

HORTUS

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Beth Chatto ♦ Gregory Long ♦ The Exploding Tree
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Beth Chatto's death at the age of ninety-four on 13 May brings an era in which writing gardeners (a breed distinct from run-of-the-mill gardening commentators) flourished, from the mid-twentieth century on, nearer to a close. Beth, though different from, nevertheless belonged to a group of distinguished British luminaries of broad appeal that included the likes of Rosemary Verey (d. 2001), Graham Stuart Thomas (d. 2003) and Beth's close friend and sometime collaborator Christopher Lloyd (d. 2006). While several of her eminent octogenarian and nonagenarian contemporaries survive her it is unlikely that we will see such a coterie again – men and women whose reputations are cemented by books (enduring books of both a practical and inspiring stripe), and not by the many – equally worthy – whose rank is increasingly, lamentably, occasioned by broadcast or social media of an ephemeral mien.

What happens to a noted garden such as Beth's when its only begetter leaves behind her mortal coil? I am assured by Dr Catherine Horwood, author of a forthcoming biography of Mrs Chatto, that the future of the garden is safe. 'For several years now, it has been managed by her granddaughter, Julia Boulton, and it is on a firm financial footing. Julia has a strong team supporting her with David Ward as Nursery Manager and Åsa Gregers-Warg as head gardener. In addition, three years ago, the Beth Chatto Education Trust was set up to further Beth's passion for educating all, young and old, about plants and ecology.' Her garden at White Barn House now has a busy timetable of schools visits, Royal Horticultural Society training courses and other vocational activities housed in a new building opened officially by Beth last year.



Gregory Long has a highly distinguished reputation in the United States – not as an author (although his book, *Historic Houses of the*

Hudson River Valley, 2004, has a standing all its own) but as the man I like to consider as 'the great enabler' at the New York Botanical Garden. His retirement as CEO and William C. Steere Sr. President after twenty-nine years in that Bronx-situated acreage is marked in an interview with Marta McDowell in this issue. I first met Gregory in the early 1990s when he introduced me to an audience comprising members of the Horticultural Alliance of the Hamptons who had gathered at the far end of Long Island to hear me talk about Cotswold gardens. Looking back, it seems an unlikely theme, but in those distant days Americans were more in thrall to English gardens than they are now. More recently Gregory took me on a tour of the NYBG in one of the garden's famous golf buggies and it was with regret that I came away from my all-too-fleeting visit to the garden in March this year without renewing my acquaintance with him. That said, we wish him a long and busy retirement indulging in the many hoped-for activities and travels that he revealed to Marta.



Further north – although my US trip this year sadly disallowed any time in Boston – there comes the story of the exploding tree. The scene is the Arnold Arboretum (see Sukie Amory's series of articles about this botanical garden in issues 112–15) when, in early May, 'violent thunderstorms roiled through Boston. During the maelstrom,' writes Ned Friedman, the arboretum's director, 'a magnificent western catalpa tree (*Catalpa speciosa* . . . in the catalpa collection behind the lilacs) was struck by lightning. The massive surge of electricity through this tree resulted in a powerful explosion as liquid water in the wood was instantly turned to steam (whose volume is roughly 1,700 times greater – think of the power of a steam engine). The interface between the wood and the bark (the cambium) has very thin-walled cells, and this is where the explosive separation of tissues occurred.'

On the morning after the storm Friedman made his way 'to see the violent aftermath up close. A massive sector of the bark from the top of the tree to the base had been blown off, and shards of the bark could be found several hundred feet away! Time will tell if

It's Time, It's Time

GREGORY LONG AND
THE NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN

MARTA McDOWELL



There are days when time seems to stand still at the New York Botanical Garden. Founded in 1891, this 250-acre garden in the heart of the northernmost borough of New York City is set among ancient rock formations and encircles the last remaining old-growth forest in the metropolitan area. On this chilly, wet mid-April afternoon even the advancing spring seems to have stopped in its tracks.

But time is not motionless for Gregory Long, CEO and the William C. Steere Sr. President of The New York Botanical Garden.

