

# Stonecrop Gardens

## History of the Flower Garden: The Garden Takes Shape

by Caroline Burgess, Director

Stonecrop grew literally and figuratively out of its spectacular albeit challenging site atop a rocky and windswept hill, surrounded by close woods and long, pastoral views down the Hudson Valley. Like all cultivated landscapes, Stonecrop, however, is just as much an expression of the ideas and aspirations of the people who create and inhabit it as the native landscape from whence it sprang. Frank Cabot's three-part series of articles which appeared previously in our newsletter beautifully documents this process of accommodating both man and nature, telling of the early years he and his family spent at Stonecrop. In this new series, I will continue the tale, using the story of our Flower Garden to illustrate the garden-making process at Stonecrop during my tenure.

An Englishwoman by birth, I arrived in the United States as the Director of Stonecrop Gardens in 1984 following the completion of my three-year Diploma in Horticulture at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. As a child, I worked in a stable near my family's home in exchange for the privilege of riding the horses. That stable belonged to Rosemary Verey and it wasn't long before I was working as a gardener and later the head gardener in her acclaimed gardens at Barnsley House. Of all the various segments of Stonecrop, the Flower Garden (as well as our less visible School of Practical Horticulture) perhaps best captures my own style, education, and passions as a gardener.

The renovation and revitalization of the Flower Garden was my first project at Stonecrop. This seemed the logical spot to begin. Anne and Frank Cabot had already started to garden between the house and horse barn, an area easily enjoyed by the Cabot family and their guests. They had also crafted and borrowed a magnificent

**Caroline racing before the Temperate House at Kew. The annual Wheelbarrow race at RBG, Kew, CB bringing up the rear! The Temperate House, the world's largest surviving Victorian Glass structure built in 1859 by Decimus Burton.**



Caroline Burgess at Barnsley House

sequence of surrounding spaces and views. One enters the house (and now the Flower Garden) through a simple yet elegant turf and gravel courtyard ringed in trees. On two sides, the house then opens to expansive vistas of fields, distant hills, and forest, while on the remaining side, a sun room and terrace unfurl into the series of rooms now known collectively as the Flower Garden. These juxtapositions of open and closed, small and large, natural and composed are recurring themes at Stonecrop, each element strengthening the other and enlivening the garden experience.

I began by analyzing the site, the Cabot's needs and my own hopes for the space. First and foremost, I wanted to create a garden for the Cabots that was, on the best

of days, enchanting, a true pleasure garden. To work this magic, I needed to provide an invitation akin to a treasure map - glimpses of rich colour, charming architectural elements, and a collector's trove of plants; the splash of water or the crunch of gravel; the heady scent of old roses—and yet still promise discovery beyond.

Whilst working with Rosemary Verey and as a student at Kew, I visited countless gardens and worked with many gardeners, both famous and little-known. In fact, I did my third



**Rosemary Verey  
(1918–2001)**

Of her friend and mentor, "RV," Caroline Burgess ("CB"), said, "We rode horses together and gardened together and not many a day goes by when I don't think fondly of my time at Barnsley, and of Barnsley plants and practices."





Scenes from Barnsley House, clockwise from top left: the renowned Laburnum Walk; an extraordinary array of potted plants outside the kitchen door... RV says the planting in a garden should become more exciting the closer to the house you come; Pond Garden with the majestic Tuscan Doric Temple as a major focal point; Vegetable Garden or Potager, CB was present for the initial laying out and she and RV laid the brick paths together.



Barnsley House

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year thesis at Kew on the workings of the UK's National Garden Scheme (NGS) and for years previously had spent each Sunday visiting every NGS Open Garden that was within a day's ride on my motor bike. I can vividly remember coming away from Valerie Finnis's walled garden at Boughton House with a basket of fresh cherries balanced on my bike. In addition to my work and studies, this mental catalogue of gardens provided me with a wealth of information and ideas from which to draw as I set to work in Cold Spring.

