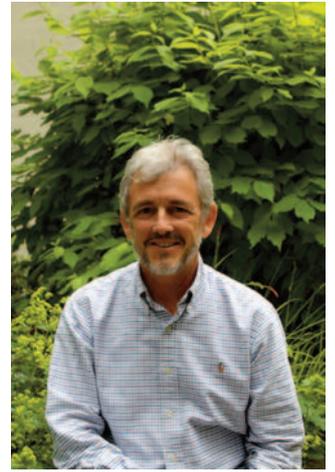


My Favourite Garden

Mike Calnan, Head of Gardens for the National Trust of England and Wales until April this year, starts a new series in which leading people in the world of historic gardens explain why certain gardens are important to them.



A 'favourite garden' suggests a place that you'd like to return to again and again. One garden which perhaps meets or exceeds all expectations in its design, content, aesthetic beauty and more. If it's a garden where the seeds of fond memories were sown, so much the better.

Having been involved with historic gardens for nearly forty years, the last twenty-one as Head of Gardens at the National Trust, I've been lucky enough to have visited hundreds of gardens at home and many abroad. In a way, this has made it more difficult to select just one as my favourite; but in another, seeing so many has helped refine my ideas as to what sets a garden apart, as something very special.

Beyond the enjoyment and appreciation of gardens with good bones, a coherent plan, beautiful detailing in stone, brick or plant material, I have experienced very few which have had a more profound and lasting impact. Being in the right place at the right time (of day, season or weather, or light condition) always helps.



One memorable experience was sitting in the steel pergola on Christopher Bradley Hole's 'Latin' Garden at the Chelsea Flower Show in 1997. Something special came together in that space which left all three of us judges deeply moved. The combination of subtle use of space, and a theme depicting the three stages of the Roman poet Virgil's life, played on emotions in a way starkly modern gardens generally can't. (*Photos above: © Andrew Lawson.*)

On another occasion, at Fenton House, in Hampstead, now a north London suburb but once a separate village, it was the impact of being surrounded by 17th-century brick walls, spanned



by a roof of apple trees in full flower under which was a carpet of small spring flowers in grass panels, intersected by close mown paths. (*Photos above: left © Yvonne Li/National Trust; right: © Marathon.*) Words cannot capture the transcendental experience this created one sunny spring morning. I found it deeply moving. It literally took my breath away and for a moment I found myself speechless. That experience has remained with me ever since and is the reason I always say Fenton is one of my favourite gardens.

I had a similar experience at Giardino Buonaccorsi (*below*), a charming late-baroque garden near Ancona in Italy, with distant views over the olive-clad hills to the Adriatic Sea beyond. Perhaps it was something to do with being privileged to visit privately and have the garden to myself on a hot sunny afternoon, that heightened the senses. A gentle breeze was wafting the scent of the wild fennel, rosemary and lavender growing in the surrounding fields into the empty orangery. Light danced on its walls and on the central tufa fountain, illuminating the ochre wash over crumbling plaster. In that moment this garden, steeped in its mysterious past, became another favourite and has remained so. I had become bewitched by its ‘spirit of place’ and transient beauty of decay. Sadly, I have not been back and perhaps the experience wouldn’t be the same if I did.

After Fenton on that spring morning and Giardino Buonaccorsi on that summer’s afternoon, I think I subconsciously set these spine-tingling moments as the hallmark of a great garden.



Sadly, experiencing anything as emotionally moving, where the spirit of place is so alive and palpable, happens more rarely as gardens become more commercialised.

So, to answer the question, which is my favourite garden: it’s the one which, like great music, lifts the soul. The one which leaves you moved, mesmerised, where the spirit of place has touched you, even if only momentarily.