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Stonecrop Gardens, Cold Spring, New York

PART TWO: SUMMER

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The most consistent aspect of summer at Stonecrop is the blur of activity. Visitors arrive from all points of the globe for our busiest season. Public programmes, including guided garden walks and special workshops, kick into high gear. Interns at our small School of Practical Horticulture, who arrive each year in February, have got their bearings and are really beginning to flourish. Most of the year's design work happens in summer – always a thrill – not to mention the staggering amount of planting and overall garden maintenance these warm months bring. Staff and interns alike are running from dawn to dusk. Knowing what our little team accomplishes, and relishing the pleasure this brings to our visitors, seems to fuel the Stonecrop mantra, *Keep Moving*.

Stonecrop's Flower Garden (as well as our less-visible School) best captures my own style, education, and passions as a gardener. It is an intensely designed, planted, and maintained space that is a world unto itself. Without question, it is the most labour-intensive summer project at Stonecrop. As soon as the last tulip fades, usually about 15 May, Operation FG begins. An astonishing number of plants is added over the seventeen-week period leading up to Stonecrop's annual garden party in early September. We estimate that at least six weeks of summer are spent on planting alone in the Flower Garden, which encompasses but a tiny fraction of our twelve gardened acres.

Taking a few steps back, the Flower Garden was actually my first project in Cold Spring. In a sense, it is where Stonecrop begins and so seemed the logical beginning for me. Anne and Frank Cabot had already started to garden between the house and horse barn, an area easily enjoyed by the Cabot family and their guests. They had also crafted and borrowed a magnificent sequence of surrounding spaces and views. One enters the house (and the FG) through a simple yet

elegant turf-and-gravel courtyard ringed in trees. On two sides, the house then opens to expansive vistas of fields, distant hills, and forest, while on the remaining side, a sun room and terrace unfurl into the series of rooms now known collectively as the Flower Garden. This juxtaposition of open and closed, small and large, natural and composed is a recurring theme at Stonecrop, each element strengthening the other and enlivening the garden experience. With that as a leaping-off point, I sought to create a flower garden for my patrons that was, on the best of days, enchanting, a true pleasure garden.

While working with Rosemary Verey and as a student at Kew, I visited countless gardens and worked with many gardeners, both famous and little known. In fact, I did my third-year thesis at Kew on the workings of the UK's National Garden Scheme (NGS) and for years previously had spent each Sunday visiting every NGS Open Garden that was within a day's ride on my motor bike. In addition to my work and studies, this mental catalogue of gardens provides me with a wealth of information and ideas on which to draw, as I did almost thirty years ago when I set to work in Cold Spring.

