Some Thoughts about Gardening at Houghton

Herb Garden

This area has experienced the greatest transformation in recent years. (See Catalogue, which shows its development and first stage).
The Thyme Labyrinth, designed by Lucinda Mackworth Young and inspired by a labyrinth version of the Knight Templars is its central feature and provides an all-year round focus, even when some of the herbs are in their winter sleep. It is fascinating to explore the different scents and flavours of thyme. The twenty or so varieties here are only a tiny representation of the more than 250 existing species. The dry frost around Easter this year did some minor damage, or at least somewhat delayed the flowering process, but we replanted with material we had earlier divided, which is necessary anyway since thyme doesn't reach old age.

The surrounding flint walls and the yew hedges almost give a "walled garden atmosphere", although this part now also connects the house with the outer garden areas. Before the herb garden project (and after the use of the area as cattle sheds) there were some formal rose beds surrounded by box hedges. Although the roses appeared to be rather mature and somewhat leggy, we tried to re-invigorate them by harshly pruning them and re-positioned them either on the wall or inside the woodland area. (95% of them survived the procedure, although we started in the middle of a very hot and dry spring). The box plants were also re-used here (and elsewhere in the garden), which explains why they haven't developed their perfect shape, yet. (The plan is that the seating area should look like a large sofa one day and so we hope that box blight won't reach our area.)
In fact, "left-over" box plants instigated many new developments: They lead the way into and through the inner woodland area, provide the figures to the musicians' bench (the curve there is meant to mirror the main path through the herb garden), fill some pots, or have been used to skirt the strawberry corner at the end of the croquet lawn (developed there to mirror the existing rose bed surroundings opposite).

The herb garden is now in its 3rd season, and, apart from some annuals or biennials, its main inhabitants have settled rather well. Yet, the views are constantly changing within or between

seasons: Some herbs tend to spread, others flower several times per year when pruned back while many seed themselves. The latter we tried to use to our advantage (similarly with the borders) to harvest plant material for the meadow bank, for the partly uneven brick steps leading to the meadow area, for some cracks within the terrace paving stones, the barn entrance or even to fill (or under-plant) pots. Apart from the plants around and within the labyrinth most of the other herbs in the quarter circles besides the seating area have been chosen for culinary purposes (e.g. parsley, chives, garlic, chervil, dittander, mint varieties, lovage etc).

Meadow Bank

This project is in its 2nd year and was conceived when some bushes and trees had been removed to open up the view from the house. Although the term "meadow" (much used and fashionable nowadays) might be a little pretentious for such a small space, the plan is to leave this area rather wild and thus provide a good contrast to the croquet lawn below. It will be mown in late autumn, just before the daffodils start to break through the soil, and we are experimenting at the moment to find out which "weeded out" plants from the herb garden and the borders might suit best without dominating. It is our good fortune that the soil here is very poor, which prevents the grass overwhelming more delicate plants. The cammassias particularly appear to like this bank and provide some focus even after they have stopped flowering. In any case, it is a real pleasure for a gardener to have an area where to adore and care for plants which are often considered weeds elsewhere. Here (with some help) they are the right plants in the right place.

The Borders

The mixed borders are still in a developing or experimenting stage since it has become necessary to remove some larger shrubs which have outgrown either their space or life-span. In principle we follow, or rather interpret, the principle of succession planting and are being helped by the fact that the yew hedges and remaining (partly evergreen) shrubs hold the areas together, also during the winter months. Otherwise we try to make the (flowering) season as long and vivid as possible from self-seeded or transplanted forget-me-nots and tulips (Ronaldo and Spring Green can be highly recommended) to Helianthus, Asters, Dahlias and Monkshood, always trying to take advantage of unexpected self seeders. It will look different from year to year, whereas the general frame reassures us that we are still in the same place. Early cutting down does the trick in encouraging plants to flower repeatedly and thus provide several flower combinations with the same plants. As foliage plant Artemisia (particularly

Powys Castle) plays an important role. It is supposed to reach its maximum span when the tulips are reclining and other fading leaves need to be hidden. Regardless of a general fear of Lady's Mantle, we encourage it here to spread. In the borders outside the herb garden and in front of the inner woodland we tried to achieve a somewhat quieter picture with fewer varieties.

Woodland area

This was actually the starting point of the new developments, since we designated a spare area (behind the rose arch) for plants that had to be relocated from to-be-refurbished borders and the former rose garden. One casual reason for this was a rather good soil gathered from some neglected "compost" heaps there. (We always try to finish one compost "column" in early summer in order to plant nasturtium on top of it, which will, ideally, be glowing till and at Guy Fawkes Night.) Now the area accommodates spare plants for gaps in borders, which will then again be replanted with useful self-seeded "youngsters" from there. In this way all the geraniums, hellebores and columbines in the woodland borders and elsewhere have been raised in and travelled about the garden areas here.
In the process we opened up this inner woodland to create an additional path to the rose arch and some shaded, partly hidden walks. It is also now possible to see the wood for the trees. In late winter the ground is carpeted with snowdrops and winter aconites.

