The Wild Gardener

By Maureen O’Connell

A few weeks ago when I was in London, I spent a few days traveling around the Sussex area of England. This is an easy two-hour southeast drive from central London. I visited several National Trust historic houses and gardens. I find October a wonderful time to visit southern England; the trees and shrubs are starting to take on their brilliant autumn hues; the late season flowers are still blooming, and the weather is usually fair and mild (or I have just always been lucky). I actually went there to visit one house and garden in particular, Gravetye Manor. Richard Infield built Gravetye in 1598 for his bride, Katharine Compton. The initials R and K may still be seen over the main entrance door from the formal garden, and their portraits are carved in oak over the fireplace in the master bedroom. There are still vestiges of that era in the house and the gardens. A lot has not changed. Allow me to tell you about this home’s most notable owner, William Robinson (1838-1935). He is considered by many as one of the greatest gardeners of all time and the “Father of the English Cottage Garden Movement.” Many Englishmen do not like to admit that an Irishman had the greatest influence upon the development of English garden design in the mid 1800s to the early 1900s.

Today, if you ask people to describe the look of an English garden, many will think of a Cottage Garden however, this style did not become popular and accepted until the mid-1800s. For centuries, English gardens were modeled after French and Dutch formal garden designs. This design appreciated balance, symmetry, and geometry. It found beauty in linearity; right angles defined this concept. In the mid-1700s, England’s three most influential garden landscape designers were William Kent, Lancelot “Capability” Brown, and Humphrey Repton. These three gardeners led the way to the gradual transition from the classical to a natural style of garden design. Kent still had a close connection to the classical world, and Brown’s gardens looked more like idealized visions of the English countryside. There are several historic gardens in Sussex which exhibit this style of Brown. His landscapes combined trees and lawns with a body of water as a focal point. Humphrey Repton was well received by plant lovers, as he introduced the concept of planting flowers next to the house.

William Robinson was born in Ireland in 1838, a year after Queen Victoria ascended the throne. He moved to London as a young man and studied at the best horticultural schools in London. In 1867, he became foreman for the herbaceous section of the Garden of the Royal Botanic Society at Regent’s Park in London. Robinson was also an accomplished writer. In 1870, he published *The Wild Garden*, but his most important work was *The English Flower Garden*, first published in 1883. Robinson traveled extensively in Europe and North America. His observations of the many gardens he visited started to shape his own vision of what a garden should look like. In New York City, he was impressed with Central Park, which was just then nearing completion under its principal designer Frederick Law Olmsted. All along, his ideas regarding landscape design were evolving into what became known as the Cottage Garden style. He revolted against the formal and constrained highly-geometric gardens of the Victorian Age that depended heavily on greenhouse-grown tropical plants. Robinson advocated the use of hearty perennials, native plants, and ground covers in natural-looking drifts. His visionary ideas were considered groundbreaking at the time, but his desire to use plants to sustain wildlife and to work with nature rather than shaping it to our ideals is very relevant and accepted today. We talk today about sustainability and growing our own food locally. This is nothing new; these were Robinson’s ideas.

In addition to writing garden books, Robinson was a columnist for *The Times*. After several years, his writing career brought him financial success, and, in 1884, he purchased the Elizabethan Manor of Gravetye, located in West Sussex, along with two hundred acres. It was here that Robinson was able to explore and develop his ideas of Wild Gardening. It was his home, garden, and field laboratory. The regal stone house, gardens, and rolling meadows still exist, much as they were in the sixteenth century. After Robinson died, the manor had several owners and uses. Today, it is a country house hotel with eighteen bedrooms and a world-renowned restaurant.

While in London, I spent several days at Gravetye, exploring the gardens and speaking with the garden team of paid professionals and volunteers. Robinson’s Wild Garden blends into the larger landscape of the lush, crocus-covered meadows, the papyrus and bamboo plants at the many ponds’ water’s edges, and the woodland edges and openings. When I was there, most of the summer-flowering plants had stopped blooming, but the autumn display was in full bloom with delicious-colored dahlias, floppy dark red sedum, pink and purple asters, light blue cosmos, and indigo-blue lobelias. The stone-walled kitchen garden still supplied the restaurant with many herbs, vegetables, berries, and flowers. Some things have changed at Gravetye Manor, but much is like it was years and years ago when it was Robinson’s dream. It still exudes Robinson; it is still his creation and memorial.

P.S. Recently, a friend said to me that after reading my last *Monocle* article, she now knows how I keep my many gardens alive and beautiful. “You have two garden helpers, Tom and Sam, to help you with the labor.” Now, that is true, and I am enclosing their picture. As you can see, Tom and Sam are my two well-loved Labrador Retrievers. Their idea of “helping in the garden,” is to dig up whatever I plant and to take naps in my hosta beds.