

Green Spaces Project of the Month - October 2002

Chumleigh Multicultural Gardens

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Chumleigh Multicultural Gardens are like an oasis in the green desert of South London's Burgess Park. The Oriental, Mediterranean, African and Caribbean, Islamic and English gardens each contain a wealth of plants and design elements reminiscent of the regions and cultures they represent. But their real relevance is revealed through projects and events which encourage communities to participate in interpreting plantings from their own cultural perspectives. The gardens are open to the public during daylight hours.



History and context

In Chumleigh Garden's café I spotted, mounted on the wall, a line from a poem by Maya Angelou which reads "The need for change bulldozed a road through the centre of my mind." This powerful image describes very well the impression Burgess Park makes.

Amidst an area of high density housing, an urban open space has been created by a gradual programme, over several decades, of slum clearance, clearing war time bomb damage and reclaiming land where disused canals once ran. In 1973 Southwark Council named the park after Councilor Jessie Burgess, Camberwell's first woman Mayor. The original idea was to give 'lungs' to the city, although my initial feeling was more of a green desert, redeemed to an extent by quite recent plantings of avenues of hopeful saplings.

In the middle of this 54 hectare expanse of otherwise forlorn grass stands a group of Victorian buildings - Chumleigh Almshouses - formerly home to the Friendly Female Asylum for elderly and frail ladies, and since 1978 Southwark's Park Management depot.

In 1993, an article in Landscape Design pointed out that "the site is in need of an overall identity and sense of purpose". In an effort to restore the earlier vision, BEN had input into consultations with local communities, who expressed interest in the idea for a multicultural garden as a central focus for the park.

A feasibility study was conducted by European Community Heritage Campus Project students, with the support of Reading University. For more information, see the article in Landscape Research journal (vol 26 No4 pages 351-556) called 'Ethnic Minority Groups and the Design of Public Open Space: an inclusive landscape?' by BEN network member Clare Risbeth.

In 1996 a new post was created within the Park Ranger Service in the Environment and Leisure Department of Southwark Council. The role of rangers, rather than wardens, forms a vital link between the gardens and the communities they serve.

Chris Wildhaber is the Ranger. She sees her New Zealand heritage and awareness of Maori culture as the inspiration for her study of 'ethnobotany' which underpins her work in one of the most ethnically diverse London Boroughs. She told me that "Many urban parks feature plants from around the world. What makes Chumleigh unique is its involvement with local communities."

As well as creating and managing the multicultural gardens, Chris is responsible for supporting a number of horticultural projects with community groups, involving mainly elders from the Asian, Irish, Afro-Caribbean and Vietnamese/Chinese communities. Tucked away behind the public access areas of the garden, groups of 'Heart Gardeners', referred to by their GPs, use raised beds and polytunnels for growing organic food, herbs and medicinal plants. This summer the Growing for Healthy Living groups celebrated with an open day which they called World Village Festival.



Chumleigh Gardens in 2002

The approach to the gardens is not as encouraging as it might be, since you have to walk past the car park and vehicle depot - but do note the attractive exhibition, created by Art in the Park, explaining how the council's fleet of electric cars contribute to environmental conservation. Look to your left and you will see a sign written in many community languages welcoming you to Chumleigh. Passing through the courtyard between the Alms Houses, past the café, you come to a gateway opening into a walled garden.

The first area you encounter is the Oriental Garden. Here a calm, still pond and rock garden contrasts with swaying bamboo-like foliage, and you can see tea bushes from the mountains of India.

In the African and Caribbean garden big leaved plants with a tropical feel can be found, as well as cacti and succulents from drier regions.

The Islamic garden is more geometric. You can see pictured here the wonderful mosaic, lily pond and jelly palm which forms the centre piece of this enclosed fragment of paradise. The local branch of MIND found this to be an ideal setting to stage a confidence building event for people with mental health problems. The Asian Elders' group are shown here meeting beneath a palm tree.

Mediterranean gardens need to create shade and conserve water, so here we find vines climbing pergolas, and herb beds of grey leafed, drought resistant plants. I was there on a bright but chilly Autumn day and some of the more tender plants were lovingly wrapped in fleece to protect them from the northern climate.

Community Activities

The gardens were very quiet the day I was there. But they will come to life on Sunday 17th November when people of all ages are invited to learn how to make their own bird feeder to help the birds survive the winter. And December sees a return of the popular, seasonal workshop making a wreath or table decoration for Christmas.

Previous workshops have focused on seasonal themes like Spring houseplant arrangements, willow weaving, making hanging baskets and window boxes; in Summer making painted pots and leaf sculptures; and an Autumn seed collecting walk in the park. These activities prove very useful to local people who often have only small gardens or balconies, but are none the less keen gardeners - especially when it comes to growing plants which link them to their roots, long ago and far away.

- Black History Month - previous events involving local communities have included
- Storytelling about plants from the Caribbean
- Plants, people and health
- Botanic drawing classes with Anita - Moghul miniatures, and banners on themes from Asia and India, with school children
- Sugar and Spice - history of tea, coffee and sugar cultivation



The Future of Chulmleigh Gardens

A development plan exists for Burgess Park. Ideas for the future include perimeter boundaries, safety features and increased staffing, but these depend on financial constraints. Chumleigh itself is also constrained by limited money, and the Ranger service is kept extremely active. Still, Chris has various projects in the pipeline.

Volunteers are welcome to input ideas about making the approach to Chumleigh Multicultural Gardens more accessible.

Although the gardens are very beautiful just to look at, Chris told me that she tries to get beyond the visual aesthetic of plants, to get at the meanings they hold for people. Hence the idea of inviting ethnic communities to contribute to a series of temporary labelled trails. Chris would welcome support with fundraising to make this project happen.

A video or CD Rom will shortly be produced, of old fashioned varieties of food, herb and medicinal plant growing - in different languages - available in 2003. BEN supported an application for funding for this project from the SEED programme (lottery partners) via RSNC (Royal Society for Nature Conservation).

Conclusion

Chumleigh Multicultural Gardens visitor's book is full of positive remarks from many different people, who come from far and wide to enjoy this little known beauty spot in South London. Comments in English, Welsh, French, Portuguese - and children's drawings - can be seen among the autographs of celebrities and dignitaries. But the entry which most moved me spoke of "great memories of my own environment in another time, another place". This captures beautifully the ethos of the garden, which Park Ranger Chris Wildhaber has worked so hard to cultivate.