
The LHS Tour of Sweden and Gotland

Deborah McMillin travelled from America to join the tour of gardens in southern Sweden

When George Feather scheduled a trip for Sweden in 2014, it was my chance to visit gardens in the country of my great grandparents who were from Halland and Kristianstad, southwest of Stockholm. My mother had made the journey to Sweden at one time. It was my opportunity now.

Flying from New York into Arlanda airport near Stockholm in the early morning of Tuesday, 3 June, I saw an expansive aerial view of the countryside with lakes, large expanses of forests, and farmsteads surrounded by large clusters of conifers. This would be the scenery along the roadway as our group of 15 would travel the first five days to gardens in the south central area near Lake Vättern and then south eastern Sweden before crossing the Baltic Sea to the Island of Gotland.

Our Wednesday stay was in Uppsala with tours of the Linnaeus Garden and Museum, his country summer estate at Hammarby and the Uppsala University Botanical Garden. These gardens were visited in 2007 by a group of LHS members and were written about in detail by LHS member Brenda Leese, so I will begin the highlights of our tour with Thursday as we headed southwest to Enköping, a city of 25 green parks.

The focus of our visit was the Dream Park, a perennial park designed by Dutchman Piet Oudolf. This park is planted in large drifts of ornamental grasses and vertical perennials to display a natural flow in comparison with the static traditional garden. Trees and shrubs were a part of the companion plantings. Thousands of *Allium aflatuense* 'Purple Sensation' provided the vertical show at the time of our visit and were used as a companion with other perennials providing interest with a variety of colour combinations, textures, and heights. A Pocket Park, a small intimate area designed around a Pump House from the 18th century, was enclosed with clipped larch hedges, benches under a shade tree and a fountain with bubbling water, to convey a sense of serenity. Contemporary sculptures are found throughout the gardens.

Our lunch visit was to Bastadalen with its Chinese Garden. This had been a quarry from the 17th century where limestone, feldspar and marble were extracted until the late 1920s. The garden is characteristic of a Chinese garden with slow winding paths, curved bridges, moss covered rocks,

clumps of hosta among the stones, bamboo, lanterns, a pavilion (in the pond), water plants, a golden dragon and Buddha, all arranged for a sense of harmony and peace. A landscape of trees (several of Chinese origin such as ginkgo and dawn redwood) cling to the steep sides of the deep quarry, with shrubs, conifers, tree peonies and columbine sharing the shallow soil of the steep hillsides that contribute to the unique location of a Chinese garden.

On Friday 6 June we headed west to the farmlands near the town of Falköping to visit a private garden raised above the flat land with the importation of boulders, rocks and stones. After 20 years a major feature of the garden is the lake with a small summerhouse on an island surrounded by beds. Repetition of circles in other parts of the garden creates a natural entrance/exit from one enclosure to the next. Slipper orchids in yellow, white, lavenders and purples were tucked among rocks and boulders with primula and iris growing by a small stream with a curved bridge. Garden ornaments are kept simple –attractive ceramic pots placed strategically within the garden rooms and the birdhouses mounted on tree stumps. The circular pathway around the lake led back to the house where we finished our garden visit with coffee, tea, and cakes, sitting outside in the garden that surrounds the house. Our hostess is retired and her husband says that she works in the garden daily. The LHS members thanked her for sharing her passion with us.

Our afternoon visit was to George's friends Sverker Kärrsgård and his wife Karin Hessland at their renovated home and country garden. They improved the soil in the 10 hectares of abandoned open land of clay and stone with organic matter and first planted shrubs and trees for shade. Fruit trees, raspberry bushes and a vegetable garden—where Karin grows Jerusalem Artichokes with tubers the size of cricket balls—thrive with the compost from grass clippings and cattle manure. A swimming pond has natural plantings around the border to purify the water. On a sloping rocky

Photograph: Deborah McMillin



terrain a woodland garden with blooming iris, yellow lady's slipper orchids, primula, columbine, ferns and daylily complete the country setting.

