

## GARDENING

# A cast of flowers past captured at Hidcote

An exhibition at Hidcote Manor gives us a closer look at the plants in this extraordinary Cotswolds garden and how they can be preserved forever. By **Natasha Goodfellow**

**B**efore me is a glorious herbaceous border in full autumnal swing: *Verbena bonariensis* sways delicately above plumes of *ligularia* while Japanese anemones and salvias mingle with *miscanthus*, *penisetum* and the seedheads of *rodgersias*. But what I'm looking at is not the plants themselves, rather their ghosts – a plaster cast of their just-plucked stems taken once artist Rachel Dein has pressed them into clay. The panel, and 19 others like it, is part of *Hidcote Through The Seasons*, a new exhibition opening at the famous Cotswolds garden designed, built and planted by Major Lawrence Johnston (1871-1958) from 1907, when he moved there, to 1948 when he transferred it to the National Trust, the first garden to be taken on by

the charity. For anyone familiar with Hidcote, once described as "one of the most joyfully planted gardens in England", the first question will surely be – how to decide what to cast?

"Johnston was passionate about plants both aesthetically, in how he combined them, and intellectually, collecting and breeding them," says Sarah Davis, assistant head gardener at Hidcote, who has helped Dein with the project. "He was awarded the RHS Veitch medal in 1948 for his work introducing and cultivating new plants, and every new area of the garden he created was an opportunity to display more of his collection."

These areas or "rooms", as they came to be known, ranged from the Scarlet Borders where purple-leaved *berberis* and grasses including *miscanthus* and *cortaderia* provided a backdrop to *kniphofia*, oriental poppies and orange



**Johnston didn't plant in blocks... planting was very naturalistic with plants mingling'**

day lilies, to the Old Garden, where exotic *eremurus* towered above "a rosy foam" of "pink star dahlias and snapdragons", as garden designer Russell Page wrote in 1934.

A rock bank recreated Alpine habitats from mountain top to meadow; scented, single-flowering old French roses were given a home in the long borders; and flamboyant peonies – both tree and herbaceous forms – were coddled in the Pillar Garden.

Teams dug peat by the barrowload into the borders so azaleas and rhododendrons would thrive, and a huge planthouse was built for more tender plants, many of which Johnston had collected himself on his expeditions.

Although the majority of Johnston's herbaceous plants have inevitably died and been replaced several times over (many original trees and woody plants survive), his layout of garden rooms remains and their impact is still as strong as it was in their heyday – gardeners come from all over the world to study here. So, just how did Dein and Davis decide which plants to cast?

"The project's aim has always been primarily artistic rather than documentary," says Dein, "and I was lucky enough to be given complete freedom to wander the gardens, picking whatever I liked. My work is very much to

**FLOWER POWER**  
View of the red borders and gazebos at Hidcote. Above, alliums and peonies in the Pillar Garden. Right, Rachel Dein applies the plaster



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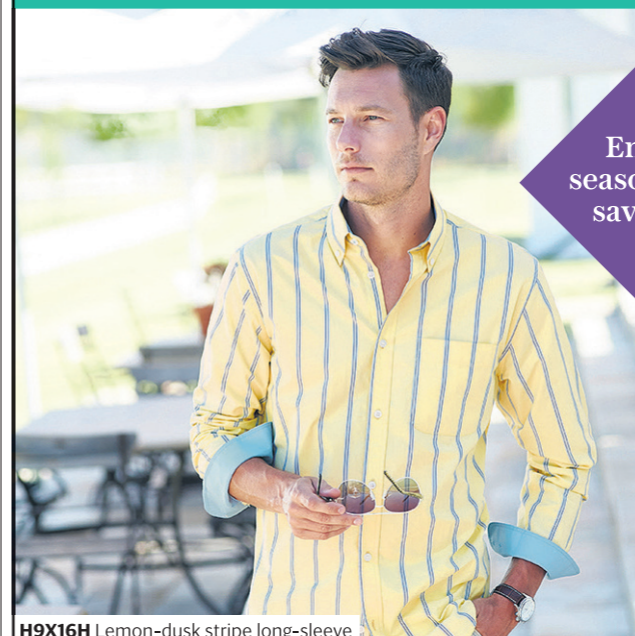
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**Arrangement**  
Spring flowers assembled by Rachel ready for the process



**Making a mark**  
Delicate hands are needed to make sure of a successful cast



**Revelation**  
Carefully unpeeling the clay impression ready for casting



**Appreciation**  
The finished product: "the actual plant, preserved forever"

do with transience, and so I wanted to capture the plants at the moment when they are most alive – that fleeting moment of glory before they fade away and die."

