

## Royal and Down-to-Earth

Since my experience of royalty is limited to Shakespeare and history books, I was surprised to learn that HRH the Prince of Wales is an organic gardener. Even more surprising is the extent of his experiments on his property, Highgrove, in Gloucestershire. In the aftermath of holiday activities comes the fun of examining gifts found by an enthusiastic Santa in a bookstore's gardening section. One such outsized volume is titled, "The Garden at Highgrove" by HRH the Prince of Wales and Candida Lycett Green, experienced television documentarian and garden writer with photographs done by Andrew Lawson and Christopher Simon Sykes. The book was first published in the UK in 2000 by Weidenfeld & Nicolson and reissued in 2012.

One may be tempted to assume book making an unnecessary enterprise done by an heir to the British throne but this volume is part of The Prince's Charities Foundation established in 1979 by the Prince of Wales and that charity is the beneficiary of such commercial activities. Now open to throngs of visitors, the resulting assets are used in furthering the educational aspects of the gardens.

Some characteristics of the property at Highgrove are the views of fields, woodland glades, distant woods and the village church. When the property was purchased in 1980 the grounds near the house consisted of one ancient Cedar of Lebanon, a few thorn bushes and an old kitchen garden. Three decades of hard work have resulted in, not a grand garden, but a series of more intimate spaces that are still changing and being changed.

The Highgrove garden has been criticized, rightly I imagine, for lacking both unity and a certain expected drama and elegance. Where one would expect a posh lawn along a drive lined with lime trees, there is an explosion of oxeye daisies, buttercups, and poppies in a meadow. The purpose in building this garden was the desire of the Prince to work in harmony with nature rather than to continue so much about modern farming and gardening that seems to be a battle against nature: in his words "...I believe it is still worth recalling some of the hard-won wisdom accumulated over centuries in terms of how to work with the grain of Nature rather than against it."

Working with nature included designing what Prince Charles terms his 'sewage garden'. The gardens in general are nourished by the manure from Hebridean sheep and Black Angus cattle and the crystal clear water in the field pond is the purified product of that manure. The Sewage Garden itself is actually a system by which the sewage from the house is run into a bark-filled pit, filtered through reed beds, then through willow beds studded with marsh marigolds and then into a sump and out into the pond. The area surrounding that pond is planted with water loving plants and flowers that attract dragonflies.

The success of this reed bed system attracted notice among people hoping to encourage introduction of reed bed sewage systems in the Upper Thames Valley as a way to ameliorate the pollution flowing into the river. This is just one example of the experiments in progress toward environmental sustainability at Highgrove. Along with sheep and cattle there are chickens. A storybook structure is set in a grove of trees and shrubs to house the Wellsummer and Maran hens. The protecting fence is curiously made of 'park pales' of cleft oak. The pales are fastened to the structure at three heights, three to six feet. The Romans are credited with using varying heights to enclose deer as they will not jump a jagged outline?

Aside from an inventive and extensive use of compost, another way these gardens flourish without herbicides, fungicides and insecticides is that resistant plants are used: for

example they have rugosa roses and the old Rosa mundi. A royal garden, just like your own, will thrive if it is well balanced. In an organic garden there are plenty of birds to take care of the slugs. Of course, perfection is merely aimed for, never expected to be achieved. When additional help is needed, the solution is never chemical but rather the importation of predatory insects. Those insects and sharp sand are some of the few things that are not home grown on the property.

9 Jan 14