One of the greatest aspects of Stonecrop is the multitude of gardens, microclimates and collections within its boundaries. Although understandable given the relative youth of the garden and its ambitious scope, this was also one of our greatest weaknesses when I first started at Stonecrop. This was most apparent around the Flower Garden where the spaces tended to run headlong into each other. As a result, the strength and drama of the Flower Garden was drained away by these blurry edges. My favourite of many beloved gardens is Hidcote, in Gloucestershire, famous for its garden rooms. I thought that many of the place-making techniques employed there by Lawrence Johnston could be used to equal effect at Stonecrop. I set about creating a series of rooms, vistas

and focal points which established a natural flow from the house through the Flower Garden and beyond.

To implement this vision, there was a good bit of construction that needed to occur before any new plants went in place. Using fencing, treillage, and other architectural elements, the Outer Sanctum, the Stable Close, the Skinny Vista, and the Inner Sanctum, what we call the main enclosed Flower Garden, were created (see plan on page 3). First, the ground plane was leveled to unite garden elements, smoothing the transition from one to the next. This required adding extra steps to the deck on the south end of the Cabots' house. As the house and this deck were rectilinear, the existing curvilinear garden beds in the Outer Sanctum were straightened so that the space utilized a consistent design vocabulary. Around the Garage Court, the four-foot fence was replaced with a six-foot, board-on-board cedar fence, hiding this service area and creating a crisply defined edge for the Outer Sanctum. Matching eight-foot fencing was used to trace the remaining boundaries of the Flower Garden and its components. Five arched openings in these fences combined with several strategically placed ornaments—a fountain at the end of the Stable Close, a Villandry Seat at the end of the Skinny Vista, a lattice-covered bench on





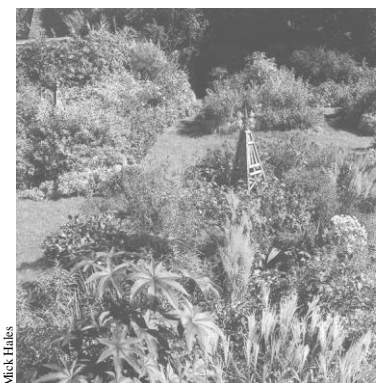
Stonecrop, clockwise from top left: Inner Sanctum; Inner Sanctum and Tool Shed; original curvilinear beds near House; original Flower Garden from Potting Shed roof



the south side of the Tool Shed, and an outdoor Garden Room in the Inner Sanctum replicating the post and beam construction of the deck - lead the eye and thus the visitor through the garden. Such structure anchors the Flower Garden, increases the sense of depth, and provides visual interest throughout the year.

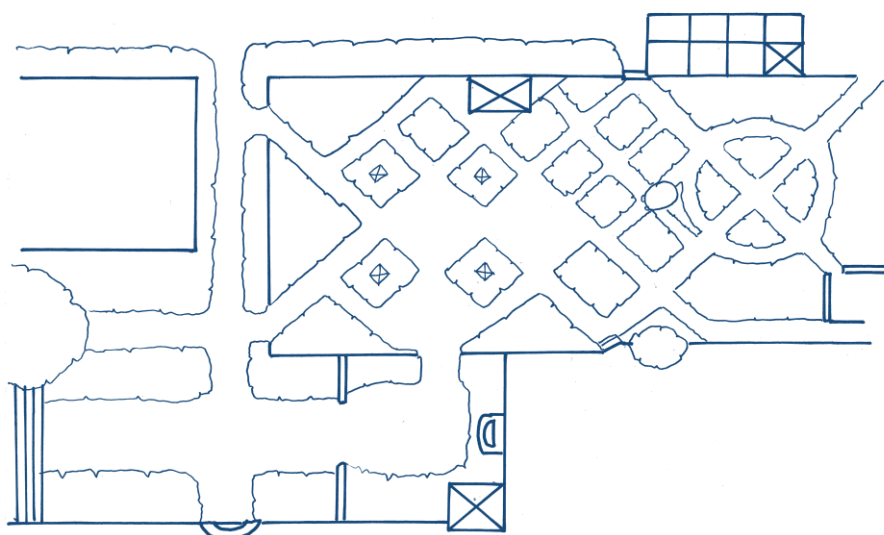
The Inner Sanctum is our *pièce de résistance*. It is an intensely designed and intensely gardened space that is a world unto itself. The beds and paths inside the enclosure were originally laid out in squares with diagonal grass paths in between, mimicking the very first lattice enclosure. I added some beds and joined others to vary

