



LEFT Varieties of cornus line one of the ponds of the Beth Chatto Gardens in Essex, known for its dry summer garden but also wonderful to visit in autumn, when it seizes interest with colourful leaves, berries and bark in the woodland and water gardens. RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM The autumn colour of *Taxodium distichum*; *Crataegus coccinea*; the happy yellow-petalled blooms of sunflower *Helianthus* 'Lemon Queen'; *Cercis canadensis* 'Forest Pansy' turns brilliant burgundy, putting on a final show before winter.



The promised land

Now 86, Beth Chatto is still gardening with gusto, ever-influencing horticulture and design as her famous plot prepares to celebrate its 50th anniversary - and, she pledges, will continue to delight visitors far into the future

PHOTOGRAPHS RACHEL WARNE WORDS MARTYN COX

Beth Chatto takes in the fiery spectacle of her famous garden in Essex. 'Autumn is a celebration, a final eruption of joy in the garden before everything calms down for winter,' she says. 'Walking around here is like watching a firework display, with flashes of colour flaring up here, there and everywhere.'

The five-acre garden attracts around 50,000 visitors a year and is renowned for its spring and summer displays, but the smouldering show of colour in autumn is equally breathtaking and arguably more dramatic. 'Of course, I have planned it to be like this by concentrating on foliage, form and texture. It doesn't

just die down in a sad kind of way; it's exciting,' says Beth - iconic plantswoman, author, nurserywoman and, above all, gardener.

And she's right: the foliage is spectacular. Red, yellow, orange, bronze and golden leaves cling on for dear life to deciduous trees and shrubs, while closer to the ground there are sheets of autumn bulbs, sculptural seedheads of herbaceous perennials and the feathery, stately blooms of late-flowering grasses. Elsewhere, jewel-like berries and clusters of fruit sparkle in the luminous afternoon sun.

With such an exuberant show to enjoy, does Beth look forward to the arrival of autumn? 'If I'm honest, no,' she ▶

says, after a brief pause. 'Like many older people, I dread the thought of the nights drawing in and the long, dark evenings that arrive with the coming of autumn. I like being outside until late at night and resent being hemmed in from 3pm,' says Beth, now 86 years old.

She was just 37 in 1960, when she and her late husband Andrew decided to turn an overgrown patch of windswept wasteland in Elmstead Market, a tiny village a stone's throw from the garrison town of Colchester, into a beautiful garden. Faced with areas of shade and full sun, with dry, silty and sticky clay soils, she created several distinctly different gardens, choosing plants that are adapted to grow well in each area.

'I was the first to use the phrase 'Right plant, right place', but now everyone says it,' says

Beth, whose experience in her own garden has helped inspire countless gardeners around the country through her books. Her first, *The Dry Garden*, was published in 1978, followed by *The Damp Garden*, *Beth Chatto's Gravel Garden* and *Beth Chatto's Woodland Garden*, published in 2002. Among her most popular books was *Dear Friend and Gardener*, a compilation of correspondence between her and the late Christopher Lloyd.

The garden broadly consists of a water garden, shady walk, woodland garden and a gravel garden, which is filled with plants that are tolerant of dry conditions and are grown without any artificial irrigation. In autumn

this area is studded with bulbs, such as yellow *Sternbergia lutea*, which draws attention to ground level. However, most eye-catching is a robust specimen of stag's horn sumach (*Rhus typhina*), whose spreading branches are clothed with pendulous leaflets that have turned a blazing crimson.

Steps lead from the gravel garden to the water garden, where a series of four ponds lie among lawns. The heavily planted edges of the ponds, along with those of nearby island beds, are at flowering pomp in summer, but have much to retain interest later in the year. There are berry-bearing trees and shrubs such as *Malus*

x zumi 'Golden Hornet', *Crataegus coccinea* and thorny berberis, along with *Helianthus* 'Lemon Queen', the toad lily *Tricyrtis formosana* and

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lots of other flowering perennials.

Many grasses in this part of the garden boast wonderful long-lasting plumes. Among them are *Pennisetum alopecuroides* f. *viridescens*, *P. alopecuroides* 'Hameln' and pampas grass, and *Cortaderia selloana* 'Sunningdale Silver'. However, it is perhaps miscanthus that Beth values the most.

'They are noble plants,' she says. 'Apart from the flowers, some make foliage that tumble like a waterfall and turn all sorts of lovely colours,' she says, picking out *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Malepartus' as a favourite, citing its soft beige feathers held above golden autumn leaves. ▶

LEFT, TOP TO BOTTOM *Rhus typhina*; *Pennisetum alopecuroides* f. *viridescens*; *Tricyrtis formosana*; *Malus x zumi* 'Golden Hornet'. **BELOW** Beth creates layers of texture with red spears of *Persicaria amplexicaulis* in the foreground and large leaves of *Gunnera tinctoria* in the background. **RIGHT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Colchicums bloom at the feet of a crab apple tree; views over a pond; in the woodland garden; a *Betula jacquemontii*.





Beneath the tapestry of trees, shrubs, grasses and perennials are sheets of pinky-mauve colchicums and blue *Crocus speciosus*. This crocus is native to parts of Turkey and Iran, and has heavily veined flowers with orange stamens that make a sapphire carpet near one pond. 'Some people are shocked to see these crocuses flowering now, as they are so heavily associated with spring,' Beth says.

