

MELLOR OPEN GARDENS

June 17th 2012

Opening again next year – 16 to 20 local gardens of every size and shape are opening to the public for charity on June 17th 2012 from 11 am to 6 pm

All proceeds to Cancer Research UK
and Mellor Parish Centre

www.melloropengardens.org.uk

How to Garden in Mellor

Before any serious gardening can begin, it is imperative to know what the basic soil conditions are. This will influence your decisions on what to plant and the likely chances of success and healthy development of your plants.

You will often hear about acid and alkaline soils, clay, sandy and loamy soils. There is no need to consider this any further in Mellor as the vast majority of local soils are slightly acidic clays. Soils derive initially from the underlying rock but in much of this area, the underlying geology is covered by a layer of glacial till or boulder clay from the last Ice Age.

Because of this, therefore, most local soils are clay and on the acidic side (in extreme cases , very acidic, close to the moorland edges) Like any type of soil, clay has it's advantages and disadvantages. It is often cold and difficult to work, can form a hard pan on the surface in hot summer weather and be slow to drain in winter and wet weather, On the other hand, it is moisture retentive and rich in nutrients and minerals. Clay like any soil, can be improved by two things: cultivation and the addition of organic matter.

The weather helps to break the soil up in the winter by a freeze / thaw effect on the clods that you dig up. Digging the soil over in the autumn and then leaving it for the weather to act upon is the most effective way of breaking it up. In the spring, the soil can be broken down much more easily into a fine tilth by raking.

Adding organic matter is the way that you can improve the soil in the longer term. Use garden compost, farmyard or stable manure and in large quantities, the bulkier the better. Dig it in if you can, but if there's just too much, then apply it as a thick layer of mulch in the autumn and then leave it for the worms to take down into the soil for you - slower, but effective. Also, whenever you do any work in the garden, you will work the organic matter into the soil as a side-effect.

Time is the third key element. Really it means repeating the above two, for several years. It will take a few years of digging and adding bulky organic matter to really improve the soil for the long term. So keep on going!

If you have clay soil, never walk on it when it wet, you will compact it even more squashing out any pockets of air that it may contain and leaving it to develop a hard and caked surface when it dries out. If you cannot resist gardening – buy a scaffolding plank or two!

Now we know what type of soil we have, what grows well in Mellor? The following list is by no means exhaustive and merely suggests some plants that will grow well if properly husbanded.

A great variety of trees – Malus (Crab Apples), Hawthorn, Laburnum, Sorbus, Prunus (flowering cherries), Magnolias and many conifers. Also many shrubs, such as Euonymous, Hypericum, Aucuba, Abelia, Forsythia, Choisya, Sambucus, all the Viburnums, Ribes (flowering currants), Philadelphus, Potentilla, Weigela and Cotinus. Also because of the acidity of the soil you can grow successfully all Azaleas, Camellias, Skimmias and Rhododendrons. The richness of the clay also supports Roses which can be trouble free due to modern varieties from suppliers such as David Austin.

As far as perennials are concerned you are spoilt for choice with hardy geraniums, for instance, guaranteeing success. You can also easily grow Rudbeckia, Astrantia, Astilbe, Hostas, Aquilegia, Epimediums, Ferns and many, many more. Bulbs are always successful too and provide colour and interest for years.

So what doesn't do well? Before listing some difficult plants to grow locally, it is fair to say that there will always be exceptions. If you want to create local conditions such as sandy, fast draining conditions it can be done with care. Also at the base of some walls and close to the house you may have alkaline (lime) conditions where builders rubble or lime mortar perhaps is buried. On the whole, however, the cold wet clay soils of Mellor are not kind to Achillea, Eryngium, Lavenders, Lupins, Verbascums, Lychnis , many grasses and some of the more alkaline loving plants like Clematis, lilacs (syringa) and birch.

Remember that garden centres often offer plants for sale that are not grown in local conditions or local soils and the above list includes many examples of sad (and expensive) failures.

Top Tips from the Mellor Open Gardens Team

Cultivate your soil and add organic material, garden compost adds nutrients and life to the soil and eventually helps break up clay.

Avoid being yet another early summer garden - people buy what's in flower at Easter and early summer and so many gardens reflect that fact. Try to plant something to enjoy every month. In winter and very early spring: the Chinese witchhazel, Hamamelis (choose a scented one) grow Viburnum bodnantense 'Dawn' for its flowers and scent , try Prunus autumnalis for cherry blossom in winter, plant hellebores and bulbs of Iris reticulatum, snowdrops and aconites. Don't forget that many bare trees have interesting shapes or bark colours in the winter months.

In later summer and especially from August into October many gardens lack interest but the hot colours of the perennials such as Heleniums, Crocosmias, Rudbeckias, Asters and Dahlias can give great pleasure until the first frosts

Make plants work for a place in your garden , look for plants that offer two seasons of interest, flowers and leaf colour or fruit, bark colours, interesting winter shapes.

Don't be afraid to be ruthless, prune hard where necessary, even take a tree or a shrub out completely if it's too overgrown or not earning its keep in your garden. Everywhere there are examples of misguided planting where specimens have outstayed their welcome.

Create interest in any garden by dividing the space into 'rooms'. Try not to let all the garden appear at once, create element of surprise and wonder, leave a little mystery.

If you have a very small garden, remember lawns are not compulsory!

Look at other gardens locally -see what does well and of course visit the Mellor Open Gardens event next year !

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