

A new vision

As part of a redesign of the gardens at Chatsworth, Tom Stuart-Smith has created a bold new plan for Joseph Paxton's 19th-century Rock Garden

WORDS TIM RICHARDSON PHOTOGRAPHS RICHARD BLOOM

IN BRIEF

What Mid-19th-century rock garden at ducal estate.

Where Derbyshire.

Soil Brashy, heavy, stony clay; slightly acidic.

Size Three acres.

Climate Temperate.

Hardiness zone USDA 8.

A froth of tall, white *Persicaria x fennica* 'Johanniswolke' dominates the Rock Garden at Chatsworth. Created in the 1840s by the 6th Duke of Devonshire and his head gardener Joseph Paxton, the garden was partly inspired by their travels to the Alps and partly by the wild moorland landscape around Bolton Abbey, the Duke's Yorkshire seat.



For most of us, a rockery is a small agglomeration of natural-looking stones at the far end of a garden, and an opportunity to grow delicate alpine flowers and succulents. That's a rather 20th-century notion, perhaps a little quaint. And it is dramatically at variance with Joseph Paxton's grand picturesque vision at Chatsworth, where from 1842 he created a craggy wonderland designed to transport visitors – in the imagination at least – to wild Yorkshire moorland, or perhaps even as far as the Alps, whence the 6th Duke of Devonshire (together with Paxton, as his head gardener) had travelled.

Tom Stuart-Smith was one of half a dozen designers invited up to Chatsworth in 2018 to comment not on the Rock Garden, but on an area of woodland subsequently developed as a new system of glades named Arcadia (see page 73). But as the 12th Duke of Devonshire recalls, “the scales fell from our eyes” when Tom lit upon the Rock Garden instead.

“Tom said, ‘You are missing something really basic here. You have this wonderful rockery but it has this motorway path going

through it and all these ditzzy gardens,” says the Duke. “We had started taking off the rambling roses and so on, but that was really just nibbling around the edges.” In the event, the commission from the Duke and Duchess was for Tom to work on both the Rock Garden and Arcadia simultaneously.

According to the Duke, the gardens at Chatsworth had been left largely unchanged since Paxton's era, barring a brief interlude in the 1910s and 1920s. “The 6th Duke died in 1868,” he explains, “and I am led to believe that nothing much happened after that until my great-grandmother Evelyn Fitzmaurice [the 9th Duchess] came here in the early 20th century and did quite a lot of gardening. Her father [Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, Viceroy of India, 1888–94] had been in charge of India and so she was used to going up into the Himalayas. There are a few rhododendrons remaining in the Rock Garden from her time.”

Tom's feeling was that the Rock Garden had lost much of its definition and character, smothered as it was by a canopy of tall trees and mature shrubs. “The whole progress through was just a bit too decorous and the planting too horticultural and patchy,”

Above A few existing Japanese maples were left in situ, but otherwise Tom has refigured the planting, which has a broadly pink, purple and white theme, courtesy of thalictrum, campanula, iris and other plants of wild appeal.

Above right Tom has replanned the path system so that visitors must wend their way around and sometimes through the rocks and boulders, adding to the atmosphere of exploration.

Right Some 50 tonnes of locally quarried gritstone have been brought in to the Rock Garden, complementing the ‘towers’ originally engineered by Paxton and his team. Fluffy white persicaria creates a softer complement to the rock textures.



16 KEY PLANTS

1 *Thalictrum* 'Black Stockings' A useful early season accompaniment to *Iris sibirica* and astrantias. “The dark stems of this cultivar make it more telling than the species,” says Tom. 2m x 75cm. AGM*. RHS H7, USDA 5a-9b†.

2 *Campanula poscharskyana* 'Stella' A low-growing bellflower that Tom uses extensively with *Erigeron karvinskianus* to colonise the cracks in the rocks. But he warns, it is very prolific. 20cm x 50cm. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 3a-8b.

3 *Astrantia major* 'Alba' A long-lived perennial that is well-suited to large-scale planting, and one that Tom describes as being “very fresh and light in early summer”. 90cm x 45cm. RHS H4, USDA 4a-7b.

4 *Dianthus carthusianorum* Creates bright spots of colour in among grasses and salvias. “The higher parts of the rockery are very dry and this species seems well adapted to such conditions,” says Tom. 40cm x 20cm. RHS H7.

