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## Charles Fox, of Glendurgan, talks about an artistic approach to gardening

**We enter our destinies; and according to some, I seem to have developed a talent for being an artist and an arranger of flowers.**

It was my grandmother's fault really. She could take a sprig or two of the invaluable evergreen *Azalea* 'Palestrina', a few lilacs and *Paeonia* 'Duchess of Marlborough', throw them together almost with one hand, and produce a display so ravishing that a visiting Pole, invited to admire Mrs Fox's flower arrangement, could, by way of an appraisal, only come up with: "*I vant ze lavatory*".



'Charles's painting of *Magnolia Sargentiana* var. *Robusta Alba* at Glendurgan

As primarily a garden designer this was not the original plan and even now, firmly eschewing the word 'florist', I pay a lot of attention to my flowers looking as if they have arranged themselves rather than being controlled by me. My only proviso is that each and every stem should feel happy as it is deeply immersed in water, with stems trimmed and leaves removed. Otherwise, as the French would say, "*on s'arrangera*".



Spring wild flowers

My own parents too had their influences: my father who knew exactly how to trim leaves to reveal flowers to their best effect and my mother who had an almost child-like ability of throwing flowers together so that they looked as they so often delightfully do in France; gathered in a bunch and put in a jug on a kitchen table.





Summer wild flowers

I must have also inherited from my mother her powers of observation. One day in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York my brothers and I witnessed, with some apprehension, her approaching one of the security guards. There was no more incongruous scene than her in tweeds and he in leather and very possibly carrying a pistol. "Excuse me young man", she said, "Are you responsible for the flowers? They are quite lovely". The value of observation has been the same with being an artist.

Someone once asked me: "How come you can paint?" This is a question I too have asked myself, having had no more training in this than in the art of flower arranging.

The answer of course, as with so many things, is to observe what not to do, as much as what to do.

This slightly reminds me of two flower-ladies once commenting on my efforts with blue flowers. They assumed that they were at a safe distance from my hearing: "I have always said, never do blue in a church, and then I see this". I was not quite sure whether her next remark should have been "and it confirms my opinion" or "and I am pleasantly surprised". I pressed on.



Blue flowers in a church

Another time in the restaurant at the Hotel Tresanton in St Mawes, I was just finishing a job, when from the other side of the room I heard a voice of some authority declare: "You have an inconsistency". Being properly brought up I apologised profusely and invited further correction. Later on her husband passed me and whispered "Don't worry, she is only the head of the flower rota at \*\*\*\*\* Abbey".

I readily confess to being subconsciously inconsistent in several areas of my life, but as a matter of fact when it comes to anything artistic I invite inconsistency in: it is, to my mind exactly that which produces pazz, makes works of art sing, and is arresting, rather like dissonance in music. Too much perfection kills. Refreshingly, some of these sharp-eyed experts can occasionally come up with constructive criticism.

When arranging flowers high up on a church wall in oasis, it is my habit to place behind the oasis container an old dust sheet to catch any drips, lest I incur the anger of those who polish any wood which is in dangerous proximity. At the last moment, before finally leaving the church, I will then remove the offending dust sheet with a sharp tug.

Twice now I have received comments about my inventive use of, on the first occasion 'the drapes', and on the second occasion, evidently more High Church, 'the veil'. I am aware and impressed by all those innovative arrangements in the floral design tent at flower shows, and wonder if I could ever qualify with the dust sheets and call my entry 'The Papal Court', 'First Communion', or 'Lady Macduff', and receive an appraisal which reads 'novel interpretation'.

I was once informed on a further occasion that I lacked a leader. (Again like the flower rota lady, she was unaware of the accuracy of this comment). But this was also amusing for another reason; one of the things I like to see in healthy trees, and am too often disappointed, is a strong leader.



Inconsistency and no leader





Pruning at  
Hotel Tresanton

I have in my mind a sort of oriental picture of this being practised by dozens of Chinese gardeners and hundreds of dozens of song birds... racing along the paths at Trebah, or perhaps, more likely these days, a National Trust property.