With that in mind, Dein and Davis (who sent Dein packages of plants when she could not make it up to Hidcote and on one memorable occasion carted a huge bucket of flowers down to Dein's London studio by train and Tube) looked for plants they felt were representative of the gardens while also being at their peak. "Having seen some of Rachel's work, I knew she liked plants with elegant, arching or curling shapes so I tried to include those too – Solomon's seal and symphytum from the Stream Garden, sweet peas from the Old Garden," says Davis.

They were both keen that certain plants should be included: the ancient Cedar of Lebanon by the house that was one of the few distinguishing fea-

tures when Johnston's mother bought Hidcote; the magnificent handkerchief tree (*Davidia involucrata vilmoriniana*), which is believed to be one of the earliest of its type in this country, and some of the lavender for which Hidcote is famous. Davis was also keen to include some apparently quite ordinary leaves: beech, hornbeam and yew from the mixed "tapestry" or single-species hedges which form the backbone of Johnston's design, as "they are part of what is so iconic about the garden," she says. Other "iconic" plants however, such as some of the roses, simply did not translate well to plaster. "Roses are difficult to cast; they're quite a fist of a flower," says Dein. "And peonies don't come out very well either – they're too squishy and indistinct."

What does translate is Johnston's artistic approach to planting and design. "Johnston didn't plant in blocks," says Davis. "His planting was very naturalistic with plants mingling, repeating and bouncing from one side of the border to the other. He was a master of pace too, contrasting areas of excitement and sensory overload with areas of calm." Dein must consider the same issues. To make her panels she rolls out sheets of clay and presses the plant matter into them, releasing the scents of the garden as she does so. "I try to recreate how they grow naturally," she says. "I'm looking for compositions with movement and space. It's a matter of knowing when to stop."

Once happy with her arrangement (and there are no second chances) she carefully removes every last fragment of vegetation from the clay, before framing the clay and pouring in the plaster. For coloured pieces, she makes a silicon mould from the cast, before adding pigment to it and recasting it. Finally, the panels are cleaned, sanded and, for the exhibition, carefully labelled.

In the early stages of the process, time is of the essence. "I have to move pretty quickly otherwise the plants will spoil," she says, "but that at least stops me being too greedy in my picking."

It also means that her panels are accurate records of the garden at a given moment in time; mixing snowdrops with dahlias, for example, is both anathema and impossible.

Davis, who has relished having the chance to share her love for the garden, is fascinated by the fact that while Rachel's work is undoubtedly artistic, it is not an interpretation.

"It's not a painting or a sculpture," she says. "It's the actual plant, preserved forever." Given Johnston loved plants as much as he did, one feels sure he would have approved.

**Hidcote Through The Seasons, Aug 25 to March 22. All work is for sale and prices start at £60. Rachel Dein will be giving a talk about her work on Sept 14. For more details and tickets, visit [nationaltrust.org.uk/hidcote](http://nationaltrust.org.uk/hidcote)**



## GARDENS TO VISIT

These bright and beautiful sites in Middlesex, Worcestershire and Cornwall are great choices for an outing this bank holiday weekend, says **George Plumtre**



**CHURCH GARDENS, CHURCH HILL, HAREFIELD, UXBRIDGE, MIDDLESEX UB9 6DU**  
Visitors will be fascinated to discover that on the western edges of London, in the village of Harefield, is an ambitious walled garden project that dates back to the early 17th century and possibly earlier. Since 1995 this important site, one of the very few in the country to retain features of a renaissance garden, has been lovingly restored and brought back to life by its

**PEAR TREE COTTAGE, WITTON HILL, WICHENFORD, WORCESTERSHIRE WR6 6YX**  
Many people visit gardens for peace and tranquillity as much as for ideas and education; Pear Tree Cottage offers both. The three-quarter-acre garden is on sloping ground around the fine Grade II traditional black and white cottage (not open). During the afternoon you can admire the striking planting

– such as hydrangeas and small-flowered clematis – the quirky ornamental details (including a shed good enough to be runner-up as national "Shed of the Year"), and the views out across orchards to Abberley clock tower. Later, as the twilight appears, you can relax, look out for bats or listen for owls while the garden becomes illuminated with subtle lighting and candles. Open tomorrow, 4pm-10pm. £5, home-made teas, wine after 6pm.