the scale. A circular path was added on the south end toward the Potting Shed, creating three large beds—now known as the Rainbow - and three smaller pie-shaped beds. To add verticality and implement Rosemary Verey's dictum to "look up," steeple trellises for vines were built in four of the central square beds, and a bespectacled salt hay-and-burlap image of Gertrude Jekyll stands in the Vegetable Garden, keeping an eye on our colour theories. In the next segment, I will discuss the planting schemes and maintenance regime that make our Flower Garden sing. Before then, do come to see the garden this fall in its exuberant peak.



Mick Hales

Inner Sanctum with steeple trellises







# Stonecrop Gardens

"To plant and maintain a flower border, with a good scheme for colour, is by no means the easy thing that is commonly supposed."  
—Gertrude Jekyll

## History of the Flower Garden Part 2, Final segment

In our last issue we looked at the *raison d'être* of the Flower Garden, including the vision and the early construction. In this final segment we address the nitty-gritty: the nuts and bolts of the plantings, the colour schemes, the maintenance regimen, and what makes the Flower Garden the most distinctively dynamic feature of Stonecrop.

### Planting Begins

Having established a formal framework, it was time to plant. The design intent was to have informal plantings within a formal framework, creating an interesting and exuberant "mixed border."

The Flower Garden proper consists of approximately 25 beds of varying shapes and sizes. Some beds, located against a fence, are only viewed from one side. Others are freestanding, viewed from all sides. Some beds are in total shade, some are in total sun, and some have partial sun/shade depending upon the time of day.

In the Inner Sanctum, which is a large flat area, the intent was to use all the colours of the rainbow including such "difficult" colours as magenta and orange and to show how they can be used in an attractive and pleasing way. To avoid a "fruit salad" effect, each bed was given a colour theme which would compliment the surrounding beds, thus unifying the overall Inner Sanctum.



**A May moment in the Flower Garden, broad beans edged with lettuce in the Vegetable Garden**

Permanent plantings—a certain tree, a shrub, a rose, vines, and a variety of perennials and grasses—give each bed individual structure. Bulbs are an integral part of each bed, from the early spring bulbs to the brightly coloured tulips and alliums. Spaces between the permanent plantings are filled with annuals, vines, tropicals, sub-tropicals and summer tubers such as dahlias. Many of these "fillers" not only help to extend the season but also add exuberantly hot and bold colour. Let's not forget the very faithful self-sowers that we so rely on year after year. Some are welcome for their foliage effect such as *Perilla frutescens* (Shiso) with its luminous maroon leaves that add bold blocks of colour, giving rhythm and unity to the beds. Others are welcome for their flowering display such as *Nigella* (Love-in-a-Mist) and *Papaver somniferum* (Opium Poppy) delighting all with their array of colours. However, our Himalayan impatiens take Best in Show in the "filler" category; they are a big presence, so floriferous, reaching over eight feet in every season and thriving on and on well into the fall.

Repetition of specific plants throughout the Outer and Inner Sanctum, whether they are permanent plants or "fillers," further helps to unify the Flower Garden proper by creating "moments of bloom." These "moments" include early spring bulbs, iris, roses, lilies, daylilies, salvias, dahlias, chrysanthemums, grasses, and autumn colour.

In the last couple of years, several beds have been removed in order to open up the area for better viewing and traffic flow. We removed two pastel triangles, a grey square in the centre, and a purple/orange square bed.

At the south end of the Inner Sanctum was a cruciform layout of *Tilia cordata* (Littleleaf Linden) pruned in a "Cat's Cradle" fashion. These lindens were grown from seed by Frank Cabot and gave welcome shade and interest. However, as they declined and required extra maintenance, we removed them in stages. This was a tough decision, but on the plus side the Rainbow opened up dramatically and along with the lawn has flourished in the welcome sun.

### Colour Themes

The Flower Garden is divided into two major sections, the Outer Sanctum (the area closest to the house), and the Inner Sanctum (the centre area enclosed by the cedar fence).

### In the Outer Sanctum

- Beds 1, 2, 3, Birch Bed and Cornus Bed—the colours are softer, consisting mostly of pinks, purples, blues and greys.
- Skinny Vista—blue and yellow
- Stable Close/Black Garden—deepest, darkest maroons (faux black)

### Within the Inner Sanctum all the beds are colour-coded.

- White Garden
- Old Rose Garden (pastel shades)
- Red Bed
- ROY (red, orange, yellow)
- Peach Square
- Yellow Square (with tripod)
- Pink/Chartreuse Square (with tripod)
- Purple/Magenta Square (with tripod)
- Blue/Lavender/Grey Bed
- Herb Garden (culinary and medicinal)
- Vegetable Garden with Miss Jekyll (ornamental as well as productive)
- Rainbow (Richard Of York Gained Battle In Vain —ROYGBIV):

**Red Rainbow** ranges from darkest maroons to scarlet.

**Pink Pie** is the adjacent pie-shaped bed that has a range of paler hues of the Red Rainbow.

**Yellow Rainbow** ranges from orange through pale yellow, to green.

**Yellow Pie** has a paler range of orange through green.

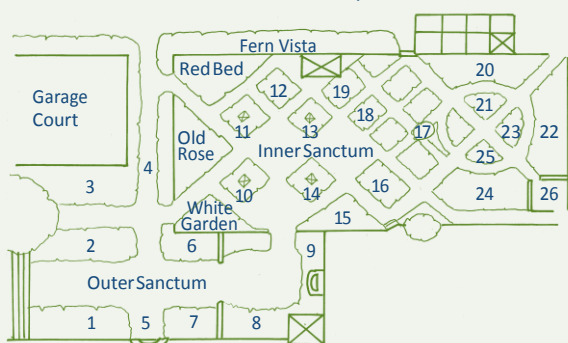
**Blue Rainbow** ranges from blue through indigo to violet.

**Blue Pie** has softer hues of the colours of the Blue Rainbow.

## The Flower Garden

Outer Sanctum	Inner Sanctum	
1 Bed 1	9 Fountain	18 Vegetable Garden
2 Bed 2	10 Pink/Chartreuse	19 Fruit Garden
3 Bed 3	11 Peach Bed	20 Red Rainbow
4 Skinny Vista	12 Red/Orange/Yellow (ROY)	21 Pink Pie
5 Villandry Seat	13 Yellow Square	22 Yellow Rainbow
6 Cornus Bed	14 Purple/Magenta	23 Yellow Pie
7 Birch Bed	15 Blue/Lavender/Grey	24 Blue Rainbow
8 Stable Close/Black Garden	16 Herb Garden	25 Blue Pie
	17 Miss Gertrude Jekyll	26 Outdoor Garden Room

ILLUSTRATION BY CAROLINE BURGESS





Miss Jekyll watches over the Vegetable Garden

### Plant Choices

It was a real surprise to find out how hot the summers can be in the Northeast compared to England. However, I was able to capitalize on the summer heat and grow unusual annuals, half-hardy perennials, and tropical with relative ease. These plants struggle with the cold and damp English climate. For instance, grasses often do not flower or set seed, and *Clematis terniflora* (Sweet Autumn Clematis) never flowers; the season is not warm enough.

