

# Lavant Horticultural Society

**'How to be a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Gardener'**

**Wed 12<sup>th</sup> June 2024**

***Timothy Walker***

Timothy was the director of Oxford Botanic Garden for 26 years and is now lecturer in Plant Sciences at Somerville College Oxford.

His talk focussed on how gardeners can cope with many of the challenges they are facing from environmental changes whilst reducing their use of natural resources.

He pointed out that in spite of gloomy predictions by nurserymen they have been able to become peat free.

He succeeded in making this not only interesting and informative, but also thoroughly enjoyable.

The talk was structured in the following ten chapters, all spiced with humour:

1. Look after your soil;
2. Choose plants that like your soil;
3. Grow more native plants;
4. Grow more fruit and vegetables;
5. Reduce watering;
6. Reduce pesticide use to the minimum;
7. Adapt to climate change;
8. Look after endangered species;
9. Gardening for nature;
10. New gardeners.

**1. Look after your soil.**

This is most important thing. It is said that you can improve soil, but not change it. Timothy had found in his own garden that it can be changed, but this was only feasible for a small area, needing to replace the soil going down three spade depths.

Prioritise making your own compost – do not let the compost heap dry out, otherwise the bacteria et al. that break it down will not be able to function. The compost heap also needs nitrogen, not to enrich the final compost, but to promote these things that break down the heap into compost.

**2. Choose plants that like your soil.**

**3. Grow more native plants.**

such as Guelder Rose *Viburnum opulus*.

Lots of natives make very good hedging plants, e.g. hazel, sloe (blackthorn), hawthorn.

Other natives worth growing: ox-eyed daisies, ragged robin, bugle, foxgloves, yellow mullein, honesty.

Avoid exotics that could pose a threat if they break out into the wild.

**4. Grow more fruit and vegetables.**

**5. Reduce watering**

by concentrating on plants that do not need constant watering.

If watering is required (such as growing vegetables) he recommended the use of porous soaker hoses in the soil, which get the moisture where it is required, rather than traditional watering, where a lot is wasted on the foliage.

**6. Reduce pesticide use to the minimum.**

Use predators to control greenhouse pests instead and encourage toads, hedgehogs and thrushes to help control slugs and snails. Use copper tape or copper containers to protect hostas.

Also choose resistant plants/varieties –

e.g. mildew resistant Aster varieties, such as ‘Blue Danube’ and ‘Little Carlow’.

“Wimbledon chop” – similar to Chelsea chop, but carried out at the start of July, to produce more flowering heads and shorter stems on asters.

**7. Adapt to climate change.**

Mediterranean plants can be useful to cope with rising temperatures and drier summers, but should not be used in rich soils, as they thrive on poorer stony ground, as in the [Delos Garden](#) at Sissinghurst.

**8. Look after endangered species.**

Timothy presented the example of critically endangered *Euphorbia stygiana*, native to the Azores, but hardy down to minus 15°C.

He had set up a project to propagate this species at Oxford, with the work carried out by young members of his team, which was very successful.

**9. Gardening for nature.**

**10. New gardeners.**

Encourage the development of young gardeners to look after gardens in the future.

In the examples of projects at Oxford University Botanic Gardens, the work of young team members was highlighted.