

1. You have described feeling 'at home' in some gardens. How would you explain this?

This feeling I am talking about is the kind one experiences spontaneously... it almost creeps up on you whilst you are not expecting it. It's the difference between admiring a beautiful landscape and experiencing a kind of dialogue with it. This 'conversation' happens between the natural garden and yourself and is akin to that felt within a close human relationship. When we find this taking place within us we can recognize a deep sense of comfort, a feeling of relaxation, maybe peacefulness and an ancient sense of ourselves.

2. Why do we need to create sacred gardens?

Making a garden is an active way to make contact with nature. At its most profound, gardening is an act of co-creation – a meeting of the creative human with the spirits of nature to make a beautiful place or to grow delicious food.

Marking or proclaiming the making of a 'sacred' garden acknowledges nature as the source of spirit and ritualizes the act of garden making. Our part in the turning wheel of life can be expressed in the very essence of ourselves – making a sacred garden is like coming back home to God – returning through stillness to the world of spirit in nature.

Creating sacred gardens is in microcosm a way we experience the wider earth as a divine place.

Organic gardening is in fact one of today's radical acts against the global corporation movement being carried out right under the noses of the establishment. In fact I see any gardening as potentially a way to discover the richness of the spiritual universe and it can bring about a living, growing and enduring relationship with nature. During these times spent in the garden and with plants, soils, compost and birds we find ourselves face to face with the 'reality' of nature. Here portals can open which enable us to step out of our normal mundane way of seeing and reveal dimensions which we are usually blind to.

3. How did you first become interested in bringing the spiritual dimension into your garden design work?

It's hard for me to identify the exact moment in time when, as you put it, my design work began to include a spiritual dimension.

A real turning point for me in my own personal development was the visit I made to Uluru (Ayers Rock) in Central Australia. After many

months traveling through India and South East Asia and witnessing buildings of many spiritual traditions with which I felt no personal recognition of spirit I felt drawn to wander into the Central Australian desert. It was at the foot of Uluru that I felt the presence of a natural (not man made) monument to spirit. Only later did I learn that Uluru means "belly of the mother" to the Australian aborigines. The power of this place and the beauty of the desert drew me onwards to learn about indigenous wisdoms and the animist traditions. It led me to study further the ancient beliefs which see the earth and all her beings as living, spiritual and interconnected entities.

However, as a designer in the mainstream I still feel the pressure to conform simply to current trends, aesthetic and practical values. As my 'specialist field' has emerged I have often experienced a certain bemused attitude from other designers towards my desire to make meaningful landscapes.

4. When you set about designing a garden how do you 'tune in' to the land and what it wants? And how does the making process widen your understanding?

Tuning to the land is for me a rapid and prompt process. My creative work is often an unconscious, spontaneous process which is only confirmed through seeing the final design meeting the deep desire of the client. For example I often dream about the plants needed for a design which a client didn't mention in the brief but which they inform me later are of significance to them personally... Sometimes, as in the Chalice Wells Gardens, I am requested to specifically tune into a particular area of the garden. Time spent in stillness and prayer have revealed to me, in such special sacred places, the garden's own desire from which I form for me the 'spiritual design brief'.

Through creating the garden itself I become further tuned to the land. Holding a sense of the sacred throughout the turmoil of dismantling an existing garden, is a serious challenge to my sense of authenticity and integrity. What I have discovered is how robust many landscape energies are – it seems that certain qualities are retained despite human manipulation. The qualities brought by existing plants (with the exception of trees) can however be quickly destroyed through their being removed. The planting process can very rapidly revive the missing energy however.

The garden makers themselves influence the finished energy of the place. Their relationship to the place and the clients have a strong influence. A garden I am currently making in Gloucestershire has

been 'blessed' by everyone involved in its making through a simple ceremony. On commencement of the building work each builder and gardener brought a piece of earth from a place in the garden which felt 'special' to them they breathed their own blessings on to that little piece of soil. This was all combined and wrapped in a piece of silk. The most adventurous gardener climbed the central giant Austrian pine and placed the gift in its upper branches. The work then began !

This piece of garden making has been a noticeably harmonious project!

5. How do you know when you have got a design 'right'?

This is a difficult question. 'Right' for me involves many factors. The garden has to work practically, aesthetically and on a deeper meaningful level. I know I have it really right when it fulfills all these needs but the real test is whether or not the client or garden visitor feels the atmosphere with ease and feels at home in the space.