Vibrant, energetic, with penetrating blue eyes and a quick wit, he seems ready to launch into the next endeavour, a conductor lifting his baton to ready the orchestra. He does not seem like someone ready to retire. But retire he will, six weeks from this interview. At the close of June after twenty-nine years of service, he will turn over the reins of the Garden to his successor, Carrie Reborra Barratt.

We are sitting in his conference room on the second floor of the Watson Building, the functional modernist 1970s addition to the original Beaux-Arts museum building that has graced the north end of the Garden since 1901. 'The New York Botanical Garden's origin story has a close connection to Kew,' Long recounted. American botanists Nathaniel Lord Britton and Elizabeth Knight Britton, inspired by the magnificence of the collections on a visit to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in 1888, returned to New York City charged with the desire to establish a similar institution. It would be a green and glittering jewel to add to the cultural crown of this growing urban centre. Backed by the likes of financiers Andrew Carnegie, J. P. Morgan, and William Vanderbilt, and in partnership with city and state governments, the New York Botanical Garden was established in 1891.

Building public-private partnership has been part of Gregory Long's contributions to the Garden. The performance and growth of the Garden during the nearly three decades of his stewardship has been stellar. Name a measure – the quality of the display gardens, library, herbarium, research, not to mention fundraising, volunteering, and audience development – the place has prospered since his arrival in 1989. Long said, 'The many aspects of the Garden are as varied, marvelous, and intricately interconnected as are the species of the plant kingdom.'

Those many aspects have seen significant change under Long's leadership. So many of the individual gardens have been restored or built during his tenure that listing them would seem like an itinerary for a visit of a day or a week. He stared out of the conference room windows toward the Steere Herbarium and, beyond it, the Pfizer Plant Research Laboratory, two of the buildings added during his watch. Long remembered, 'When I got here, I'd take a



Sigourney Weaver, Michael Bloomberg, Maureen Chilton, and Gregory Long at the NYBG exhibition *Emily Dickinson's Garden: The Art of Poetry*



Gregory Long receiving the IMLS Award for NYBG with Karen Washington and Michelle Obama

golf cart around the Garden and think, "This place is too big. Carnegie and Morgan bought too much land". Now I think, "we could use more space". He particularly mourns the parts lost in the 1950s. (Robert Moses, the urban development tsar of mid-twentieth century New York City, commandeered part of the Garden to construct the southern extension of the Bronx River Parkway.)

From many a visitor's point of view, Long's administration might also seem synonymous with exhibitions. These are beyond the standards (each year the Garden puts on an orchid show in spring, an autumn *Kiku* Japanese garden show, and the Holiday Train Show). 'These are our perennials,' Long noted. Added to these, the Garden has mounted major exhibitions annually since 2008, exhibitions that combine the botanical and horticultural with a theme drawn from the arts and the humanities.

These exhibitions evolved from a chance remark by Dr David Kohn, a noted Darwin scholar who was working with the Garden's archival collections of Darwiniana. 'We were having lunch,' Long recalled, 'and David said, "Did you know about the restoration of Darwin's gardens?" And then he pulled out pictures.' (Kohn was consultant to the Charles Darwin Trust and English Heritage on the project.) From Kohn's photographs of Down House in Kent, the idea for a major show in a New York City public garden was born. Its centrepiece was a set built and planted in the Enid Haupt Conservatory to mimic Darwin's study looking out to the spring-blooming gardens where he studied everything from cowslips to carnivorous plants. Starting at the Conservatory, the visitor could explore thirty-plus Darwin-related stops spread over more than half of the Garden. Since then, exhibitions have branched out with Emily Dickinson, Claude Monet, Frida Kahlo, and, with the upcoming show, Georgia O'Keeffe, to name a few. One exhibition, Henry Moore, appeared at both Kew and at the New York Botanical Garden.

