

SEPTEMBER 2024

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Regional Magazine
of the Year 2024

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This photograph: Keith Heppell
All other photographs: Melanie Taylor of
Hazelwood Plantscapes

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Unless you're a student or associated with the university, you might think Cambridge's college gardens are 'off limits' to visitors. Ahead of Open Cambridge this month, Newmarket garden designer Melanie Taylor gets behind-the-scenes access to explore the past, present and future of these historic plots

Having lived near Cambridge for more than a decade, a surprise to me and perhaps the real 'secret' of the college gardens, is that so many are open to the public almost every day (except for exam periods in April to June). Some require you to purchase tickets in advance online or, as in the case of King's, on arrival (at the visitor centre on King's Parade), whilst others, like Robinson College, are happy for you to turn up and make a donation to the National Garden Scheme (details and opening times can be found on the individual college websites).

A tranquil haven

Alongside the hustle and bustle of the bus station on Drummer Street lies what head gardener Brendon Sims describes as the "secret, hidden oasis" of the Emmanuel College gardens.

Built on the site of a Dominican priory dating back to 1238 and founded in 1584, Emmanuel, with its chapel designed by Sir Christopher Wren, encompasses almost 12 acres of beautiful gardens just beyond the bus station walls.

Brendon and his team of 10 gardeners



Chapman's Garden at Emmanuel College

were delighted when 'Emma' was nominated two years ago as a Royal Horticultural Society 'unmissable garden' – one of 12 finalists along with Blenheim Palace.

Within the private Fellows' Garden stands one of Cambridge's most famous and majestic trees, the Oriental Plane (*Platanus orientalis*) thought to date back to the 1830s. The dappled shade of its weeping branches makes it a very peaceful and calming space. Next to the Fellows' Garden, the bronze 'Jester' sculpture by Wendy Taylor, installed in 1994, is set off beautifully by the billowy planting in the borders.

Chapman's Garden is one of 'Emma's' most tranquil spots. Named after Arthur

Chapman, a popular Fellow who died in 1913, it houses another specimen tree, the Dawn Redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*), the seeds of which came from China and were probably planted in 1949.

The stream in Chapman's Garden and the old swan pond in the Paddock are fed by Hobson's Conduit, a watercourse built by Thomas Hobson between 1610 and 1614 to bring clean water into Cambridge from the springs at Nine Hills near Great Shelford.

Seeing himself very much as a custodian of the gardens, Brendon prides himself on the work he is doing to educate the next generation of gardeners and believes that horticultural training and biodiversity will be his legacy. "My vision," he says, "is to connect the green spaces of the city to increase biodiversity and wildlife."

He is working with other colleges to create a connective ribbon of meadow planting from the council beds in Christ's Pieces, through Christ's College, to Emmanuel's wildflower meadow in North Court (accessed via a secret tunnel that runs underneath Emmanuel Street), through to the gardens of the graduate student houses the college owns on Park Terrace.

This wildflower planting is a modern take on the traditional 'ribbon' planting of the Victorians, creating a wildlife habitat corridor that then links up with the efforts of other college gardens across the university, increasing the sustainability and biodiversity of the city.

Protecting native species

Brendon has worked closely with Steve Coghill, head gardener at King's College, who, with his team, is responsible for one of the most iconic and most photographed Cambridge vistas – the famous lawn which sweeps down to the Backs. Established as a fine sward lawn in 1772, it's undergone a transformation since 2019 when Steve sowed a third of a hectare as a wildflower meadow.

Today it is a species-rich tapestry of wild carrot (*Daucus carota*), field scabious (*Knautia arvensis*), yellow rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*), greater and lesser knapweed (*Centaurea scabiosa* and *Centaurea nigra*), wild marjoram (*Origanum vulgare*) and spiny restharrow (*Ononis spinosa*), which is a member of the pea family. The meadow is also home to a rare species of orchid, the Lizard Orchid (*Himantoglossum hircinum*).

In 2023, Steve was a co-author of a paper by Dr Cicely Marshall which established that despite its small size (0.36ha), the meadow supported approximately three times more plant, spider and bug species than the remaining lawn, and bats were recorded flying over it three times more often. The number of invertebrates living in it was also 25 times higher in the meadow than in the lawn.

Every August the meadow is mown for hay using Shire horses and traditional farming machinery from the late 19th and early 20th centuries; it really is quite a sight to behold.

Head west

To the west, you enter a peaceful world away from the city crowds as you step into the grounds of Newnham College. Paul Anderson is one of the new generation of Cambridge head gardeners, having joined Newnham six years ago after changing careers from the agri-science world of Syngenta. He is sensitive to the environment and traditions of the college, preserving what's there and blending it with new ideas.

Paul and his team are honouring the traditions of the Arts and Crafts garden they've inherited; take the curved benches built from local materials by Cambridge Restoration for the new peony garden, created in 2022. The contemporary yet traditional 'nest' bench in the new 'four seasons' garden also has a distinctive Arts and Crafts feel to it, despite its modern aesthetic.

The bejewelled Kennedy borders, brimming with annuals, are redesigned every year to a new theme. They are simply



Thorneycreek House at Robinson College



The handcrafted benches in Newnham's peony garden

stunning. The vibrancy and dynamism of the planting comes through with colour, shape and texture and the coppiced hazel plant supports are another sustainable feature. As someone who loves roses, I am also thrilled to see the sunken rose garden, which I imagine looks glorious in June. Says Paul: "I like people to come in and enjoy the garden; you can walk on our grass. I think it's really rather cool that it's here to be enjoyed as a space and not just a garden to be admired. I want the garden to feel alive."

Paul and the team will look back to the past before any future redevelopment. Having just returned from a study day at Beth Chatto's gardens, Paul adds: "We'll also take a trip to Gertrude Jekyll's garden at Munstead Wood – I want to stay true to the original ideas. After all, we're the stewards; it's not about us as gardeners, it's about the gardens themselves." A short stroll from Newnham and you reach the 1980s red-brick architecture of Robinson College. Its modern exterior

belies the traditional lawns and splendid Arts and Crafts Thorneycreek House (built in 1895) which lies within.

Robinson's gardens contain many specimen trees including a wonderful Indian Bean Tree (*Catalpa bignonioides* 'Aurea') and a Weeping Redwood (*Sequoiadendron giganteum* 'Pendula'). A guide is available for a £5 donation to the National Garden Scheme from the Porters' Lodge which details the main gardens and those of houses 2, 4, 5 and 6 Adams Road and 1 Sylvester Road, which also make up the Robinson campus.

Sustainability is key

All of the gardeners I've met agree that these gardens should be open, alive and play a role in making the colleges more inclusive and accessible. Their joy and enthusiasm for the gardens is infectious and an inspiration. They share a desire to tread lightly on the landscape whilst recognising that the conditions in which they garden are increasingly different from those who went before them.

Sustainability is evermore important. Climate change is impacting some of our native trees and plants and water scarcity means that they are looking for new ways to irrigate and use water efficiently through rainwater harvesting.

As Steve Coghill says: "The historic landscape shouldn't be set in aspic. You have to respect that historical context, but you mustn't be frightened to innovate within the spirit of it. There will always be ways to bring in changes that actually respect what's gone before."

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If you'd like help designing wildflower schemes for your garden, or refurbishing an existing border, you can reach out to Melanie at melanie.taylor@hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk or use the contact form on her website: hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk