

Book and TV Series Reviews: Around the World in 80 Gardens

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AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 GARDENS

Monty Don BBC with Weidenfeld and Nicholson 2008

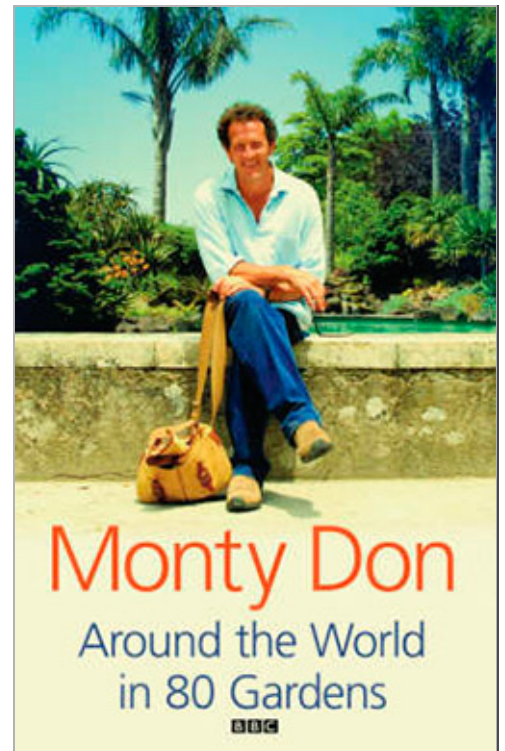
No doubt quite a few Study Group members watched this program recently on ABC TV. I didn't see all the programs including the one on Australia and New Zealand because we had a power blackout! I really enjoyed the episodes which I saw. I found the choice of gardens refreshing as it was a good mix of old and new, grand and modest, traditional and idiosyncratic gardens. So I was rather pleased when I picked up the book of the series at my local library recently. I actually think it would have been better to have read the book before seeing the series. I had read the chapter on Northern European gardens before seeing that episode which was really rewarding.

One of the appealing features about the series as seen on TV was how Monty Don's commentary was based on his own reactions to each garden rather than a more academic and theoretical approach to garden design. His personal reactions come through even more in the book including some charming revelations of the difficulties and hardships of filming the series. I have heard several criticisms of the Australian episode. It would be interesting to know who suggested the gardens which could be featured. I am sure residents of every country included or excluded from the series would question the choice of gardens from their area. I imagine Monty Don would have made the final selection himself.

Friends have told me that he did not seem to warm to the Australian gardens. The aim of the series was to investigate the extent to which gardens reflected the culture of each country. He no doubt picked up the Australian ambivalence to our native flora and the yearning for an English style garden which is still present here after 200 years. He was not impressed by the nostalgic English style of Kennerton Green but he was enthusiastic about the Mornington Peninsula Garden which had progressed from an English style garden to one which used native Australian plants. I was surprised that he first came across the idea of a waterwise garden in South Africa after he had visited Australia in the middle of a drought!

Here are some of the ideas and thoughts which really resonated with me from the TV series and the book.

- The gardens which were most appealing relied on the plants for form. The fashion for flowers came in the 19th century. Rousham, created in the 18th century and "the greatest masterpiece of English gardening", is notable for the absence of flowers. Instead the design relies on green of every shade. Dutch designer Piet Oudolf chooses plants for form as much as for flowers. He prefers flowering plants with small flowers to large bloomed hybrids.
- An extension of the plants as form idea was the extent to which pruned and clipped plants featured in gardens all over the world. I had never seen cloud pruned hedges before nor read an explanation of how it is done. It is a softer style than square cut hedges, which could be successful with some Australian natives or groups of native plants.
- The inspiration for traditional Chinese gardens comes from the paintings of the landscape of the Yellow Mountains. Naturally bosaied trees grow in the limestone outcrops. Imagine paintings of angophoras growing out of the Sydney sandstone providing similar inspiration.
- Great gardens are never complete. Successful gardens are constantly changing and evolving. "Try and hold it still and it slips like sand through your fingers" (Jacques Wirtz Antwerp). On the other hand sometimes the real skill is knowing when to do



nothing.

- Context is everything. A garden should be tied to the context of its maker, the climate, geology, language, history, flora and culture even history of the place. "Increasingly I find themed gardens based upon plants that are not comfortable there and have to be mollycoddled just to survive an absurdity".(Monty Don).This is the dilemma for Australian gardeners. We have inherited the great English gardening tradition from our forebears but we are gardening in an Australian context which using Monty Don's definition is usually incompatible with an English style garden.
- There are gardeners in other parts of the world trying to create gardens from the indigenous flora. Two of the gardens which I really liked were in New Zealand and Chile created from native plants. They were not the only ones, there were others as well in Mexico and Norway.