

# Petticoats in the Parterres

**Women Garden Designers: 1900 to the Present**

By *Kristina Taylor*

Garden Art Press. 288 pages. £35.00.

ISBN 978-1-870-67381-5.

**First Ladies of Gardening**

By *Heidi Howcroft*

Photographs by *Marianne Majerus*

Frances Lincoln. 176 pages. £20.00.

ISBN 978-0-7112-3643-1.



Women horticulturalists have been receiving a lot of attention recently. Kristina Taylor includes thirty-one of them in her roll-call of female garden designers, a selection so arbitrary the reader wants to cry “What, no Alvilde Lees-Milne, no .....” – which proves how rich the corpus is on which the author had to draw.

Her start date is a little arbitrary, too, as she begins with Gertrude Jekyll and Beatrix Farrand, who very much began their careers in the 19th

century: but she does continue right up to the present, ending with gardens made in the current decade. Guessing which of these will be regarded as interesting in a further century’s time is a fool’s game. Those by Jinny Blom at the Chelsea Flower Show, for instance, were never intended to last – though even the ephemeral can be influential.

Taylor’s introduction raises the question of whether men and women design gardens differently, and she tells us firmly that she is not going to provide an answer. But we do get an impression of some of the things these women have in common: many had other careers, often more than one, before they began designing gardens; many write as well as garden; many were and are artists (see the watercolour by Rosmarie Weiss *left*). Indeed, Taylor quotes Farrand: “landscape gardening is the profession of a painter built on the substructure of that of an engineer.”

Taylor has done an awesome amount of travelling and research: her chosen designers come from almost all over the world, and work (or have worked) in such a variety of styles that they are difficult to categorise. Whether lumping them

together as ‘women’ is appropriate in today’s world is another matter. The thought of a parallel book themed on men is inconceivable.

Many of the same people (upgraded to ‘ladies’ this time) appear in Heidi Howcroft’s book, but she also includes some who were not designers but influential in other ways: Beatrix Havergal, for instance, with her Waterperry Horticultural School, which trained women to become professional gardeners.

Howcroft describes her subjects unsensationally: the story of Sissinghurst is unusually well told, with due weight given to the impact of the Nicolsons’ variable finances and what she calls their “bygone lifestyle”. And how she makes you wish you had eavesdropped on the conversation when Vita met Margery Fish, whose garden and writings were equally influential in the post-war years.

Photographs in glossy garden books often make the gardens appear unreal but here Marianne Majerus has made them all look as though human beings (or dogs as in the photograph *above* of Sleightholmedale) really do inhabit their lawns and borders.

Gillian Mawrey

