

Setting standards and achieving them

Mick Reece¹

Congratulations to the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture and the New Zealand Gardens Trust for their achievement in providing this country with a credible national registration and reference system for those wanting to visit gardens in New Zealand.

Congratulations and heartfelt admiration also to the assessors who provide the quality control and are courageous and conscientious enough to do what is needed to be done, despite the risks attached to that process when the news isn't what the customer wants to hear.

When you think about it, creating a garden is a hugely personal and intensely emotional expression of ourselves which must mean a lot to us – otherwise, why do it? It is therefore not surprising that some of us may feel vulnerable and sensitive when the precious product of our efforts is exposed to others for their scrutiny and, more traumatically, their critical evaluation for judgement! It may be a harrowing experience and I suppose the answer lies somewhere between the euphoria of having your garden praised and the depths of frustrated anger from getting criticism you really didn't expect or want. I guess it could also expose how competitive you are.

Ultimately, before you get involved with sharing your garden with others, you should have a good idea of why you want to do that and what you are prepared to do to achieve it.

For gardens in public ownership the situation is reasonably clear cut, in that there is a *requirement* that the garden be managed and maintained for presentation to visitors and that some attempt is made to provide value for their

investment. It also creates a need to gauge the extent to which you achieve success, and to measure this against an agreed level of performance.

The public garden's design and management is also subject to increased levels of accountability because the garden is being visited *as of right* because someone has prepaid for that through membership or paying their rates. In plain language – you (the manager) do not own the garden and you cannot get away with what you want to do until you have convinced someone else that it needs doing (approval) and/or to pay for it (by way of sponsorship, donations or grants).

Success and failure are therefore measurable and so to avoid the latter, getting your standards of service right is very important. A big part of that is understanding your customer and anticipating or forecasting their needs.

For the Botanic Garden here in Dunedin, setting standards to provide consistent performance and achieving recognised customer satisfaction has been, and continues to be, an interesting issue. In preparing this article I decided to try and tell the story from a personal perspective, of how this issue was approached 15 to 18 years ago.

In 1990, I was planning a trip with my wife Jill to the UK, aiming to include visits to as many famous gardens as possible, for inspiration, enjoyment and perspective. Deciding on a prioritised list for five weeks was exciting but horrendous. At that stage I had to consider which were the more relevant gardens for comparison and reference against the Dunedin Botanic Garden.

Interestingly, I had to conclude that Kew and Edinburgh Botanic Gardens were important to experience but the issue of the relationship with customers was critical. In that context, RHS Wisley and the National Trust Gardens such as Sissinghurst were the better match for this purpose. Their relationship with their members and their need to sustain a product that rewarded the member with ongoing benefit, ownership and pride was more akin to the relationship Dunedin's Botanic Garden has with its community – its ratepayers.

Right or wrong in these assumptions – the trip proved to be a major part of my education in meeting customer needs and the importance of getting right the relationship between such elements as design, structure, form, information, variety, identity, quality, consistency and the importance of change. Of course you never get it exactly right, but it is important to keep trying.

RHS Wisley and Sissinghurst are established gardens in the UK with an international reputation for excellence. They offered to us, at the Dunedin Botanic Garden, relevant benchmarks for the services and experiences we were trying to offer our visitors. They represent two reference points for demonstrating the value of structure, design and plant selection in our gardens; this is often on a much bigger scale and budget than we can aspire to but the principles remain the same.

The photographs and captions that follow attempt to illustrate some of these points and provide some food for thought in terms of identifying relevant standards and levels of service for gardens open to visitors.

¹ P O Box 8021, Gardens Post Office, Dunedin; mreece@dcc.govt.nz

RHS Wisley

The Royal Horticultural Society has more than 300,000 members and the garden at Wisley is their showpiece. It combines a number of features and facilities to satisfy the wide range of garden interests of its members. The quality of the presentation at Wisley is widely recognised and emphasises that the use of imposing structural elements needs to be balanced by good maintenance if the effect is to be inspiring. It also provides many examples of how important attention to planting detail and variety is when attracting and maintaining the interest of gardeners.



Fig. 1 The laboratory at Wisley (built in 1916 to resemble a country residence) and the adjacent canal provide a classic picture on the large scale with effective design elements. This is near the entrance to the garden and sets the scene for many visitors.



2a



2b

Fig. 2 a–b Intimate plant detail is provided by a formal planting of succulent plants, or “tapestry bedding” and which not only features the main display (2a), but also a second planting (2b) that interprets the display with named samples of the plants used.



3a



3b

Fig. 3 a–b Throughout the RHS garden at Wisley, traditional features such as the rock garden provide interest and at the same time an insight into the change and renewal required from time to time. Looking across to the ‘wild garden’ we can see an area recovering from the devastating storms of 1987. The works are made to be a feature of interest so that the rehabilitation is interpreted to involve visitors in the process rather than excluding access until completed.



4b



4a



4c

Fig. 4 a–c Areas of enclosure provide a change of pace where intimate detail can be appreciated, provided that the presentation standards are high. These can be designed as “rooms” within the feature such as the rock garden (4a) or, formal elements such as this trough garden (4b) as an adjunct to the alpine house and the intense courtyard of floral plant displays (4c).

Sissinghurst

Sissinghurst is a garden created and made famous by Vita Sackville-West and now managed by the National Trust. It needs no introduction to most gardeners and is visited by many thousands of people throughout the year. It has been developed to maximise the restored buildings and structures of the original 13th Century manor house to create a series of garden "rooms". These are impeccably designed and planted to celebrate themes, plant associations, and colour combinations. Even the most uninitiated visitor, with limited experience in gardening and plants, cannot help but be inspired.

This garden continues to be managed by the Trust and maintained and developed to reflect Sackville-West's passion for the right plant in the right place, using the very best plants available to form three dimensional pictures in each garden space. The attention to detail and commitment to the original principles, whilst embracing change within that established design framework, is the reason for its timelessness and why so many people return again and again.



Fig. 5 a–c The overview from the tower (5a) gives an immediate aerial connection to the layout of the garden and also to an appreciation for the borrowed landscape of the Kentish Weald. Figure 5b shows a late summer



scene with the mown areas of under-planted bulbs forming geometric patterns through the orchard. The Rose Garden (5c) is a sheltered walled haven of old fashioned roses, clematis, bulbs and perennials in artistically arranged profusion. This contrasts with the formal use of hedges along pathways and the central feature of the Rondel, which represents the shape of the floor of the local Oast houses that are a part of the process for malting of barley.



Fig. 6 a–b; 7 a–b The South Cottage Garden (6a, 6b), and the White Garden (7a, 7b), are well known and famous components of this garden. They are two of several which are designed to contain plants that exhibit distinctive colour themes – the "hot" colours of reds, purples, orange and yellows in the former and in the latter the dramatically different "cool" shades of white, silver, green and grey.

Mick Reece has been in Dunedin since 1983 when he was successful in applying for the position as Curator of the Dunedin Botanic Garden. Before that he was employed at the Wellington Botanic Garden for seven years where he completed his RNZIH National Diploma of Horticulture (Hons). Mick has managed to remain involved at a management level with the Botanic Garden over the past 22 years although as Community and Recreation Services Manager his responsibilities have extended to parks, reserves, cemeteries, community development and other activities of the Dunedin City Council.

Mick is passionate about plants and gardens and belongs to a number of professional and non-professional organisations, including executive membership of the RNZIH, promoting these interests at a national and international level.