6. When you are working with people you ask them how they want to 'feel' in their garden. Why do you ask this?

This is a question I have crafted to provide me, the designer, with some vital information! Many people I have made gardens for have asked for a sacred garden but claim to know nothing of gardens and have even asked me what a 'sacred garden' is --- whilst saying it is just this that they want!

In order to discover their underlying desire I find this question of 'feeling' evokes some interesting responses. Whilst walking and talking in their garden it becomes clear how it either provides (or doesn't) the atmosphere they long for. Stories of childhood memories emerge, places and sometimes feelings of distant landscapes. Once we have stopped talking about decking, paving and water features, this question reveals the clients real desires and the place of their own dream gardens.

7. Are there developments in current garden design which you find inspiring?

Yes, the movement towards natural meadow re-creation and the 'prairie style' planting as exemplified by the Swedish designer, Piet Oudoff both inspire me in that they intend to mimic natural systems.

Both encourage wildlife and once established need relatively little maintenance. They are also less 'gardenesque' rather giving people a bigger view of landscape taking them back to a vision of lush complexity on a big scale!

8. You recently designed a feng shui garden for Hampton Court Palace Flower Show which featured a beautiful Moon Gate. How do garden forms such as this, from ancient traditions, help create a sacred energy space?

The Moon Gate of the Feng Shui Garden really captured people's imagination. I think that a powerful threshold over which you pass into a sacred space is an ancient tradition which can, very successfully, be revived in the modern garden. Making a point of entry and making a conscious change of being from the ordinary into the sacred space is something which gives people a point from which to start. Whether, as in the slightly low moongate where one bows on entry and through a gesture of humility, changes one's state of mind...or as in the Shinto tradition, passing under a Torii Arch marks an entry into a sacred place of the spirits.... (see pictures of the Moongate and the Torii Arch both made by James Showers).

9. Do you foresee public gardens playing a more sacred role in everyday life - like the druid sacred groves or Sufi Paradise Gardens?

I certainly do hope to see this and there seems evidence to support a movement towards the use of gardens as an expression of all kinds of spirituality.

I am currently designing, with the Hastings Peace Group, a garden for a public park which will give people the chance to contemplate Peace. I have proposed a 'Peace Walk' with a mandala like walkway, the centre of which will hold soil from lands from all over the world. I feel that the significance and the spirit of the placing of gifts of earth will energetically link up our intention for Peace on the Planet.

Walking the Peace Garden mandala could become an activity for the people of Hastings to take part in whenever they want.

10. Do women gardeners like yourself have an intuitive connection to the female essence of the natural world and help urbanised culture reconnect with Mother Earth?

Yes, and there are a large proportion of women gardeners out there. Interestingly most of my students are women and an important part of

my work is to empower them to step into the important role of re-envisioning this female sacred earth. Realising that this doesn't exclude men and the masculine active energy but in returning to ancient wisdoms we naturally and easily become aware of the Divine Feminine that is the earth. Nature is by its very nature feminine!

Urbanised culture, as you put it, predominantly excludes nature. The Shaman, writer and teacher, Martin Prechtel says that when we see the spirit of a plant she comes to us as a woman. Beginning to understand this significance and how urban life is so out of balance due to its exclusion of nature and the feminine is a journey which needs to be taken by the new makers of Sacred Gardens.

11. On your year's course, which covers many aspects of garden design, how do your students respond to such experiences as dancing to connect with plant energies?

See 12)

12. How does working with plants bring a deeper awareness of the feminine essence of nature?

The one year course in making sacred gardens is especially challenging as it requires students to move between and combine technical and intuitive teaching. Becoming sensitive to plant energies is part of this and we have discovered that there are energetic relationships between our body structure and the spirit of plants – movement work can reveal these to us.

We may work with deep contemplation of a piece of land and its plants and then move to the measurement and scale drawing of it within the space of a couple of hours. It's not for everyone.

With both the right and left brain engaged in a design project the results can be unique, creative, beautiful and technically workable.

Recognising and responding to the feminine essence of nature and combining this with creative design is of course my own life's path. I hope to inspire the evolution of a new generation of designers whose deep desire is to delve deep into nature and emerge to create even more beauty!