no general awareness of, or interest in the foundation stones of its own survival. But does this lack of connection really matter in the modern age?

**NEEDS FOR THE FUTURE**

In times of stability and security it possibly does not. We can rely on complex and highly evolved technologies, supply chains and systems innovations to bring our needs to our door in confidence that the flow will continue. The problem is that the 21st Century does not look to be shaping up in a way where stability and security will be easily found.

The major perturbations that challenge the world are easy to see—global economic change and new demands for resources, demographic challenges, water shortages, climate change and the rising costs and constraints on the use of fossil energy. To take just one example, to manage the risks of climate change the UK Climate Change Act commits the country to an 80% reduction in carbon emissions in 40 years. That’s a huge transformation in almost no time. Anyone working today in their twenties will still be working. We have a society so intimately dependent on the supply of abundant fossil energy that we probably can't even conceive of that new world we have to create. The one thing we do know is that it will be a time of radical unpredictable change that will call on the best of our skills and understanding.

Even if the bulk of our population remains without significant horticultural skills, it's hard to see how issues like food security in the face of such change can be tackled without fostering a greater level of respect for growing, and a more literate constituency that supports a political and economic system that safeguards the plants, places, people and practices without which we could not exist. Unless we have that understanding, our infrastructure and investment in horticulture, as well as research and education in one of the most fundamental sciences of all, will continue to be dismantled.
Horticulture also offers many people a rewarding, and sometimes even an inspirational and transformational, part of their life. It provides something of our souls' needs. The experience of seeing seed spring to life, and with care grows to reach a stage where it pays us back with its bounty is a fundamental and spiritual one. Visiting wild places and working in conservation teaches respect for nature's beauty and complexity, but it is usually an experience where we have to learn to not interfere, to tread as lightly as we can on the Earth. This is a vitally important lesson, but it's not sufficient for a healthy society. Gardening provides a different kind of natural experience—one where we work in alignment with natural growth and explore what it means to be actively part of the living world.

Gardens teach us many lessons, from the practical to the profound. They are often equated with paradise, but for a gardener there are important insights into what paradise actually is. An unchanging paradise for eternity is a form of imprisonment for the soul because it makes imagination and hope redundant. Paradise must pass to be important. In fleeting moments gardening gives us the sustenance of being in harmony and in control together with nature, but we know that the experience will be instantly lost again and we begin again. Change, evolution, loss and reward cycle constantly. Horticulture brings that to us - is there anything more important?

To open this engagement with horticulture we need an accessible language that has both science and poetry at its disposal, to encourage people to reappraise why horticulture is both fundamental and spiritual (Fig. 1–4). We have to translate what we do into words of power and beauty or there will be no mandate.

Horticulturists as a rule understand that they hold a vital knowledge in trust, but the professional infrastructure, language and allegiance to elite or opaque institutions does little to foster a wider community of engaged people. Heligan and Eden are important because they aim to make horticulture more accessible to the millions who come through our doors.

Fig. 1. Catherine Cutler of the Eden Project at the Eden harvest Festival with holidaymakers Robert, William, and David. Photo Chris Savill.

Fig. 2. Planting bulbs at the Eden Project. Bulb mania.
EDEN’S CONTEXT

We realised that for the wider public, botanic gardens had become irrelevant to their lives. Our secret was to use popular language accessible to all. Eden would be “impossible”, daring and a “global must see”. It had to compete for the attention of the public and break the shackles of horticulture’s traditional audience. It had to be bold in the way it valued its horticultural staff and had to create a culture that inspired horticulturists to lift their eyes and ambitions away from the repetitive and covert processes of old and embrace, if you like a “rock n roll” attitude. This meant being judged by the degree that the audience engages, rather than the strict confines of quality husbandry.

The experience from Heligan was that even people who weren't gardeners who sat in productive gardens access something very old, something that predates civilisation. Eden has developed a broader agenda engaging with different audiences on a range of initiatives. As well as the plant displays there are many opportunities for people to have their first direct contact with growing, ranging from participative demonstrations on site through to a range of outreach programmes. We work with schools across the globe through our Gardens for Life Programme. We teach practical gardening in collaboration with the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh. We have created the largest ever garden at the Chelsea Flower Show built with support from 500 homeless and disadvantaged people and prisoners from across the UK. At our nursery we host the People and Gardens project helping people with learning difficulties and mental health problems to develop more fulfilled and independent lives and the Sensory Trust who work nationally to promote inclusive design and break down barriers to access to land.

But there is so much more to do. The concern about food security continues to rise in public and political consciousness, but still the research, education and horticultural
production infrastructure of the UK continues to be destroyed and understanding about the systems of, and choices for, food supply remains weak. For the next stage in our development we want to use the assets of our site, our audience and our brand to see if we can lever real change, and we are open to any effective partnership that will make that possible.

References