Or maybe it was at Caerhays, where once I was drawing the attention of a gardening group to a bit of superb camellia pruning. "What you want to avoid," I said with apparent knowledge, "is this:" and I bent down to touch a bad example of unobserved chaffing. I should have known better: it turned out to be a loose piece of pruning which was about 20cm long, which had lodged itself in a fork, and which I was able to remove with my hand. Laughter and embarrassment followed all round.

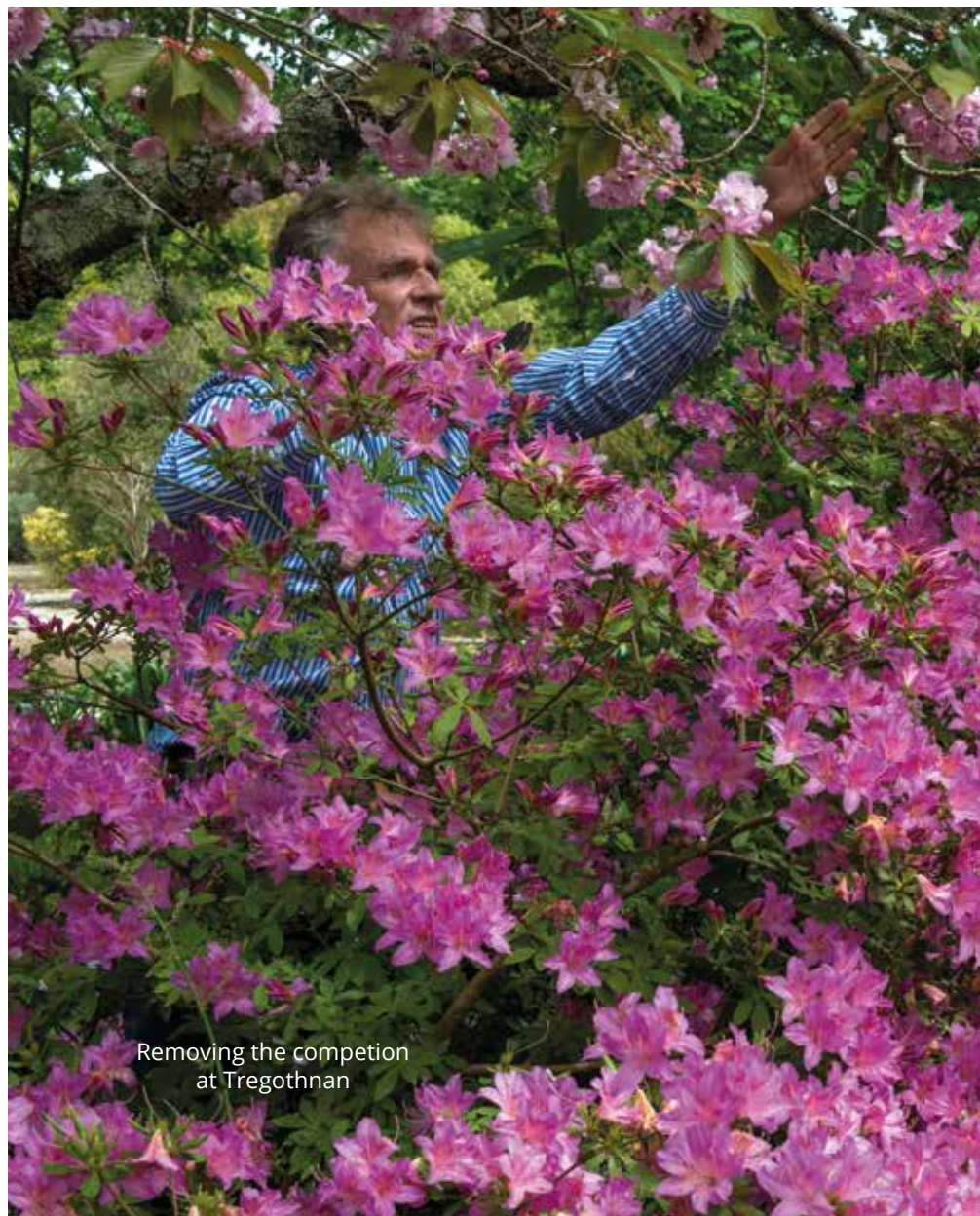
This brings us to yet another subject I know so little about: pruning. Indeed I once overheard a great aunt, gazing at one of my creations, say "Why not kill the whole bush?" (Grander gardens of course, like Heligan, had in their kitchen gardens, dedicated rows of foliage for cutting; these, I have noticed with some sadness, have only recently been removed). On the contrary I have learnt over the years that a plant can benefit hugely by being picked; and I am not talking about only sweet peas. Often it is a matter, at least in the first instance, of common sense, e.g. removing the competition (see above and right).