5 *Erigeron karvinskianus* A popular, low-growing perennial that Tom likens to “vegetable Polyfilla – rapidly healing over gaps opened up by adventurous visitors – scaling the rocks in unexpected ways”. 30cm x 1m. AGM. RHS H5.

6 *Sesleria autumnalis* For Tom, the autumn moor-grass is “one of the most successful grasses on the dry banks – a very robust evergreen associating well with origanum, salvia, dianthus and cenolophium, to make something quite reminiscent of an alpine meadow.” 1m x 50cm. RHS H7, USDA 5a-8b.

7 *Persicaria x fennica* 'Johanniswolke' Tom calls this persicaria “a giant handsome thug”, but it is one that doesn’t seem to seed, so it just gradually expands to become a “vast frothing mass”. 2.5m x 1.5m. RHS H7.

8 *Cenolophium denudatum* An umbellifer that Tom describes as being “somewhere between cow parsley and wild carrot but with a glossy, smart sophistication”. For Tom just a few of these can give a garden a wild feel but he warns that it can seed freely. 1m x 75cm. RHS H6.

16 key plants continues on page 75.



A cascade tumbles down the face of one of Paxton’s original cantilevered rock stacks, some of which contain a metal armature, surrounded by a mix of lush planting dominated by a large *Darmera peltata* and spots of purple colour from *Salvia nemorosa* ‘Caradonna’.

▷ says Tom. “This is a garden that ought to look semi-apocalyptic – as if some great eruption has happened.”

So he decided to start again more or less from scratch, emphasising – and dramatising – particularly the two entrances into the Rock Garden, while also finessing and varying the path system. It now feels as if the paths are finding their way through the rocks, as opposed to forging through them.

“It is probably the biggest rockery ever made in terms of the sheer amount of rock – an amazing concept,” says Tom. “Quite a lot of the big rock piles had fallen apart and have been remade. You can see the original Paxton rocks quite clearly: they are either towers, or these extraordinary cantilevered stacks, often with a long ‘diving-board’ rock protruding in characteristic style. You occasionally see it occurring naturally up in the Dales, and we tried to echo that Paxton style.”

Tom bolstered Paxton’s original vision by adding numerous gritstone boulders, a stone quarried on the estate and used for the house façades. An estimated 50 tonnes of rock has been brought in – the newer boulders a light buff colour while Paxton’s originals are a darker grey. At the heart of the Rock



The wider landscape at Chatsworth

Having completed the £32m Masterplan project to restore the house a few years ago, the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire looked to undertake a similar revitalising effect on the garden. As well as Tom’s work in the Rock Garden, key projects include:

Arcadia “Arcadia is a sort of code name: a link to the painting by Poussin in the house,” explains head gardener Steve Porter, alluding to Nicolas Poussin’s *Et in Arcadia Ego*. In an initiative supported by Gucci since 2018, this 15-acre area of woodland has been partially cleared and intensively replanted by Tom to create a walk that connects four glades of contrasting character, offering fine views back across to the house and garden. There is a bog garden, the ‘rabbit glade’, with a diagonal vista back to the conservatory, and the ‘meadow glade’, which has been planted by Tom’s regular collaborator, naturalistic plantsman James Hitchmough.

The Maze Borders Tom has reconfigured what was formerly a lupin garden into a largely herbaceous garden that reflects his own exuberant style. It is lent structure by stone pillars, clipped yew shapes and (planned) ironwork baskets.

The Rose Garden The old, quartered rose garden in front of Chatsworth’s glasshouse, has been re-imagined by Tom and now includes a far wider variety of roses, including classics such as ‘Tuscany Superb’ and ‘Charles de Mills’. The roses are complemented by a richly romantic, ‘jewel-box’ planting of perennials such as irises, violas and old-fashioned pinks. Four wooden arbours are to be added. Tom’s inspiration was the kind of ‘antiquarian’ gardening pursued by the Marchioness of Salisbury at Hatfield House and Cranborne Manor from the 1980s.

Trout Stream Dan Pearson’s work in the upper reaches of the garden was first essayed in a well-received RHS Chelsea Flower Show garden in 2015: a planted-up stream, which wends its way down the hillside and ends at the Jack Pond.



▷ Garden is a large pond, fed by the Strid – an artificial ‘wild’ stream – that Tom says creates a feeling of openness and animation in the midst of the scene. A decision was taken to remove a bridge that had formerly spanned it, to avoid any hint of domestication.

