

THEATRE with plants

The exotic at Cotswold Wildlife Park goes far beyond mere animals. Words and pictures by Mandy Bradshaw

It's when we start discussing the eating habits of lemurs that I realise just how different Tim Miles' job is. True, conversations with gardeners about how to stop plants being eaten are routine but the pests are usually slugs and snails, or possibly rabbits and deer. Yet this head gardener faces far more unusual challenges.

It's not the only thing about Cotswold Wildlife Park that is distinctive. While it has a range of planting found widely in the region – mixed perennials in soft colours, a fine collection of trees and shrubs – borders filled with flamboyant exotics make it as much an attraction for gardeners as it is for wildlife lovers.

It was not always so. When Tim joined the park near Burford 19 years ago, the gardens though neat and tidy were not significant. His arrival coincided with a change in emphasis and a move to give the gardens more importance.

He started small: new bedding, a few bananas and cannas for quick impact.

"I had to get the confidence of the owners so created one small area at first."

Today, the seven-strong gardening team works across the park on planting that includes prairie-style grass borders, mixed herbaceous around the old house, hanging baskets jammed with seasonal colour, shrubberies, a wild flower meadow and a new collection of magnolias.

It's the Walled Garden that I remembered from previous visits and its impact has not diminished. Scarlet, orange and yellow are set against deep bronze foliage, huge banana leaves are backlit by the soft September sun and flowers so vibrant they look artificial are clustered in corners.

The 'hot bed' is one of the originals, steeply banked and with graduated planting so that what lies behind is hidden.

There's yellow from cannas, senna

and dahlias – including 'David Howard' and 'Moonfire' – set against the orange Mexican sunflower *Tithonia rotundiflora*, huge trumpet-like flowers of brugmansia and delicately veined leaves of variegated *Abutilon pictum* 'Thomsonii'.

"It's one of the few instances where virus is desirable," comments Tim.

Threaded through these fiery colours is the deep blue of *Salvia* 'Mystic Spires Blue', while red-leaved beetroot 'Bulls Blood' and scented-leaved *Pelargonium* 'Charity' are included for their foliage.

On the flip side of the border, plants more commonly seen indoors – spider plants, asparagus fern, tradescantia and the polka dot plant, *Hypoestes phyllostachya* – are used to light up the shaded side.

"Houseplants do enjoy being outside in the summer, if you're sympathetic and put them in a shady spot."

The 'horseshoe bed' – all the borders are named to make it easier for the team – is a bold mix of red and pink. Busy Lizzies dominate and are teamed with cannas, begonias, coleus and the canna-like *Hedychium greenii*, or red ginger, all set off by flashes of white.

"We plant drifts of things, usually different combinations rather than one thing and the planting changes as you walk around."

At the heart of the horseshoe, an island bed is given a jungly feel with bananas planted en masse.

"On a good day, the ibis give extra colour," Tim says with a smile.

Around the Tropical House, lipstick pink bromeliads hang from branches and add an even more exotic feel to borders.

Elsewhere, dark brown millet, bamboo, castor oil plants and purple sugar cane give the necessary counterpoint to make the more flamboyant performers sing out.

Surprisingly, none of it is planned on paper. Instead years of experience enable ▶



Grasses are used in planting around the white rhinos' enclosure

‘The animals are sometimes a really good excuse for certain planting schemes’

the team to put together combinations that work, mixing leaf size and shape as well as colour. Using bold colours is says Tim, more risky but essential.

It’s a method of planting that he discussed often with the late Christopher Lloyd, who was well known for his bold schemes at Great Dixter.

“I was fortunate to get to know Christopher Lloyd quite well and he said using pastel colours was the soft option as you couldn’t really go that far wrong.

“You don’t get that sense of exotic with pale colours. Flamboyant colours are just made for it.”

It’s a lesson that is continued with the many containers and hanging baskets that are found throughout the park. Beds of *Rudbeckia hirta* ‘Autumn Shades’ front the café, a walkway between two animal houses has huge hanging baskets under the glass awning and even the toilet block is masked by containers of exotics.

If the main beds in the Walled Garden are all about colour, the arid beds rely on shape. Strong verticals from cacti are set against the fleshy foliage of *Euphorbia myrsinites*, architectural aeoniums and domes of *osteospermum*. There are agaves, aloes and yucca with wispy *Verbena bonariensis* woven through.

Unusual plants include the thistle-like *Berkheya purpurea* and *Acanthus sennii*, a rare red flowered plant from Ethiopia.

Much of the display is lifted at the end of the autumn, with lavender and unusual conifers giving something to look at over winter.

“I’m not sure how many cacti we’re responsible for killing after people come here, see them outdoors and think they are out all year round,” says Tim wryly.

Planting in this style was something Tim had in mind long before he arrived at the park but space opposite the meerkats gave him the perfect opportunity to put it into practice.

“The animals are sometimes a really good excuse for certain planting schemes.”

That’s not to say that merely replicating their natural landscape always works, which brings us onto the lemurs.

Madagascar, a new element since my last visit to the park, allows visitors to walk through the lemur enclosure where some of the animals are in pens



Years of experience mean the team can plant without planning first



Near the old house the planting is more formal

COTSWOLD WILDLIFE PARK

Cotswold Wildlife Park near Burford is open daily, except Christmas Day, from 10am-6pm until October, and then 10am-5pm from November to March. For more details, visit cotswoldwildlifepark.co.uk

with others allowed to roam.

Planting this area has been tricky with a delicate balance between giving it the right feel and not merely providing food for the lemurs.

Bamboo is a favourite edible and some original cherry trees, which were ignored to begin with, have now had their leaves pulled off and are dying. Some things remain untouched: a large tetrapanax, trachycarpus, which has just its flowers removed, and *Leycesteria Formosa*, which is trampled but otherwise left alone.

“They eat the flowers and the berries so get a double use out of it. It’s almost as if they know that and don’t give it too much of a bashing.”

A recent experiment has seen eucalyptus



Calceolaria x banksii is one of the unusual things in the Walled Garden

introduced – it’s thought the lemurs won’t like the oil in its leaves – and monkey puzzles, grevillea and phoenix palms give the necessary exotic touch.

This juggling animals and plants is all part of Tim’s role and something he also encountered when he worked at London Zoo. Many of the enclosures have some planting and nearly all are surrounded by borders.

In one aviary, an overgrown box bush has been ‘cloud pruned’ to give the birds more space while retaining some greenery. Some is allowed to grow through the wire, avoiding what Tim describes as the ‘plant in captivity’ look.

“Blurring the lines is the big thing,” he explains. “We don’t want an obvious inside and outside and try to get the whole thing to blend together.”

He’s also conscious of the wider landscape and outside the Walled Garden planting schemes are designed to fit their location.

Around the house, there’s formality and tradition with deep purple *Salvia ‘Amistad’* teamed with white marguerites in box-edged beds, while lilies, phlox and lavender are just some of the components of long mixed borders.

Move further out and the mood is more relaxed with white rhinos glimpsed through plumes of *Stipa gigantea*, punctuated with colour from kniphofia, crocosmia and helenium.

In the distance, there is open Cotswold countryside, a view the team works hard to preserve.

“We have a borrowed landscape of the trees beyond and we have to keep that openness,” explains Tim.

“Theatre with plants is what we do.” ♦

Twitter: @ChattyGardener
Facebook: The Chatty Gardener