**CRUGSILICK, RUAN HIGH LANES, TRURO, CORNWALL TR2 5LJ**  
If you are fortunate enough to be spending the bank holiday weekend anywhere in south Cornwall, don't miss this open garden set in the idyllic countryside of the Roseland peninsula. On one side the garden drops away from the venerable house (not open) giving a view out across a wooded valley that is so typical of the Roseland. In a project that has been carried out over the past six years by the present owners, the descending levels are skilfully and imaginatively handled, with yew hedges and sweeping borders around an oval lawn on the upper level and a large pond and exotic trees and shrubs on a lower terrace. The



wooded slope provides a backdrop to the walled kitchen garden and a hot garden, and the whole ensemble has great vitality. Open tomorrow, 11am-5.30pm. Admission £5, children free, home-made teas, plants for sale, dogs welcome.

owners, Patrick and Kay McHugh. Historically, perhaps the most interesting feature is an arcaded brick wall, but today – and especially at this time of year when a spectacular late-summer flowering display of dahlias combines with fruit and vegetable crops – you will enjoy the rich variety in the pattern of geometrically arranged raised beds, long borders, and fruit trees trained against the walls. This is an ongoing restoration project of great commitment and you will leave impressed by what has been achieved. Open bank holiday Monday, 2pm-5pm. Admission £5, children £2. Light refreshments.

For all gardens open for the National Garden Scheme, visit [ngs.org.uk](http://ngs.org.uk)

## 12 GREAT GARDEN PLANTS FROM HIDCOTE

**CARPINUS BETULUS**  
With its finely toothed, deeply furrowed leaves, hornbeam makes a handsome hedge, as seen in Hidcote's famous Long Walk. Happy in most soils and conditions, it is more drought-tolerant than beech.

**FAGUS SYLVATICA**  
At Hidcote, beech is used both as trees in the atmospheric Beech Allée, and in the garden's famous 'tapestry hedges' where it mixes with box, holly and yew. Holds its leaves year-round if clipped.

**ROSA 'GRUSS AN AACHEN'**  
A scented hybrid tea rose that opens pink and then matures to a beautiful white. Today you'll find it in the White Garden, where it combines well with crambé, acanthus and phlox.



**HYPERICUM 'HIDCOTE'**  
Discovered by Johnston on

Mount Kilimanjaro in 1928, this small, bushy St. John's Wort now thrives in Hidcote's Courtyard. Happy in sun or part-shade, it bears large yellow flowers from summer into autumn.



**LAVANDULA**  
Hidcote is home to several types of lavender: *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Hidcote' (thought to have been collected by Johnston at his other home in the South of France); some very old plants of 'Hidcote Giant', believed to have been planted by Johnston himself, and 'Munstead'. All require well-drained soil and full sun.

**HELIOTROPE**  
An article in *Country Life* in 1930 mentioned Johnston's heliotropes in the East Court Garden. Today, you'll find standards of 'Lord Roberts' here, among silver-leaved centaureas. Their scent is as sweet as their common

name – cherry pie – and butterflies love them.  
**MECONOPSIS CAMBRICA**  
The simple Welsh poppy would have appealed to Johnston's liking for naturalistic, wild plantings. A rampant self-seeder, it is allowed free rein in much, but not all, of the garden.

**PRIMULA PULVERENTULA**  
In 1911, Johnston was given an RHS award of merit for the pink 'Hidcote' strain of the mealy primrose. Today, a mix of candelabra primroses in tutti-frutti colours grow in the Stream Garden where they are well-suited to the moist soil and partial shade.



**LATHYRUS GRANDIFLORUS**  
A beautiful, pink, unscented, everlasting pea which comes back year after year; it scrambles over slopes or can be trained to climb. See them in the Old Garden.



**SYMPHYTUM**  
*Symphytum* 'Hidcote Blue' and 'Hidcote Pink' are said to prefer moist soils although, as assistant head gardener Sarah Davis says, "They seem capable of growing anywhere." A great weed-suppressing ground cover, particularly in shady spots.

**JASMINUM POLYANTHUM**  
Collected on a plant hunting trip to Yunnan in China in 1931 (where plant collector George Forrest accused Johnston of "gadding about"), this fragrant, tender evergreen received an RHS Award of Merit in 1941. See it in the Plant Shelter.

**COTONEASTER GLAUCOPHYLLUS**  
A huge clump of grey-leaved cotoneaster is an imposing presence in the Courtyard. Happy in most conditions, it is loved by bees and bears claret-coloured berries in autumn.

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