Head gardener Steve Porter is equally admiring of the feat of Victorian engineering the Rock Garden represents. “Paxton’s rockwork was designed to look precarious,” he says. “There is some internal ironwork, but a lot of it is counter-weighted.”

Steve also notes the slightly Japanese character of the Rock Garden as it developed, with mature katsuras and acers coming to dominate. Tom has retained some of these, but otherwise introduced perhaps less demonstrative species, notably *Cornus kousa* in several varieties, as a favourite of the current Duke and Duchess. On the tops of the rocks he has used *Phillyrea*, with some ‘quite ornamental’ smaller trees used lower down, such as the cut-leaf crab apple, *Malus transitoria*, the Yoshino cherry, *Prunus x yedoensis*, and two snowball trees, *Styrax japonicus* and *S. hemsleyanus*.

Overall, says Tom, his vision has been to make it less horticultural and more experiential. “I wanted more groups and drifts

and repetitions,” he says, listing as key link plants veronicastrums, actaeas, persicarias, irises (mainly *I. sibirica*), astrantias, rogersias, epimediums and hellebores. “There are also some quite ‘gardeny’ things,” he adds, such as the tall, pink *Phlox x arendsii* ‘Utopia’. Bulbs, too, play an important role, with martagon lilies and the rhizomatous perennial *Omphalodes cappadocica* ‘Cherry Ingram’, which appears in spring alongside puschkinias and dwarf narcissi.

The planting could be characterised as quietly connoisseurial, but Tom sees his horticultural interventions as the start of something, rather than an end point. “I am hoping I have created a framework that the garden team does not need to regard as static,” he says. “They can always improve on it and add new things.” □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Address Chatsworth, Bakewell, Derbyshire DE45 1PP. **Web** chatsworth.org **Garden open** 10.30am-5pm. Garden-only admission £15; see website for other ticket options and seasonal opening times.

Find out more about Tom’s work at tomstuartsmith.co.uk

Above Mature woodland surrounds the Rock Garden, which takes the form of a half-bowl. The scale of the boulders is in keeping with the magnificent landscape of the surrounding Chatsworth estate.



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16 KEY PLANTS CONTINUED

9 *Monarda bradburiana* A spring-flowering, low-growing, mildew-free, tenacious bergamot for difficult dry places. 60cm x 60cm. USDA 5a-8b.

10 *Heuchera villosa* ‘Autumn Bride’ An excellent plant for dry banks in sun or semi shade. Evergreen and weed-excluding, it is very fresh in flower in August and September. 60cm x 1.2m. RHS H6.

11 *Iris* ‘Silver Edge’ Siberian irises play an important role in the Rock Garden. Tom likes them because they are long-lived, slowly expanding and disease-resistant, while the foliage provides good bold texture. This is a cultivar he finds to be particularly strong. 1.2m x 50cm. AGM. RHS H7, USDA 3a-8b.

12 *Iris* ‘White Swirl’ Another *Iris sibirica* cultivar found in the Rock Garden with elegant, ivory-white falls flushed with yellow at the base, and narrow, linear leaves. 90cm x 30cm. RHS H7, USDA 3a-8b.

13 *Omphalodes cappadocica* ‘Cherry Ingram’ A spreading groundcover, with smart foliage and piercing scilla-blue flowers. Perfect for slightly moist semi-shade, Tom likes to use it with hellebores, epimediums and pushkinias. 20cm x 45cm. RHS H5.

14 *Amsonia tabernaemontana* var. *salicifolia* A clump-forming perennial with pale, icy blue flowers that Tom calls a “unique colour”. Along with this variety, he has used various amsonias in the Rock Garden, including the cultivar ‘Blue Ice’. 70cm x 45cm. RHS H5, USDA 3a-9b.

15 *Cornus kousa* var. *chinensis* ‘A small tree that has everything,” says Tom. “Fine shape, flowers, fruit, autumn colour.” 7m x 5m. RHS H6, USDA 5a-8b.

16 *Kolkwitzia amabilis* Known as the beauty bush this deciduous, dense shrub bears a profusion of pink flowers in spring. “This is such an elegant, transparent and delicate shrub,” says Tom. 3m x 4m. RHS H6.

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.
†Hardiness ratings given where available.



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