With so many fabulous autumn interest plants on show, is it possible to pick out a favourite? Beth pauses before suggesting bergenias. 'We grow about 40 different named varieties here. I love them for the simplicity of their round leaves, and I value them because they are evergreen, and many varieties turn a wonderful wine colour in autumn.' The ones she couldn't do without are *Bergenia crassifolia* 'Autumn Red', *B. 'Morgenröte'*, *B. 'Beethoven'* and *B. 'Mrs Crawford'*.

As she gets older, Beth is unable to carry out some of the more physical jobs in the garden, but she still likes to spend at least four hours a day outdoors. 'I'm not sure how I would cope without being able to garden, and I don't think I'd want to live much longer if I had to be kept in a chair or bed,' says Beth.

For now, she is looking forward to 2010, when the garden celebrates its 50th anniversary, planning a series of events to mark this milestone. Yet even after half a century of captivating and inspiring others with her

garden, she still doesn't consider it finished. 'A garden is not a picture hanging on the wall. People think that you get to the stage when the garden is perfect, but it's not like that at all. The garden is more of a responsibility now than it was in the beginning, as more editing is required,' she says.

To illustrate this, she explains that the trees need careful pruning to maintain their shape, or have to be removed completely because they have become too big. 'We took out a paulownia recently that I had planted soon after I arrived here. It was heart wrenching, but it opens up a view and I have planted another elsewhere.'

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I hope I shall live long enough to see it flower,' Beth says, and tells me she has made financial arrangements to ensure that her garden will be looked after and continue to open to the public well into the future - leaving no doubt that this remarkable woman will be influencing all us gardeners for many more years to come.

The Beth Chatto Gardens, Elmstead Market, Colchester, Essex CO7 7DB. Open daily; Monday to Saturday, 9am-5pm; Sunday, 10am-5pm. Tel: +44 (0)1206 822007. The nursery adjoins the garden, and mail order is available from www.bethchatto.co.uk

Turn over for garden notebook ►

LEFT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT *Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Goldschleier' and *Bergenia* 'Admiral'; bright autumnal colours; rudbeckia on left, *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Zebrinus' to the right and eupatorium behind; a royal fern in front of *Phormium tenax*. **BELOW** The famous gravel garden, with drought-tolerant plants such as *Rhus typhina* and eucalyptus. **RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM** *Pennisetum orientale*; berberis; ligularia seedheads; *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Strictus'.

The notebook

The **Beth Chatto Gardens** covers an area of five acres with several different types of garden, including water and woodland, on both silty and clay soils. The gravel garden has never received a drop of water from artificial watering



RETHINKING THE POND

As attractive as having a big pond may seem, in some gardens a large body of water can lack interest, so consider breaking it up into a series of smaller ponds. Beth's four ponds were formed by damming a spring-fed ditch, which perpetually fills them. The grassed-over dams form paths to walk across the water. Finally, a simple bridge crosses over the remains of the ditch (*below*).



TO BOG, OR NOT TO BOG

Bog gardens are often created around the perimeter of a pond (*above*), but you can construct one on its own to make use of an area that is naturally damp all year round. However, avoid completely waterlogged ground, as even bog plants need some drainage. Plant it up with royal ferns (*Osmunda regalis*), drumstick primulas and day lilies, or, if you have the space, *Gunnera tinctoria*.



PERIMETER PLANTING

Most aquatic plants die back in autumn and don't reappear until spring, so the area around the outside of a pond should be well planted to provide interest. Choose trees for autumn colour - crab apples, taxodium and liquidamber are all ideal - berries (*berberis*, *left*) or bark. Pick shrubs for winter such as scarlet *Cornus alba* 'Sibirica' and white-stemmed *Rubus cockburnianus*, along with bamboos.

CONTACTS

GARDENS NEARBY WITH AUTUMN INTEREST

- **Marks Hall Gardens & Arboretum**, Coggeshall, Essex CO6 1TG. 100 acres of arboretum. Tel: +44 (0)1376 563796. www.markshall.org.uk
- **The Gibberd Garden**, Marsh Lane, Gilden Way, Harlow, Essex CM17 0NA. Hundreds of sculptures displayed in a woodland setting. Tel: +44 (0)1279 442112. www.thegibberdgarden.co.uk
- **RHS Garden Hyde Hall**, Westerns Approach, Rettendon, Chelmsford, Essex CM3 8AT. Autumn fruit and foliage. Tel: +44 (0)1245 400256. www.rhs.org.uk/gardens/hydehall

LOCAL NURSERIES

- **Beeches Nursery**, Ashdon, Saffron Walden, Essex CB10 2HB. Tel: +44 (0)1799 584362. www.beechesnursery.co.uk
- **Ken Muir**, Rectory Road, Weeley Heath, Clacton-on-Sea, Essex CO16 9BJ. Wide selection of soft and top fruit. Tel: +44 (0)1255 830181. www.kenmuir.co.uk

BETH CHATTO'S TIPS

- **Be aware of your soil and climate.** Whether you've got a sunny site, or an area of dry shade or damp shade, you can improve the soil, but choose plants adapted by nature for problem areas.
- **However small your garden**, everybody should have a compost bin tucked away somewhere. In fact, I'd recommend having two, three or four as it's amazing how quickly the stuff rots down.
- **If you move to a new house** and don't know what to grow, walk around the neighbourhood to see what your neighbours are growing. This will give you an idea of what will do well in your own garden, so make a note of what you like and what you do not.
- **Resist the temptation to have a lawn in a small front garden.** They often look moth-eaten and are a bore to mow. A garden with plants that offer spring to autumn interest will give you so much more enjoyment.