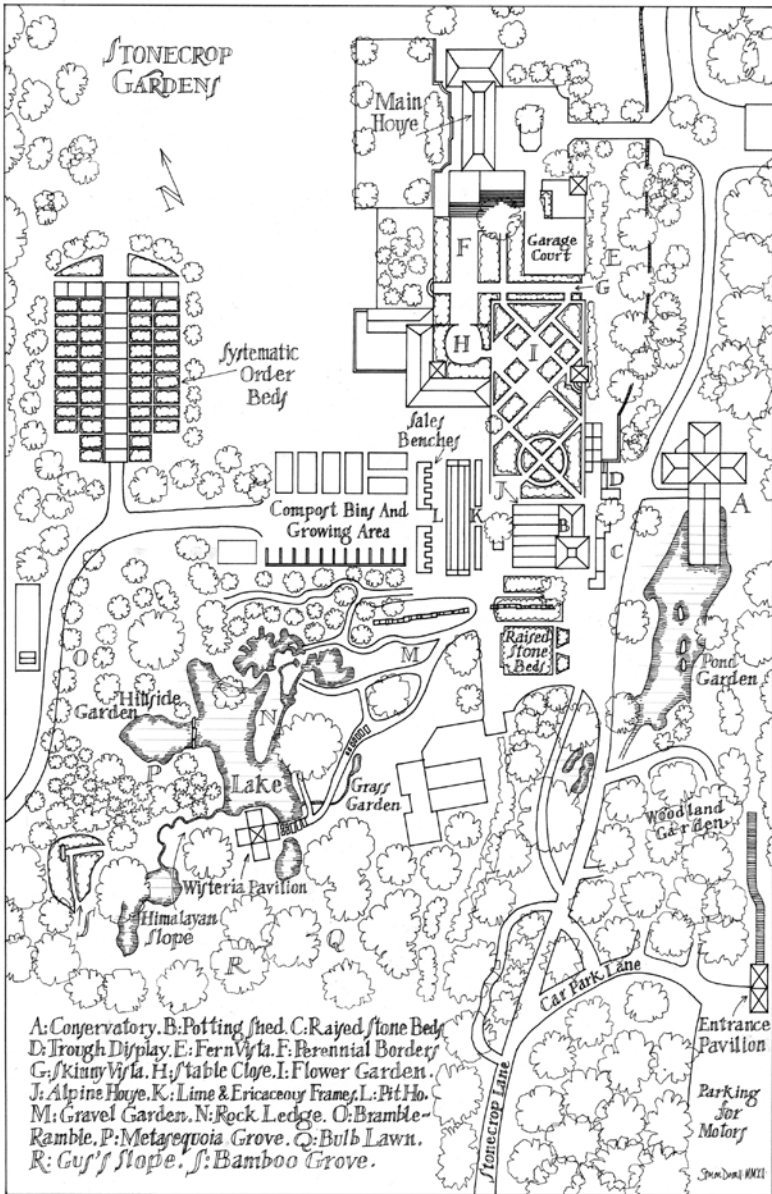
My favourite of many beloved gardens is Hidcote, in Gloucestershire, and I believed the place-making techniques employed by Lawrence Johnston could be used to similar effect at Stonecrop. I set about creating a series of rooms, vistas and focal points that encouraged one to stop and explore in detail, while the promise of further discovery – glimpses of rich colour, striking plants, and charming architectural elements; the splash of water and the heady scent of old roses just out of sight – established a natural flow from the house through the Flower Garden and beyond.

To implement this vision, a good bit of ground levelling and construction was required before new planting could begin. Using fencing, treillage and other architectural elements discussed in my spring article, the Outer Sanctum, the Stable Close, the Skinny Vista, and the Inner Sanctum – what we call the main section of the Flower Garden – were created. This structure anchors the Flower Garden, increases the sense of depth, and provides visual interest

throughout the year. The beds and paths comprising the Inner Sanctum are laid out primarily in squares laced with diagonal grass paths, while beds in the rest of the FG are rectangles of various depths.

In contrast to the low, tidy forms of alpiners and even woodlanders elsewhere at Stonecrop, I wanted exuberant, billowing mixed plantings to explode out of this fairly formal geometric plan. I also wanted to use colour in very precise ways. The Outer Sanctum and the Skinny Vista largely feature classic pastel shades, although in answer to Vita's White Garden, Stonecrop's Black Garden can be found there as well. For the Inner Sanctum, our *pièce de résistance*, I decided to use all colours of the rainbow, including those occasionally thought difficult to harmonise, like magenta and orange. I hoped it would be engagingly lighthearted and justify (perhaps selfishly) the use of a dizzying array of plants. With our hessian-and-salt-hay Miss Jekyll keeping an eye out for mistakes, a colour scheme was developed for each bed that complements its neighbours and, tapestry-like, creates a harmonious whole. Repetition of certain plants in both the Outer and Inner Sanctums unifies the larger Flower Garden by creating ribbons of like effects, what we think of as horticultural moments. These include early spring bulbs, and – ranging from summer into autumn – iris, roses, lilies, daylilies, salvias, dahlias, chrysanthemums, grasses, and autumn colour.