British connections go beyond Kew and Charles Darwin, and Long recounted some others that took place during his years at the Garden. Lady Salisbury, a Distinguished Counselor to the Board of the New York Botanical Garden, created the Auricula Theatre,

graced each spring with displays of potted Primulaceae, in the Herb Garden for which Penelope Hobhouse designed a central double-knot of boxwood in 1991, inspired by an illustration in a seventeenth-century English husbandry manual. 'Penny Hobhouse has had a long relationship here,' Long mused. 'And Rosemary Verey did a wonderful design for an ornamental kitchen garden before she died in 2001. It has been adapted for the display beds at the new Edible Academy. We are calling them the 'Barnsley Beds', after Verey's Barnsley House near Cirencester.' As he was saying this, Long grabbed a sharp pencil and sketched the semi-circular plan on a pad of yellow paper. One could easily picture him doing the same in a meeting of the Board of Trustees.

'A botanical garden is a curious creature,' Long suggested. 'It is a relatively small field. There are more people with expertise available for the leadership of, say a museum or a library than a public garden. I suppose more people are interested in painting or books than plants.' (Long came to the NYBG after holding positions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the New York Public Library.) Finding those people—Board development—and getting the commitment of businesses and major donors are among the most important of Long's institutional accomplishments.

His successor, Dr Carrie Barratt is, in Gregory Long's words, 'an inspired choice' as the Garden's new Chief Executive Officer. Her background and expertise from the Metropolitan Museum of Art will mean that she can lead the Garden as a museum and more. 'The interpretation of its collections can be a foundation for understanding in so many areas: science, culture, and history,' Long said. 'In an urbanising world, the botanical garden is more important every minute of the day. As a landscape it is unsullied. It is uncommercial. And it is educational.'

'Education,' he continued, 'that is what matters the most. America isn't England. Americans in general don't know much about plants. But plants tell interesting stories and can be the most accessible science.' He sometimes brings visitors to the Herbarium with its 7.8 million dried and mounted botanical specimens. 'I can see them start glancing at their watches, likely wishing I were tak-

ing them to see the lilacs or the roses. But then the curators start telling them the stories of the plants and no one wants to leave.' Stories, properly told, can change lives.

And what's next for Gregory Long's story? Cincinnatus returning to the plough? 'I never had a gap year,' Long said, 'so we're thinking about that.' Perhaps a winter in Rome. Perhaps a year studying the Italian Renaissance, harkening back to his university days. 'But there are so many things,' he added. 'There is an embarrassment of riches in the exhibitions at New York City's art museums.' He ticked off a few, starting with Zurbarán's *Jacob and His Twelve Sons*: paintings from Auckland Castle, Co. Durham, now at the Frick Museum. And opera. 'Isn't opera for your retirement?' he joked. 'When you can really concentrate on it.'

There are greener pastures for Gregory Long too. A house in Key West, Florida with a new tropical garden beckons. There is a beloved summer home in the Hudson Valley, two hours away in New York State. Up until now visits have generally been 'forty-eight-hour weekends,' speed laps spanning late Friday to Sunday afternoon before heading back to the city and back to work. 'This weekend I'm going to plant the spinach and move the benches from the barn to the garden.' Then there's writing. Rizzoli published Long's first book, *Historic Houses of the Hudson River Valley, 1663–1915* in 2004. And more travel: 'I've never seen south-east Asia – and other places where there are fewer people. An in-depth exploration of the scholar gardens of China, perhaps. A tour of unusual small botanic gardens: the Orto Botanico in Palermo, the Royal Botanical Garden in Sri Lanka . . .' You can tell he is spinning dream itineraries.

Of English gardens, Long's first foray into their riches stemmed from an interest in the Bloomsbury group, and from them into Arts & Crafts design. He called visiting Sissinghurst in the 1970s 'part of my education'. His appreciation of British gardens encompasses seventeenth-century designs, landscape gardens such as Fountains Abbey and Studley Royal, and wonderful herbaceous borders. He was smitten with Sue Dickinson's double flower border at Eythrope (Lord Rothschild's property in Buckinghamshire).

I have taught at the New York Botanical Garden since 1998, so

like many members of staff at the Garden, I have never worked under another president. One of his direct reports told him that he was 'sort of like Castro'. I suggested perhaps Queen Elizabeth II might be a better analogy, but he clearly enjoyed the irony of the original suggestion.

Long said at the end of our conversation, 'People keep asking me why, if I have had this job for twenty-nine years, why not make it thirty? But it's time. It's time.'

Photographs courtesy of the New York Botanical Garden.