As regards camellias, they have an amazing ability to regenerate, and in addition can be pruned for aesthetic reasons: someone once opined that camellias should be pruned leaving in the branches enough space through which a bird might fly.

Branches which are in-growing and can lead to chaffing and disease are best removed, as are water shoots which rub. When I was a child, there was a phrase to describe anything that should not be allowed, such as water shoots: it was 'infra dig'. They were assiduously removed.

Then, in the journal of a well known horticultural society an article appeared saying that water shoots were, after all, permissible: they would ultimately grow upward and outwards and form new branches with bigger flowers.

**But you have to be watchful, especially with magnolias (see next page).**



Removing the competition  
at Tregothnan



A mistake we all make, as amateurs and professionals, is to plant shrubs too close to a path. This is because we want our gardens looking full and luxuriant, and as quickly as possible, unlike a gardening cousin of mine who, most refreshingly, likes to see pure earth, as in 17th century paintings of rows of equally spaced tulips, the bright colours being set off by square feet of weedless chocolate brown.

Subconsciously I achieved this effect in my prize-winning two metre square garden at prep. school. The too-close-to-the-path phenomenon is also because we are seduced by the smallness of shrubs when we first purchase them. You only have to drive through suburbia to see this, and worse: blue cedars as much as ubiquitous *leylandii* equally romping away. The effects of tree roots is not so obvious; they may in time upset paths, walls and drains, and weep like mad over houses and roads, but shrubs, if left to grow and be pruned, form a veritable hedge.

I, however, with my little lopper or saw, have learnt that a way round this aesthetically very unpleasing sight, is to remove the offending branches from as far into the shrub as possible, thus avoiding a hard edge. At Glendurgan the National Trust is keen to practice the rules of clean gardening. This means plenty of air and space around each tree or shrub, mulching above the roots rather than piled up around the trunk, and keeping a raised canopy so that there is not a muddle where the skirt of a tree meets the long grass, and the strimmer or mower.

The head gardener once said to me that weeding was done on a giant scale: so that where there is a plant from the lower echelons, such as, in my opinion, *Berberis* or *Mahonia*, competing with a specimen tree, the course of action is clear.



Be watchful, especially with magnolias  
*Magnolia campbellii* subsp. *mollicomata*

Tim Smit remarked on this in a magazine article: "Glendurgan is open; there is space for everything to breathe".

Of course, we all dream of having an old fashioned cutting garden. I once had the privilege of being shown around the private cutting garden of a well known banking family. In it are grown enough flowers to furnish the house every weekend of the year. As well as 12 foot by 12 foot plots of iris, peony, sweet william, cornflowers, and camassias, to name but a few favorites, there was also a cherry blossom house, and a carnation house, containing not the sort of *Dianthus* you see in every florist's shop, but malmaisons of Edwardian size and splendour. For those of us who run to only rows of cutting flowers, however, a lot is to be said for having a paucity of raw materials. It exercises the imagination, and as we all know, the best dinners are often the result of an almost empty fridge.

I suspect that I am what bird books call a 'carrion feeder'. If ever I hear that a branch has fallen or that someone is about to cut down their dahlias I will be there a.s.a.p. with my secateurs.

Several years ago now when the County Flower Show was held at Trelissick, I had the temerity to ask the Tresco team what was going to happen to its stand once the show came to an end. On hearing that it was going to be chucked I asked if I could clear it for them. You can get a lot of foliage and flowers into the boot of an estate car even if they are banksias, proteas, and bottle-brushes. With unusual plants such as these, my Scillonian trophies, it is much easier to achieve impact.

But you also need appropriate containers, from a practical point of view as much as anything else. The flower arranger's worst nightmare is that a vase should topple over in the middle of a wedding service, or that a hanging arrangement comes crashing to the floor in the middle of the bridegroom's speech.