In designing these and similar gardens, I think of permanent plantings and fillers. Permanent plantings – trees, shrubs, roses, vines, some long-lived bulbs, and a variety of perennials and grasses – give structure to individual beds. Spaces between the permanent plantings are filled with annuals, vines, tropicals, sub-tropicals, bulbs, and summer tubers like dahlias. Creating a lush and decidedly out-of-the ordinary feel, many of these filler plants extend the season in the Flower Garden to our first frost and beyond. While in spring we eagerly check to see what has survived winter in the garden, the most distinctive summer task is to distribute our myriad filler plants in the Flower Garden. To supply these, Stonecrop has an extensive propagation programme, growing a vast number of plants from cuttings and seed (much of it collected on site). Tender



and half-hardy perennials are overwintered in a network of poly tunnels, production greenhouses, and cold frames.

While the colour scheme and the permanent plants are just that, permanent, there can be remarkable variation in the way each bed looks based upon which fillers are placed where. Carefully working bed by bed, notes and photographs from previous years are consulted. Not all winters being equal even under glass, fillers are examined for overall appearance and health before being approved for use. Typical planting design criteria are also employed, so candidates are evaluated for performance, aesthetic and other sensory qualities and the way they relate to each other. Such questions should include are the colours the same and the texture or scale wildly different, or vice versa? Can the entire plant be appreciated at a distance, or does it invite close inspection? Naturally, artistic licence is also involved. Putting it all together, I would describe this process as I often have to interns: 'It's a feel thing'. While that might not be the clear, easy-to-follow answer some seek, it is the truth. Planting design is a skill that can be developed by evaluating other gardens, ones you like and, well, other ones, and being willing to take risks.

We start with the hardiest plants, many of them large specimens used as anchors, and go forward. In rough order of appearance, these are *Fuchsia* 'Mrs Popple,' *Persicaria microcephala* 'Red Dragon,' *Strobilanthes maculatus*, *Brugmansia*, *Abutilon*, *Leonotis leonurus*, *Tibouchina urvilleana*, and hardy bananas. Widespread use of the unassuming *Helichrysum petiolare* creates a steady rhythm. Then come the more delicate cuppeas, tender salvias, dahlias, crocosmias, gladioli, acidantheras, and hedychiums. Some of the latter, including *H. coronarium* with its heavenly fragrance, can easily be left in their pots and moved in, out and around the beds as needed, just as Gertrude Jekyll did, especially with lilies.

Once these have had some time to settle in we start filling gaps in the Flower Garden with plants such as coleus, chrysanthemums, and *Asclepius curassavica* that we've grown from cuttings, and others we have grown from seed. Some of our favourites in the latter category include *Cynoglossum amabile* 'Mystery Rose,' *Alonsoa meridionalis*

‘Ember Glow,’ *Coreopsis tinctoria*, and a variety of snapdragons. More favourites at Stonecrop include the ‘Rocket’ series, plants reaching upwards of three feet in a great range of colours, and an old cultivar, *Antirrhinum majus* ‘Black Prince,’ with dark leaves and deep crimson flowers. If folklore bears any truth, snapdragons will also protect us from witchcraft.

We rely upon a number of plants that self-seed, especially in the Flower Garden. With judicious edits, these fortuitous additions can be just what are needed even in the most carefully wrought plan. I adore *Perilla frutescens* (shiso), which adds a bold note of colour and texture throughout the season. I prefer the varieties with luminous maroon leaves. If, like Miss Willmott, I were to secretly sprinkle seeds in other gardens, this would undoubtedly be my ‘ghost’. That said, we make ample use of the green-leafed varieties, and plant flat- and frilled-leafed types in both hues. Other self-sowers – these welcome for their floral display – include *Nigella damascena* (love-in-a-mist) and *Papaver somniferum* (opium poppy). Best-in-show in this group of persistent fillers is Himalayan impatiens, *Impatiens glandulifera* ‘Alba’. Covered in white flowers, they have great presence, reaching more than eight feet high each season and thriving well into autumn. Our garden is enclosed, enabling us to control this plant carefully. It can, however, become invasive as each plant produces up to eight hundred seeds a season that spread around the parent plant when the seed capsules explode. I don’t suggest naturalising with it. We have had some rather lucky crosses arise with our self-seeding population. A favourite is *Nicotiana* ‘Stonecrop Mauve’, which grows true from seed, and is offered for sale in limited quantities.

