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Chattowood Putting “Right Plant, Right Place” into Action

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Beth Chatto was, of course, a gardener ahead of her time. Inspired by her ecologist husband Andrew, she pioneered sustainable horticulture, neatly captured by the aphorism ‘Right Plant, Right Place’. Simply, if you plant the plant where it wants to be, then the less you will need to do for it, in terms of inputs.



The culmination of this approach is the Gravel Garden in the Beth Chatto Gardens. A naturally droughty site, it was planted with Right Plants – tolerant of drought, visually attractive to us and, almost universally, attractive to visiting insects, providing nectar and pollen resources throughout the year. The only inputs these plants have received are just a bucket of water as they were planted and what the skies have produced in this semi-arid corner of Essex. Little water and no chemicals: that is ecological gardening, enjoyed by thousands of people and a myriad of insects each year. Over its 20-year existence it has experienced deluges and droughts, increasingly so with climate breakdown, and still it thrives.



So when a local opportunity arose to spread this word in a practical way, Beth's grand-daughter Julia and all the Garden team were well-placed. Just a few hundred metres down the road, a developer Lanswood had permission for a new housing estate, and they called it 'Chattowood' ...taking that name, they could hardly refuse to cooperate!

It was agreed that at the entrance to the estate, the estate landscaping and front gardens would be planted in the 'Beth's Gravel Garden' style. What's more, it was further agreed that those front gardens would be retained as part of the estate fabric and be looked after by the management company, so giving assurance that the initial investment in ecology would not be wiped out at the whim of a new householder.



With plans, supervision, help and plants from the Garden, in April 2022 the gardens were created. First the topsoil was stripped and taken away: a good move as plants that need fertile loam will also need water, fertilizer and pesticides to keep looking good. 30cm of local sand then laid on top, and the potted plants planted in, each with their last bucket of water. And apart from sporadic hand-weeding, that's it.

I first visited in late June when, despite the very dry preceding months it was looking wonderful – and buzzing! *Salvia*, *Gaura*, *Verbena*, *Lavandula*, *Buddleia*, *Santolina* and many more blooming away, feeding the masses and starting to fill the space.



A plan was hatched for me to assess the value of these gardens for insects, in comparison with the conveniently situated next door estate, a place of new-laid turf, a few robust hedging plants and 'lollipop' trees. Then came the record-breaking heatwave and intensified drought. I deferred my surveys until the climatic turmoil subsided, and managed to return in mid-August. It was still warm and dry, but not too extreme either for the insects or for me to be out... Very pleasingly, almost all the new plants had survived, even though some had lost their flowers earlier than would have been expected in a more normal summer. A second set of visits in September came after the drought broke, but as the season was fading so fewer insects were evident.



I opted for simple walk-past census of the gardens, which at a very slow pace took some 15-20 minutes. Any longer and the survey would have been more subject to the issues of double-counting. Insects were assigned to major groups; only those which are readily identifiable at a glance were identified down to species level. A similar length of time was spent searching for insects in the front gardens and public areas of the adjacent estate immediately after each Chattowood survey.

A table of the results for anyone interested is available here: [Chattowood survey](#). As hoped (and expected), the Chattowood plantings attracted a greater number of individuals and species of visiting insect. The headline summary of **120 insects recorded in Chattowood** versus **just 6 in the adjacent estate** for the same observer effort is very telling, **20 times more insects in the purpose-planted garden areas**.

Here are a some of the insect highlights (admittedly not all taken here and this year: I was too busy counting!)



Another significant point was that half of the insects recorded in the adjacent development were attracted to ‘weeds’ (specifically Bristly Ox-tongue) that dared to push their way through the drought-scorched turf. Needless to say, those flower resources were not available due to mowing after the second visit.



It will be interesting to continue this study next summer, in hopefully more normal weather conditions. It may then also attract some interest or comment from the houses that will no doubt be occupied by then. Although a very simple survey, it has produced hard data in favour of this planting approach from a biodiversity perspective. It would also be interesting to look at other measurables from the project, including costs, public perception and approval, including saleability of the new houses.



Chattowood – a tribute to Julia’s vision and persuasiveness, the hard work of the Beth Chatto and Lanswood teams, and a vision of a sustainable future for gardens and housing developments, especially living in the global greenhouse. What an antidote to the ecopathic trend for ‘plastic grass’ and the like...!