Varying and experimenting with the “fillers” year after year continues to be fun. However, the permanent plantings and colour themes have remained the same. Before any plant is selected for the Flower Garden, it is carefully scrutinized to make sure it is an appropriate choice. Much of the following is taken into consideration:

- Overall shape of the plant or silhouette: Is it a mound? Is it vase-shaped? How tall and wide does it grow?
- Shape of the inflorescence: Is it a spike? Does it have a raceme or a panicle? Does it flower once or is it continuous?
- Individual flower shape, size, and texture: Is it a daisy? Is it an umbel? Is it pea-shaped? Do the flowers hang? Do the flowers “bowl you over” or do you have to look closely to see them?
- Flower colour and texture: Is it blending or contrasting? The flower colour of *Salvia involucrata* and *Dahlia* ‘Rebecca Lynn’ are exactly the same, but the flower shape differs strikingly. This is an example of blending. You can either contrast with the same overall flower colour but different shape, or you can contrast with the same flower shape but different colour and size.
- Leaf shape, size, colour, texture: bold foliage next to fine, grey foliage blended with purple foliage, glaucous combined with coarse foliage.

Consider the above guidelines a thought process, but don’t be too rigid. Trust me, you can take all this into consideration and drive yourself wild, but Mother Nature and serendipity can make combinations that you have never thought of, so experiment to your heart’s content.

In a nutshell, the Flower Garden is special because of the broad variety of plantings, the lively splashes of colour and the exuberance of our staff, all of which help to make it the eighth wonder of the modern world.

### Labelling

It is problematic to label a garden which is all about aesthetics. The garden would be a sea of labels on long stakes, and since much of the garden is ever changing, it would be an eyesore as well as a constant task as plants come and go. Therefore it is much to your advantage to attend our annual Members’ Garden Party where we label over 150 plants in the Flower Garden alone. The Flower Garden has also played a star role in our Friday Evening Garden Walks with the “show-stoppers” of the week being featured and labelled.

### How does it all happen? (Many factors come into play.)

**Good soil is essential.** Twenty years ago all the beds were double-dug, incorporating horse manure. The soil is now mulched every two to three years with horse manure. This we consider a must to maintain good soil structure and fertility.

**Annuals**, both homegrown and self-sowers, are essential “fillers.”

**Tender perennials** such as cuphea, fuchsia, and dahlia provide the most bloom. In the early days we rented a greenhouse in Cold Spring to build our tender collection. We first built two polytunnels to overwinter stock plants for propagation purposes, and the tender collection started to grow. We now have six polytunnels and overwinter large tender plants and their propagules. The tenders are tougher than we think. They seem to cope well with being planted in the spring, dug up in the fall and then overwintered in cool (48°F) polytunnels where they are in a semi-dormant state.

**Perennials** are the backbone of the garden. To control flowering time and reduce staking needs, many of our perennials are regularly cut back by a third to a half, several times during the season. This will often produce a second flush of blooms. Deadheading regularly is important for aesthetic reasons and to ensure a continuum of bloom, as well as to control excess seeding.

**Maintenance** of the Flower Garden during the growing season is quite challenging. Deadheading, staking, mulching, weeding, and maneuvering amongst the mass plantings is an isometric workout akin to Tournament Twister! In a season, the changes in the Flower Garden are dramatic, from bare earth in March to a ten-foot jungle by July and back to bare earth in November when we cut the garden down prior to bulb planting and mulching.

The Flower Garden is irrigated once a week during the dry summer months using oscillating sprinklers on stands which are moved throughout the garden. No fertilizing or spraying is required, just strong healthy plants going into good soil.

Gardening on this large scale and with this degree of complexity does require time, plants, labour, and knowledge, and it can seem daunting. However, recreating a modest Stonecrop-style Flower Garden following the principles of the “mixed border” in a bed or two at home is very manageable. The results will be the envy of your neighbours and a marvel to your friends.

—Caroline Burgess, Director



Flower Garden Tool Shed



Corner seat in the Fruit