So belt and braces are a number one requirement with me: I have to be able to swing from the ropes I attach to a marquee pole in order to test them. Weddings are fun – as far as I am concerned, the larger the better. The poor, or very-soon-to-be-poor, father of the bride knows that the financial cost will be immense; I too am not unaware of my final bill. But it is a fraction of the total expense.



Wedding flowers at Boconnoc



Cherry blossom and beech tree leaves at Boconnoc

Digressing for a moment, I am also painfully aware that the degree of extravagance - which sometimes includes me - to a wedding, is in inverse proportion to the success of a marriage; and you only have to open the pages of a high-society magazine to observe this.

I enjoy the fact that the whole exercise is done and dusted in a few days, and seen by a large number of guests. I enjoy being present during the lead-up to the event. I like seeing how other aspects of the wedding are being managed, biting my tongue, and sometimes not biting my tongue if I know from experience a better way of doing something; often this is none of my business.

There is too, I have to say, a vicarious enjoyment in witnessing all the banter behind doors e.g. "Come on Trace, stop looking like a spare part at a perfume factory", and an exasperated mother, to the devoted father, about their daughter about to be married "Frankly I am not too interested in anything else that Susan says she wants".

Also important, and much underrated in my opinion, is to bear in mind what garden designers call the data: What sort of site are we dealing with? What is the size of the room, the colour scheme, the budget and the number of people attending the party? Are there on-site containers which can be used? More importantly is there on-site an abundance of foliage or flowers which I can raid?

As readers of this magazine will know, there are in Cornwall not many other estates which can touch the beauty of Boconnoc; and as I have also discovered, there are few better opportunities than here for me to practise my profession.

In May 2016 I was asked to help decorate the house. The beech tree leaves were new and in the woods I was able to find some eight feet high saplings, each with a trunk no wider than a little finger; and in the garden the cherry trees were laden with blossom.

I cut a few ingrowing branches, carried them into the house and decorated - with some dexterity but not too much - a few alcoves. For any event Boconnoc is the perfect house, has flower containers to match, and does not demand too much ornamentation.

**Often, as with designing a garden, the fewer the ingredients the better.**



*Gevuina avallana*, *Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Silver Queen' and *Camellia reticulata* at Trelissick

As I grew up, away from home and living in London, I gravitated towards flora - and fauna - whenever and wherever I could. It was not long before I was observing what was being achieved at places like the Royal Academy and the Royal Opera House in terms of inventiveness and scale.





The right container: Apple blossom in a silver jug

Flower arrangements need to echo the scale and style of their surroundings and in turn need to be complemented by their containers, such as in the story of the late Duchess of Devonshire, finding she had to decorate a dining room table for a state occasion at Chatsworth.

She averred that being in the depths of winter there was not one thing to pick in the garden - which I do not believe (what are acres of glass houses for?) - and so found some old aquariums which she then filled with chicks.

This is not the sort of idea you can practice at home; stick to goldfish in a glass cylinder, and, as the Sunday newspaper pamphlets say, your guests, even if not presidents, will be "astonished and delighted".

One year I helped a friend, still working her magic with flowers in her nineties, arrange some flowers for a military charity event at The Grange in Hampshire.

She had hired an urn at least three foot high by three foot wide, filled it with Oasis, and then created not so much a flower arrangement but something verging on a border, with branches of Phoenix palm, *Mahonia*, bright blue hydrangeas, about fifty white lilies and, I seem to remember, about a dozen *Delphinium* Pacific blue hybrids.

Meanwhile, contributing to this modest display, behind it, I decorated a ten foot high fire place with bright green grapes and pale blue hydrangeas.

I had persuaded a World War II hero to part with these: the second time I had approached him for an infinite supply of hydrangeas.

The first had been in the 1980s at the time of my wedding, when my brother and I picked about 500. "Pick them long, Charles," he said "if you pick them long you can always shorten; but if you pick them short you cannot lengthen"; and then after a few seconds he added "You can make that a philosophy for life if you like". It is an expensive philosophy, but it certainly works with flower-arranging. I am often asked the secret to preserving hydrangeas and everyone has his or her own: for me what has always worked 99% is to immerse the cut stem and flower overnight in the bath....not always a popular recipe with those who have to clean the bathroom.

