



Survival of the old order at Compton Wynyates.

## Gardening

# The emergence of the modern garden

By R. W. Sidwell

The story of the development of gardening is intriguing whether we think of it over the last 25 years, 250 years, or 2,500 years. It is a very old activity. Each age and each culture has taken the plants at its disposal and, with the available facilities, created gardens to designs that accord with the fashions of the day.

The great Victorian gardens with their large ranges of heated glass and garden staffs of 30 or more were crippled by the First World War and, with a few exceptions, eliminated altogether after the second. Death duties and high taxation together with continually rising costs have made it impossible for the fine old gardens to be kept up.

Since the Second World War, and especially over the past 25 years, the new type modern garden has emerged. At its simplest this will be roughish lawn with an occasional tree and areas of shrubs. Lawn mowing takes up a fair amount of time but it is mechanised and requires little or no skill when compared with the management of the old-time gardens. Gardeners become mere "tidier-uppers."

For those with a more enlightened interest in plants we have "plantsman's gardens" of varying degrees of intensity of planting and at their ultimate limit, are fine collections of rare plants requiring specialist cultivation.

Some modern gardens are created out of what was open fields a short time ago. Such gardens have a newness that has a certain character of its own. They seem to shout at one as one enters: Nothing in this garden is more than ten years old." Rather like the old Woolworth slogan: "Nothing in these stores over sixpence."

Other gardens may have an odd mature tree which has managed to survive in spite of ground levelling and excavation. Some of the most interesting modern gardens are those created on old orchard sites. What more beautiful feature could one look for than a century old pear tree with its mass of flowers in the spring, perhaps a few fruit later on, and, above all, its fine autumn colour. At Sissinghurst such trees would be planted with vigorous climbing roses. There is a certain sadness in this. These trees were planted hope-

fully to produce fruit. They did their best for upwards of half a century, became uneconomic as fruit producers in competition with modern commercial plantations and now, between the fruit and the firewood, they serve as supports for a bunch of flowers.

When these old pears have gone, and the day is not far off, they will be gone for ever. It is understandable that no one plants standard pears on wild pear stock for fruit why but why does no one think of planting wild pear or perry pear as an amenity tree? The loss of these old orchards in the Hereford, Worcester, Gloucester areas is as great a loss as the elms. And what has this to do with modern gardens? Nothing except that if you are lucky enough to have some old fruit trees, rugged and gnarled through years of struggle, make them last as long as you can. They cannot be replaced in your lifetime and nothing you can do can give you quite so much character.

Some of the large old gardens have been split up into building plots and the "big house" demolished. With luck we may finish up with a mulberry tree on the lawn or (dare one hope?) an old walled kitchen garden.

One of the best examples of building on an old site is Witley Park House, less than 20 years old and built on a fragment of the old park far out of sight of Witley Court itself. The garden is a mere 18 acres and has as its garden pond a nine-acre lake, the fifth and last of a chain that once formed a feature of the old estate. Last autumn I saw about 40 Canada Geese alight here. The present owner has planted nearly 2,800 trees in more than 100 species during the past 15 years including a small area of woodland. It is rather like a phoenix arising from the ashes for Witley Court was literally gutted by fire some years ago and the future of the whole park was in question.

And so gardens go on and fashions change to meet the changed conditions. The more natural and less fussy layouts of today with their lower labour requirements seem to us more appealing than the high labour gardens of yore: But fortunately a few old gardens survive as museum pieces and long may they continue to do so.