Working with Nature

Two of the 20th century’s most influential plantswomen, Ruth Bancroft and Beth Chatto, extolled the virtues of the right plant in the right place, from their respective homes in California and Essex, says Ruth Chivers

It’s easy to get swept away by enthusiasm for plants that once seen you simply must have, however long you’ve been gardening. But making calm, considered choices improves creativity and brings more successful results. Beth Chatto and Ruth Bancroft were outstanding gardeners who demonstrated the power of making more deliberate plant choices. Combining a passion for plants with the ability to put the right ones in the right places resulted in their groundbreaking gardens. There’s much to be learned from their approach, whatever the style of your garden.
Beth Chatto and Ruth Bancroft had a shared gardening philosophy, which was simply to accept the underlying conditions in their gardens and choose plants to suit them. Both were creating gardens at a similar time, when terms such as ecology, water conservation and sustainable planting were not in common parlance. Mid-century gardening progress translated into gardeners choosing plants more for their looks than how well suited they were to the conditions in which they were planted. Yet while the two women had a similar approach, and average rainfall in their respective Walnut Creek, California and Elmstead Market, Essex gardens was identical at 50cm a year, their results were stylistically different. Latitude, climate and underlying landscape differences explain the contrasts, but both women made great gardens using nature as a guide.

Each woman had a childhood interest in plants, but neither was formally trained in botany or horticulture. Both trained as teachers and became keen gardeners only after marriage. In the 1940s, Chatto inherited the Essex house and garden of her husband Andrew’s parents – he worked in the family fruit-growing business. In the same decade, Bancroft’s husband, Philip, inherited his family’s 400-acre ranch, which produced pears and walnuts, in Walnut Creek, California.

Chatto’s initial focus was on the vegetable garden before she turned her attention to the more traditionally planted ornamental areas. Bancroft’s first passion was for irises and over the years she built up quite a collection. She took her favourite plants with her when she married, but her lack of knowledge of Walnut Creek’s climate – the San Francisco Bay Area consists of a collection of different microclimates – meant that many of them died in its cold winter weather.

Significant friendships made in the 1950s led to major changes in both women’s approaches to gardening. Chatto described her first meeting with artist and gardener Cedric Morris at his garden at Benton End, Suffolk, as “turning her world upside down”. It was an unconventional garden for those times, crammed with a spontaneous mix of herbaceous plants and bulbs. Many plants then considered ‘weeds’ were new to Chatto and sparked her interest as a flower arranger, Euphorbia characias subsp. wulfenii in particular.

Bancroft’s fascination with succulents began in the same decade. Visiting her friend Glenn Davidson’s garden in San Francisco, she was intrigued by the geometric rosette of fleshy pink leaves of a Canary Island species of aeonium. Davidson gave her several pots of different succulents to take home and her collection of drought-tolerant plants began.
It was Cedric Morris who told the Chattos they would never make a good garden out of the one they had inherited, prompting them to move house. They already owned the land at Elmstead Market where White Barn House was built in 1960, and Chatto promptly set about making her new garden. Large tangles of brambles were cleared with a few fine oaks and hollies retained as focal points. Her ecological approach to design concentrated on finding plants that would thrive in the garden’s different habitats. Plants that could withstand prolonged drought and poor soil were used to create a Mediterranean garden on the warm gravel slopes next to the house. Plants native to the world’s temperate forests were used in the shaded areas, beneath large canopied trees. And damming the spring-fed ditch running through the site’s centre enhanced conditions for plants that prefer watery conditions.

The final area Chatto established was her Gravel Garden. Before the winter of 1991-1992, visitors used the Leylandii-hedged grass area at the garden’s entrance to park their cars. Chatto cleared the area and redesigned it using hosepipes to create large curving shapes, like a dried-up riverbed with islands of planting. Her vision was a main path meandering through boldly planted areas with no visible hard edges. The plants survive without irrigation and if plants chosen from her drought-tolerant lists died, they were replaced with others that proved better-suited: tough love, indeed! The Gravel Garden has consequently become one of Chatto’s most famous designs, being both inspirational and influential.

Once Bancroft’s collection of potted, drought-tolerant plants had taken over all the windowsills of her home and spread outside, she decided it was time to extend her garden. The old walnut trees at Walnut Creek were diseased and unproductive, so much of the farmland had been sold for housing in 1972, but Bancroft retained four acres to create a new garden for her succulents and cacti, which were well-suited to the climate here.