Like so many gardeners, I can find it hard to give up old friends. At the south end of the Inner Sanctum, towards the Potting Shed, was a cruciform layout of *Tilia cordata* meticulously trained in cat’s-cradle fashion. These lindens were grown from seed by Frank Cabot and gave welcome shade, structure, and visual interest. However, as they declined, requiring ever more maintenance, I reluctantly decided to remove them in stages. While a signature garden feature disappeared, the various beds and adjacent grass paths at that end

of the garden have flourished in the new-found sun. In the last few years, several beds in the Inner Sanctum have also been removed. While we lost some desirables, including our grey and purple-and-orange squares, the overall garden is improved. Over time, the beds had become densely planted and very tall, and were packed tightly in the high fenced enclosure. While this was my desired effect, it had become difficult to view the garden with any sense of perspective on the whole. By opening up the space a bit, individual plants and plant combinations as well as the overall design could again be enjoyed. Similarly, navigating the Inner Sanctum became easier when one could better understand the entire space. Such major steps can be difficult, but they also keep a garden fresh and engaging.

The maintenance regime, not surprisingly, is complex at Stonecrop, particularly in the Flower Garden. To control flowering time and reduce (but not eliminate) the need for staking, many perennials and certain annuals are regularly cut back by a third to a half several times during the season. This will often produce a second flush of blooms. While this treatment is not uncommon now, I was certainly among the first to practice it regularly here in the United States. We are careful to deadhead certain plants, ensuring a continuum of bloom, controlling excess seeding, and keeping them looking vital. As beds become more dense, secateurs are used to shape the garden's appearance by clipping away one plant that covers another, or simply adjusting the visual balance between plants. Weeding is a major concern in the spring FG, when more soil is bare, but as the beds fill up, it becomes less so. In my opinion, everything starts with the soil. Twenty years ago all of the beds in the Flower Garden were double-dug, incorporating composted horse manure from the stable Anne Cabot allows me to share. These beds are now mulched every two or three years with more horse manure that has been run through our purpose-built cooker to kill weed seeds. This maintains good soil structure and fertility. As a result, we never need to apply additional fertilisers. I can't speak for the plants, but with all of the planting and replanting we do, I can assure you that sinking a spade into this soil that is soft as butter makes all the difference.

Watering is another major undertaking during Stonecrop summers, due to extreme heat (which can reach above 100°F), drought, or both. Fortunately, even on our rocky hilltop, our dowsers-cum-well-driller has been able to sink three massive wells – two run at 65 gallons per minute and one at 100 gpm – and assorted smaller ones, so the staff stay busy with myriad hose pipes and sprinklers. This year already looks dubious. The past winter was one of the driest in years, with record-setting high temperatures. To give a sense of the climatic vagaries at Stonecrop, the first day this year higher than 90°F was 16 April. Early bulbs and late bulbs and flowering trees all burst forth together. Three weeks later, there was a hard freeze at 26°F, evidence of why we plan for the end of May as the last frost date. While the high summer temperatures in this part of upstate New York have some drawbacks, this same heat and abundant sun make many plants relatively easy to grow. Perennials that are staples here, many ornamental grasses and the robust, wildly fragrant *Clematis ternifolia* (sweet autumn clematis) seldom bloom in the cool English summers.

