

## Principles for the garden at Vico Morcote

*The garden of Sir Peter Smithers in the Lake Lugano area of Switzerland has drawn considerable interest among members because of the owner's efforts to furnish it with the best Magnolia clones from whatever source. Here he tells us what he wanted in a garden to begin with, and what he got.*

- It shall be a source of pleasure to the owner and his friends, not a burden and an anxiety.

- It must therefore be planted so as to reduce labour to an absolute minimum, and the amount of work involved must diminish as the owner grows old.

- All plants in the garden must therefore be of a permanent character: no annuals, biennials or plants requiring lifting in winter or other attention of a special kind.

- The planting must be of a dense kind, so that the plants live in a self-sustaining community with one another, with little space for weeds to grow or need for support.

- Choice of genera for the garden is a matter of taste for the owner and of suitability for the climate and aspect. "Difficult" plants, if not successful after a fair trial, are abandoned for easier subjects of which there are plenty.

- At all levels, planting distances are such as to form a closed canopy, for example, a high canopy of Magnolias, an understorey of Camellias, Rhododendrons, etc., and ground cover. As the high canopy thickens, many sun-loving plants will be eliminated by the shade conditions. But they will be replaced by plants of the forest floor. This is the intended evolution of the garden.

- The design is that of the Japanese stroll garden. The owner is led by a winding path which, with short side spurs, carries him through the entire garden and back to the starting point.

- The plantings, 16 in number, are varying compositions of plants according to the lie of the ground, and there is no repetition of planting. The visitor is surprised at every turn of the path, with a new plant community different from what he has seen so far.

- No plant is added to the garden if there is in existence anywhere in the world an obtainable superior form. This applies with particular force to Magnolias which, however fine, are eliminated when a better is found.

- The number of genera is limited by the size of the garden and the wish to have several collections of world-class quality. In this garden there are Magnolias, Tree Peonies, and Hybrid Nerines. Other collections such as Rhododendrons, Ferns, Cornus, and Camellias are enjoyable but do not aim to set standards.

- Rigidly excluded are such plants as conifers and palms, which would divorce us from the great deciduous forests of oak and sweet chestnut across the lake.

- No plant is ever exchanged. All plants are available to serious gardeners, stock and labour permitting. The pleasure of owning a fine plant is not complete until it has been given to friends.

It is a constant source of surprise — and satisfaction — that events have turned out exactly as intended at the first major planting in 1972. Since then about 10,000 species and cultivars have been established in the garden. The initial labour was severe and required a contractor for two planting seasons. Therefore a full time gardener was required for four years. But as the plants have matured the work load has declined dramatically, and a half-time gardener is now sufficient. There is no digging, cultivation, or heavy work. Most of the work is done by the plants themselves, which expect no wages, only understanding of their needs.