In 1972, she commissioned garden designer and nurseryman Lester Hawkins to help with the new garden’s layout. Retaining a few mature oaks, they set out a network of meandering paths through a series of organically shaped and mounded borders. Boulders were positioned in some as naturalistic backdrops to planting and a large angular structure was installed for guaranteed shade, since not all drought-tolerant plants enjoy constant full sun. Two Victorian-style shade houses linked by a domed folly were a gift from her husband, Philip, and became the garden’s main entrance when it first opened to the public. Paths were covered with crushed brown rock.
brought in from nearby quarries, especially chosen by Bancroft to better set off her plants.

Like Chatto’s Gravel Garden, Bancroft’s drought-tolerant garden shows that such spaces need be neither dull nor arid-looking. The sheer variety of Bancroft’s plants from the world’s drier regions is striking. Six-metre-tall, gangly giants and huge, shark-toothed agaves induce childlike wonder in visitors, while attention-grabbing key plants in each border lure visitors around. Up close, ruffle-edged cabbage-like succulents and a sprinkling of California natives such as zauschneria add texture and warm colours. Short-lived flowers pepper bright spatters of colour through planting for much of the year in this vibrant garden that still looks ‘modern’.

Not finding the right plants to suit her garden in nurseries caused Chatto to open her own, Unusual Plants, in 1967. Its lists were booklets that classified plants by the conditions they prefer – the result of her astute gardening and observation – with detailed descriptions that made customers want to grow the plants in their own gardens. For many gardeners, they were books to read as avidly as any best-selling thriller. Bancroft’s plant searches involved scouring far-flung nurseries for the right type of plants to suit her collection. She was a great advocate of using smaller plants that transplanted better while keeping back-up plants in reserve. She never stopped adding new plants to her garden and in her nineties could be seen putting out brightly coloured markers where new plants were to be added. She used to garden seven days a week, never stopping for lunch, but pausing at midday for a cold beer — although by 87 she found this was making her drowsy, so cut it out!

Chatto’s fame grew thanks to her nursery displays at Chelsea Flower Show. The types of plants she exhibited and the way in which they were arranged along the same ecological lines as her garden made a big impact, and between 1977 and 1986 the RHS awarded her ten consecutive gold medals. In 1987, she was awarded the Lawrence Memorial Medal and the Victoria Medal of Honour. She lectured internationally and wrote best-selling books all based on her own garden. Chatto died in 2018 aged 94, but her garden and nursery remain family-run, with a new education trust and plentiful courses and events further spreading her passion for working with the natural world rather than against it.

Before Bancroft’s creation opened to the public in 1994 as a non-profit organisation, Penelope Hobhouse named it as “one of the finest gardens in North America”. As a living archive of dry climate and desert plants, some of which were disappearing from native habitats, it was a major influence on the founding of the USA’s The Garden Conservancy, which helps to preserve significant private gardens for the enjoyment and education of the public. It was the first garden to be sponsored by the Conservancy, which secured its future by turning Bancroft’s private passion into a public resource.

With its propagation centre and outdoor classroom, it is committed to educating gardeners on the benefits of water conservation through drought-tolerant planting. Bancroft worked in her garden alongside gardeners and volunteers until well into her nineties (she died in 2017, just after her 109th birthday). She never stopped adding new plants to her collection and while the garden remains relatively unknown, her legacy is secured.

For more information, visit bethchatto.co.uk and ruthbancroftgarden.org
Working with WHAT YOU’VE GOT

An ecological approach to planting gives gardens a natural, settled feel.

Embrace ‘problem’ areas
Both Chatto and Bancroft accepted what they had rather than spending time and money changing soil conditions. Embracing ‘problem’ areas like this is liberating: it lowers maintenance and increases planting success. Carry out a simple site assessment and match planting to conditions. Make precise lists of suitable plants and stick to them, like Ruth Bancroft’s choice of *Agave parryi* and *Aloe heteracantha* in the hot spot above.

Use mature trees and plants as anchors
Both women kept fine old trees in place when creating their gardens, taking them into account when devising their layouts – like in Chatto’s Woodland Garden, above – they’re invaluable ‘anchors’ to all garden changes. Sensitive pruning and crown lifting by experts solves mature tree ‘problems’ such as excessively dense shade.

Use plants to fight weeds
To address the issue of “the everlasting weed problem and lack of time to cope with it”, Chatto covered the ground with foliage for as long as possible. Carpets of groundcover plants also help make newly planted beds look fully grown.

Appreciate senescence
The spent flowers and interesting seedheads of many plants prolong beauty, texture and provide winter food for wildlife. Annuals with interesting seedheads, such as love-in-a-mist and poppies, were essential for Chatto.

Arrange plants in groups
Chatto was influenced by the ‘Golden principle of design’ of Japanese flower arranging, and arranged plants in groups “to form roughly asymmetrical triangles”. Think in threes, not single plants – tall, mid height, lower growing – and adjust scale to size of the space or area.

THE ENGLISH GARDEN JANUARY 2020