

The Arts & Crafts Garden

By Nicola Kamp

“A garden is often the very making of a homestead in great towns, gardens, both private and public, are positive necessities if the citizens are to live reasonable and healthy lives in body and mind.”

— William Morris, 1895

The founder of the Arts and Crafts movement, William Morris, is perhaps more noted for his textiles, furniture and poetry than for the gardens he designed. However, all of his work was inspired by the natural world: the trees, flowers, birds and rivers of the English countryside. He was a dedicated naturalist, and was passionate about local flora. At a time when many new plants were being brought to England from around the world, to grow under glass, Morris asked his countrymen to appreciate the natural quiet charm of violets, fritillaries, wild roses, honeysuckle and narcissus growing naturally amidst the hedgerows and vales of England. Perhaps Morris’s appreciation of native plants is as valid now as it was in late nineteenth century. Native plants, local stone and wood, wildlife habitat, living in harmony with the environment ... doesn’t that sound familiar? Morris was ahead of his time: 150 years ago, his concerns were farsighted and are still applicable for our gardens today.

Morris developed eight design principles for the Arts and Crafts garden. He desired to find renewal in industrial England by using local materials and plants, em-

ploying traditional craftsmanship, and creating gardens more in sympathy with nature. True to his ideals of beauty and utility, he adopted the practical purpose of medieval gardens to grow fruit, herbs and vegetables, as well as creating gardens of mystery and repose.

❶ The first principle was to unify house and garden. Walled enclosures were fashioned to grow hardy flowers near the house, in contrast to the sweeping parkland beyond. He felt that gardens should clothe the house, acting as a floral extension to link the house with the surrounding countryside.

❷ “Enclose the garden with trees, hedges or natural-looking fences.” Morris believed the garden should be a series of rooms with hedges, to give a sense of privacy. Beds were usually straight, often edged with wattle fences, much like the geometric medieval monastic gardens of the Middle Ages. Interestingly, Morris was quite happy to have hardy flowers and

herbs within the enclosures grow in wild abandon, propagating and self-seeding the way nature intended plants to grow.

❸ Preserving local identity was Morris’s third principle. He entreated society to celebrate everything local, including food, architecture, language, dialect, craftsmanship, and even beer!

❹ Offended by the Victorian trend of propagating new cultivars to create overdeveloped blooms or showy doubles, Morris suggested that heritage or cottage favourites should be appreciated. “Plant simple flowers” was the fourth principle.

❺ Plant hunters and sea captains had introduced thousands of new plants. Many annuals grown in hothouses were set out in “carpet beds,” a mass floral display lasting four months, leaving the beds unnaturally bare the rest of the year. Morris’ fifth principle was to eschew the current horticultural trends in favour of traditional practices.

❻ Morris complained about the practice of developers pulling down old houses and clearing away existing trees. “The one



William Morris’ Garden

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258 Exeter Rd, London
www.customrockcreations.ca 519-652-8811 or 1-866-755-6255