Orchard and Meadow Walks

From here it is possible to savour the wider and special atmosphere of the place through casually following the paths between and under the trees. A particular and majestic highlight is when the cow parsley flowers.
Perhaps after following the Templars' path you might want to trail a more casual route in the meadow labyrinth with an entrance and exit. Two people could, for instance, start at opposite points and meet in the middle and then separate again. It is perfectly possible to change the structure and pattern by mowing differently each year since the whole area is cut in autumn.
The flint cairn in the middle is made from stones dug out during the several planting and maintenance tasks in the herb garden and the borders. (Perhaps a symbolic greeting to nearby Grimes Graves). The ash piece on top is from the tree outside the herb garden which had to be pollarded after gale damage. Unfortunately the heart of the tree, which has been revealed in the process, has somewhat withered away (see picture in flyer).

General thoughts

It was fortunate that the "garden rooms" of Houghton on the Hill were not expected to deliver "instant results" or to work towards particular seasonal highlights (even though this might still be the case). This enabled us to observe the area for a longer period and to find out which plants really like it here and also which are able to withstand the neighbourhood of pheasants, partridges, moles and voles, or the occasional rambling hare and munjack. Hence we tend to weed a little later than (perhaps) expected in order to "harvest" plants. Perhaps similar to the term *slow food* our "philosophy" to working at Houghton might be termed *Slow Gardening*. This does not necessarily mean that the wheelbarrow will be pushed at a lower speed but that the focus is not on instant or spectacular results but rather a kind of gentle progress. Things are meant to look as if they have always been or belonged here and not designed for a purpose or effect. A "haircut" or any other major change should not be instantly visible and the plants that appear to like the area are as much used as possible, though in different constellations. The approach is thus to plan well ahead but not necessarily stick to the plan, perhaps comparable to jazz music where it is important to listen and react within a reassuring framework. The latter is, of course, generously provided at Houghton on the Hill with mature trees, yew, laurel and box hedges and flint walls (essential ingredients of the Norfolk cultural landscape). Within these formal surroundings it is thus perfectly possible to experiment with informal planting schemes and also to incorporate an unexpected seedling now and then or even to learn to appreciate some quick plants which have overtaken the gardener…

Plants that particularly flourish at Houghton

We won't dwell on ground elder and nettles (if you can't beat them eat them, e.g. as soup or lasagne, or drink them e.g. as nettle beer) but the following have established themselves as reliable spreaders and self-seeders and thus provided badly needed ground cover material for larger areas:

- **Woodruff:** Although one needs to be careful in borders near delicate plants, this is a wonderful weed-suppressing and spreading plant that provides effective ground cover under roses or box rows (only occasional weeding is necessary). When in flower it creates an impressive effect. A good material for May Bowle (a kind of spring wine).
- **Centaurea Montana or Perennial Cornflower:** Although it can be a little invasive in borders, it is possible to be quite ruthless to restrict it. Yet, it has such a seasonal life-span that it can be flowering 4 times a year. Almost the first to come and the last to go, it is fascinating to plan colour schemes around it (if only the partners were as reliable).

- **Hellebores Foetidus:** The common name “Stinking Hellebore” is extremely unjust (even though noses differ). It flowers from November till May (if not longer), provides healthy foliage, thrives in shady places and self seeds graciously. We used it as immediate ground cover together with euphorbia in areas where trees had been felled and left larger empty spaces.
- **Perennial Flax:** Although this plant has no long life span, it happily seeds itself. First established in the herb garden, it now also thrives in the borders. The single delicate blue flowers don’t last long but repeat for a very long period.
- **Geraniums of many varieties** feel quite at home in this region and soil. A reliable repeatedly flowering ground cover, it works in formal and wilder arrangements. Winter might be a problem: hence the backbone of some bushes or small trees enlivens these areas.
- **Herb Robert:** If there were a vote for “best loved weed”* the prize would go to this wild geranium. It is impressive how it so innocently creeps in and looks you in the eye like a cat which is not normally allowed on the sofa, and knows it. If necessary it can be removed easily but having medicinal qualities too, it is more than welcome to embellish the herb garden walls.
- **Dittander:** This (hot tasting) herb is a little invasive and seems overpowering in early spring but is more or less easy to restrict. It is possible to produce a delicious Pesto out of it, which can also be done from sage, parsley, lemon balm, oregano, chives and many other leaves (apart from the traditional basil). Ramsons is another valuable source for pesto.
- **Hyssop** seems to like Houghton very much, even though it can look precarious after a harsh winter. And it self-seeds and thus suggests attentive (late) weeding.

*The opposite (least loved weed) prize goes to cleavers, and this far in advance of ground elder or bindweed. In a casual experiment (fighting weeds with weeds) this beast seems to have won so far. A mischievous wrestler.