



LIVING LEGACY

Geoff Hamilton built Barnsdale Gardens to inspire his TV audience, and his son Nick has been carrying on his valuable work, he tells **Ciar Byrne**

When Geoff Hamilton, the much-loved presenter of *Gardeners' World* from 1979 until 1996, was making his own garden at Barnsdale in Rutland he designed it as a series of television sets. This is perhaps not surprising as the gardens, which are celebrating their 40th anniversary this year, were the backdrop for the show as well as his other popular TV series *The Cottage Garden*, *The Paradise Garden* and *The Ornamental Kitchen Garden*.

Since Geoff's death in 1996, aged 60, Barnsdale has been overseen by his middle son, Nick. He has continued to develop the gardens but, just like his father, has made sure that visitors leave with plenty of inspiration to take back home.

The current Barnsdale is the second garden of that name. The first was on the Barnsdale Hall Estate, where Geoff lived with his young family. He rented a couple of acres for growing fruit and vegetables, where he could also take photographs for *Practical Gardening* magazine, which he started editing in 1975.

When he became the presenter of *Gardeners' World* he needed more room to experiment, so relocated to a nearby Victorian farmhouse with five acres of land. 'It was obviously his own back garden, but it needed to serve the purposes of presenting,' says Nick. 'His vision was to create many small gardens within a garden.'

Geoff was well-known for his money-saving ideas, and one of the first areas he created was The £2

Garden. It was designed to inspire a typical family of four who could only afford to spend a couple of pounds a week on their garden.

'He was well known for making gardening accessible,' says Nick. 'Everything was made, nothing was bought. The £2 Garden was all about creating something on the cheap because he was aware that gardeners often don't have vast sums of money.'

Today this area is The Cutting Garden, where Nick and his team grow seasonal flowers including gauras, penstemons, dahlias, sedums, agapanthus and echinaceas.

As a TV presenter Geoff had to appeal to the widest audience possible, so as well as cheap-and-cheerful ideas he would also illustrate alternatives for those who did have money to



PICTURES: STEVE HAMILTON

splash out. One of the most popular features at Barnsdale is the two gardens he created for his series *The Cottage Garden*.

'The Gentleman's Cottage Garden was very expensive,' says Nick. 'He was aware that there were people out there with staggering amounts of money to spend on their gardens, as well as people who had just a few pennies. He didn't want to alienate anyone.' Next door to it is The Artisan's Cottage Garden, which is a more economical alternative.

It was the same when it came to organic gardening. Geoff was very much at the forefront of the movement and ahead of his time. However, in the 1980s and 1990s he recognised that many of his viewers were still wedded to herbicides and pesticides. 'He would always mention the organic way first, because that was what tended to stick in people's minds, but he would also mention a chemical alternative,' says Nick.

One of Geoff's most famous developments was The Ornamental

Clockwise from opposite page: The Japanese Garden; the formal area Geoff called Versailles; The Allotment; Geoff at work in The Artisan's Cottage Garden



Kitchen Garden, which is still very popular. His influence can clearly be seen today in the trend for growing 'edimentals' – attractive plants that can also be eaten. Back in those days the idea of a garden that was both beautiful and productive was new.

'It was never meant to be a mainly productive garden with a few ornamental plants thrown in to perk it up, it was always the other way round,' says Nick. 'The most important thing was that it was beautiful. When he built it in 1987 ➤

Glorious gardens

This page, clockwise from right: a eucalyptus tree in The First Time Garden, which was built to give tips to novice gardeners; The Gentleman's Cottage Garden and The Artisan's Cottage Garden. Opposite page: The Mediterranean Garden and Nick Hamilton at work



the varieties you could get from the seed catalogues were very limited in terms of their ornamental value. They had plants that were great for cropping but that didn't look particularly beautiful, whereas now you pick up a seed catalogue and there are so many beautiful looking vegetables that you're spoilt for choice. It's not difficult now to combine the two, but in those days it was quite difficult. It was one of his great loves.'

The Paradise Garden was another favourite that was also the subject of a popular television series. Once again, Geoff created low-cost and expensive alternatives: the Town Paradise Garden bursts with colour and scent, and tranquil water streams from a lion's head fountain; the relatively cheap Country Paradise Garden has more of a woodland feel, including a hornbeam arbour and an avenue of nut trees.

'The principle was to create your own little piece of paradise in the available space, whether that was an allotment, a front garden, your back

'Geoff's great passion was to pass on his knowledge to as many people as possible'

garden, wherever,' says Nick. 'His great passion was to pass on his knowledge to as many people as he could, and get them to understand the feeling you get when you're in the garden, which is just like being in paradise – to create your own beautiful space that you get lost in. He really enjoyed doing those two.'

It is now more than 25 years since Geoff died, but Nick has never forgotten his father's belief that a garden is always a work in progress. If an area of the garden is starting to look tired he has no qualms about changing it. For example, The Modern Estate Garden needs to be updated to

better reflect how we use our gardens today, incorporating an entertaining and barbecuing area. Although Nick is sceptical about fashions in gardening he thinks it is essential to 'dribble through change', so that people have a reason to keep coming back to Barnsdale.

One part of the garden that has been adapted for the 21st century was formerly a scree garden. It is behind the more formal lawns and herbaceous borders Geoff called Versailles, because they reminded him of the French palace's gardens.

Although the scree garden featured on Gardeners' World it was never open to the public. Nick and his team decided to transform it into a Mediterranean garden, but recreating the flora of sunnier climes was never going to be an easy option in Rutland, where winters can be cold and wet. Their solution was to mound up the borders and incorporate lots of shingle to create better drainage. Now this area is home to lots of the grey-leaved plants native to southern

Europe, as well as shrubby salvias, pineapple lilies and the more tender rock roses.

In many ways Geoff Hamilton was a visionary. As well as spearheading the organic movement he was one of the first popular gardeners to stress the need for peat-free composts – to prevent the depletion of peat bogs – a concept that is only now becoming mainstream. Barnsdale has now been peat-free for three decades: instead, they use well-rotted horse manure from local stables, compost any garden waste and shred their own bark for mulching.

'Dad was phenomenally ahead of his time,' says Nick. 'He understood that organic was the way to go because we couldn't just keep killing insects with pesticides and chucking all this fertiliser on the ground that eventually gets washed into waterways. It was not about lecturing to people, it was always about encouraging people. When he talked about organic or peat-free he always suggested that first, to put the idea in people's heads, then mentioned the alternative afterwards hoping they wouldn't hear that bit. Also, he made people realise the satisfaction of building something as opposed to just getting out your cheque book or credit card.'

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Nick is the only one of Geoff's three sons who followed him into a career in horticulture. When he took over at Barnsdale he was aware that his father's fame would begin to fade.

'It took about seven years before I heard the first person say to their friend: "Oh, it was made by that bloke from the television, what's his name?" and I thought: "It's starting now".'

But his father's legacy lives on, and this year they will be celebrating at Barnsdale with a series of events to mark the 40th anniversary of the

gardens, including an outdoor party, a stand at the Gardeners' World Live event at the NEC in Birmingham in June and a gardeners' questions forum in August.

'I understand why my dad did what he did,' says Nick. 'All he wanted to do was inspire people to get into the garden. It's such a great feeling to be able to do that. Working outside and working in horticulture – what a life! Why would you want to stop?' ■

◆ Barnsdale Gardens is open all year round. For information visit barnsdalegardens.co.uk