While we have dawdled in Stonecrop's Flower Garden, there are many summer highlights in other parts of the garden. Some of the very best are shrubs and vines. Beginning, no surprise, in the Flower Garden, stand-out shrubs include the choice *Hydrangea aspera* Villosa Group, with large velvety grey leaves and near-opalescent lace-caps; *Philadelphus coronarius* 'Aureus', and *Corylus maxima* 'Purpurea' – the purple filbert in our Black Garden. Two of the best vines in the FG include *Humulus lupulus* 'Aureus' – the golden hop, of which I can never get enough – and *Vitis coignetiae*, that we call the crimson glory vine, handsome and vigorous throughout the season with deep crimson-purple, brilliant scarlet, and fiery orange autumn hues. A treasured shrub Rosemary Verey taught me to love is *Buddleja alternifolia* 'Argentea', with decidedly arching branches of silver leaves and lavender inflorescences.

We rely heavily on shrub roses throughout the gardens, with superb examples of *Rosa glauca*, *R. villosa*, *R. nutkana*, *R. 'Cantabrigiensis'* and all members of the terrifically hardy Canadian Explorer series of rugosas. Appropriately enough for our location above the Hudson

River, with just a bit of deadheading *Rosa rugosa* 'Henry Hudson' is always covered in spice-scented white flowers, lush dark green foliage, and magnificent fruit.

Clematis is another favourite. Topping the list might be *Clematis viticella* 'Betty Corning', with prolific and fragrant pale lavender bells summer to autumn. The rich blue *C. × durandii* always takes me back to Rosemary Verey's Barnsley House, where it wove through an ornate dark blue fence in the Pond Garden. At Stonecrop, I've planted it with laburnum in homage to my mentor. Some other clematis combinations we prefer are the huge yet delicate soft blue flowers of *C. 'Mrs Cholmondeley'*, which complement the very fragrant, white-flowered *Wisteria sinensis* 'Jacko', while on the fiery side, yellow *C. tangutica* 'Helios' brilliantly partners the fragrant golden-apricot climbing rose 'Autumn Sunset'.

A few choice shrubs native to the US include *Cotinus obovatus*, the American smokewood, *Calycanthus floridus* (Carolina allspice), with red-brown flowers giving off an unforgettable spicy scent, *Viburnum cassinoides* (withe-rod), which performs throughout the year and bears long-lasting pink-red and blue-black berries, *Diervilla lonicera*, the bush honeysuckle, dotted with terminal, sulfur-yellow flowers – an excellent groundcoverer, even in dry shade, and *Clethra acuminata*, boasting a fragrant white summer bloom and an attractive tiered structure. Very good near-natives at Stonecrop include *Rhus typhina* 'Dissecta', a fern-leafed version of staghorn sumac, and *Aesculus × carnea* 'Briotii', a red horse chestnut with rich red flowers.

There are several other shrubs which I don't believe we could live without: *Clerodendrum trichotomum* or harlequin glory bower, a shrub with a divine scent (unless you crush the leaves) covered with delicate white flowers in late summer and then even more spectacularly, with persistent bright blue berries held in brilliant fleshy-red calyces, *Clethra barbinervis*, the Japanese clethra, which has long, slightly drooping, creamy terminal racemes and smooth almost muscular grey bark that exfoliates to shades of red-brown, and *Pseudocdonia sinensis*, the Chinese quince, that in addition to the delight of its flowers and fruit, has superb exfoliating bark very much like a stewartia. Nor must I skip *Tripterygium regelii*,

Regel's threewingnut, a scandent shrub that with proper support can reach thirty feet, its vine-like branches crowned in large, airy, fragrant greenish-white panicles in late summer. A favourite of twentieth-century American designer Beatrix Farrand, it still grows up walls at Dumbarton Oaks, her masterwork in Washington, DC. A fine, non-invasive bittersweet relative, it is rare and well worth searching for.

Once again, this glimpse of Stonecrop has been limited. I hope, however, that you have gleaned a sense of our approach to planting and design, and a taste of our wide-ranging collection. Autumn marks the true peak for many of our gardens and ushers in the brilliant colouring for which the north-eastern United States is justly famous. I look forward to welcoming you back soon.

Once again I am indebted to Kate Kerin for marshalling my thoughts and helping me to prepare this article for publication.

Garden plan by Simon Dorrell.