

September Talk: "Confessions Of A Gardener"

Presented by: Alan Sargent on Wednesday 26th September 2018

On a glorious late September afternoon many HIHS members and guests filled the URCH hall to hear Alan look back on many of his, out of the ordinary, life's experiences. He spoke of the many changes of direction through his career in horticulture, each bringing new challenges and experiences. Much time has been spent as a contractor in hard landscaping creating gardens for the wealthy and famous including many show gardens at the Chelsea Flower Show.

Great care was taken to ensure we could not identify any person by name or reference to protect the confidentiality of the professional/client relationship. Alan reiterated that unrealistic demands generally only arose with a small minority of commissions in the main due to the clients lack of understanding of plants and gardening wisdom. Difficulties come with every new garden, such is "*par for the course*" and taken on board as a matter of course but some of which Alan spoke of would "*challenge the patience of Job*". Each client is unique with individual taste and preferences, as it is their garden it is natural they demand it be exactly to their whims of fancy. What to one is perfect, to another something else. One "*must bend with the wind*" and satisfy their wishes that is the nature of contracting.

An area at the other extreme was Alan's involvements in the construction of so many Chelsea Show Gardens where right plant in right place, inter-relationships of colour and form with adjacent plants, perfect specimens, top quality finish and impeccable taste was a byword. Nothing was too much trouble, each garden had to be perfect as they represented the client's shop window to the world and as such they left it to the professionals to utilize their expertise and deliver something special.

During the Royal parties visit each year protocol and security was paramount. Just one person must represent each garden and be able to answer technical questions, as many of the Royal party are very knowledgeable so invariably it is the garden designer nominated for the task. If a member of the party stops to speak one takes one step forward then as they part one step back. Silence is maintained until spoken to. No advance notice is given of numbers and individuals attending, it only comes clear when the cavalcade of cars arrive and they step out. The President of the RHS accompanies the Queen, however many in the group go their own ways seeking out their particular favourites or stands applicable to charities in which they are involved.

The breakdown of stands on 5.00pm on the last day presents its own challenges. The plants sell off can be frantic with everyone trying to get a bargain and something to take home as a conversation piece. Mature specimen plants are used year after year so are not sold off and must be returned to the specialist nursery from which resourced. So we only take to the front of the stand all of those that we do not wish to transport as they have little real value or any future use to us as a contractor. So it is in our interest to dispose of as many as possible, prices initially start high dropping as taker numbers diminish till those left finally "*go for a song*".

Alan closed by indicating many of his current involvements are as an expert witness in legal disputes. We now live in a world where it appears individuals are quick to seek compensation through the courts and perhaps unaware that legal costs can in many instances far exceed their understanding. His lifetimes ability "*to take all in his stride*" has proven an invaluable asset when under cross examination.

Alan's intent was "*to give retirement a miss*" as he was involved in so many interesting elements.

END