**The arranging of flowers, I often describe, is nothing more than painting with flowers, rather than paints: the same theories of composition and colour apply.**

Moving on to painting brings us back to observation. At Glendurgan I am not short of subjects, and can go for a short walk and notice a hundred different scenes which lend themselves to being painted.

But it is only when you are standing in front of something for at least two hours that you begin to make deep observations; and of course, as you observe, you learn, for example, foxgloves have bells which are more rectangular in shape than circular.





Handkerchief tree bracts  
*Davidia involucrata* var. *vilmoriniana*

You learn with the Handkerchief tree what is a bract and with magnolias what is a tepal, a sepal and a petal.



*Magnolia sprengeri* var. *diva*  
tepal, sepal and petal

You learn exactly how the new leaves of the tulip tree burst out of a foetus-like pod, and then unfold like two flag-wavers. You also become soaked in the essence of what surrounds you whether or not that is the subject. So for example a painting of the bluebells at Enys is not merely a visual exercise and experience. The scent is overpowering; the hammering of woodpeckers is a delight; and the sun is wonderfully warm on one's back.



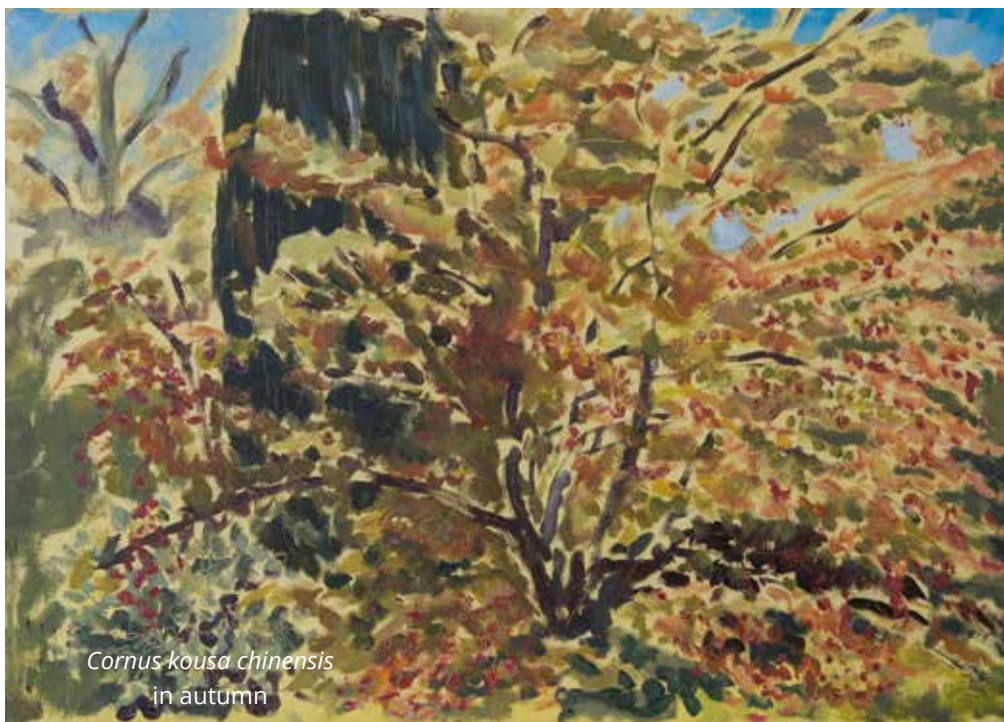
Bluebells at Enys



*Cornus kousa chinensis*  
in summer

At the bottom of the lawn at Glendurgan there are two plants which respond well to being painted, but not to being picked. The first is *Cornus kousa chinensis*. There is strength and design its form, variation in its bark, a spinach

green intensity in its foliage, a tiered wedding cake effect when it flowers, and then all the glories of autumn foliage and strawberry like fruits. I can forgive it for drooping soon after it has been picked.



*Cornus kousa chinensis*  
in autumn

The other is *Agave americana*. Except for its flowers which apparently can be fried in batter and eaten, it defies picking; even for the flowers you will need a ladder, or perhaps safer, a cherry picker, something in which I have not for the moment invested.

I once saw an arrangement of gorse.....

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