Our Saturday morning stop was to visit LHS members Ray Lakeland from Kirkby Lonsdale and his wife Margaret, who had bought a fixer-upper cottage as their May to September summer home. They started the garden two years ago removing scrub from soil that was free draining and rocky which they now mulch with compost annually. Taking advantage of the dryer climate of Sweden they have planted a garden with emphasis on plants that do not do as well in the Lake District. As an example echinacea and hosta thrive because there are fewer snails and slugs. Heuchera does not do as well according to Ray, but possibly because it is a rabbit's treat rather than because of the weather. No damage could be seen because of the clusters of bright blue flowers of forget-me-not used as a companion plant with the heuchera. Familiar to the Lake District, primula, peony, aquilegia and potted pelargonium were in June bloom. Due to sporadic downpours tea, coffee and desert were served in the cottage rather than the outdoor tent Ray and Margaret had decorated with Union Jack bunting for our visit.

Our afternoon visit was a private garden on the wooded slopes of Lake Ämmern. Our hosts have visited Holehird and gave us several comparisons. Annual rainfall is about half what it is at Holehird and they are lower at 100 metres above sea level. Their latitude at 58 degrees is the same as the northern parts of Scotland with winter temperatures 26-27 degrees centigrade below freezing point. Their garden faces in all four directions, is 200 metres long and includes Scots pines, birch and juniper trees. Paths for 'retired' people have been established as the terrain has large boulders (left by ice age melt) and a rocky hillside planted with rhododendrons. To fill

Below: Garden at Falköping. Right: the garden of Ray and Margaret Lakeland



Photograph: Dorothy Feather

the sizeable areas between moss-covered boulders, large plants and mass grouping of hosta, ferns and ground cover are used. Numerous varieties of colourful primula and the *Linnaea borealis* are found in the woodland, a natural garden without strict borders. Moving out of the shade the flat land is planted with fruit trees, vegetables, herbs and ornamentals in June bloom.

Island of Gotland

Monday 9 June was our first day of exploring on the Island of Gotland known for nature reserves and as a mecca for artists. We started with the Husrygg Nature Reserve on the southern tip of Gotland where towering limestone cliffs jut over the Baltic Sea. The mid-morning coffee and tea stop was at Körbsärgården in the southern parish of Sundre. Marita Jonsson told us the story of the origins of the garden from the original founder in the 1940s to their purchase of the garden and restaurant in 2000. Original plants were retained after the purchase of the property and the structure of the garden was maintained with the division of herb, perennials, old-fashioned roses, vegetable and fruit garden. On our visit late tulips were still in bloom with aquilegia, peony, iris, orange poppy and tradescantia. Lily and dahlia were close to bloom for summer. Contemporary sculptures are a part of the garden landscape as Marita's husband Jon is an artist and started an art studio to show the work of artists inspired by Gotland. Recently they built a contemporary wing to house international art exhibitions.

Marita took on an ambitious project for the 300th anniversary celebrating the birth of Linnaeus by following in his footsteps through Gotland on his journey in July 1741. Her informative travel diary with impressive photographs taken by her and daughter Helga was published in 2007. A copy of Marita's book is now in the library at Holehird.

The Kallgatburg Nature Reserve is unique as its location straddles two different forms of bedrock, pure limestone that drains off quickly creating dry land, and marlstone that creates marshy area. Often different flora can be observed on the two sides of the reserve's 2.7 km nature trail. The popularity of Kallgatburg is mainly due to the lady's slipper orchids. It has become the main focus of many day trips in early June when the orchid is in full bloom.

On Tuesday morning George was determined that he was going to find this wild orchid in bloom. He found a note in the comment book at the sign-board dated the 8th, just two days earlier, that the orchid was in bloom,



Photograph: Dorothy Feather

Above left: lady's slipper orchid growing wild. Right: the Lau homestead

but no indication of distance was given. Regardless, the hunt was on. It was a short walk through forest area and then pastureland where the nature trail began. In marshy areas long narrow wooden planks were laid down for walking. The group cautiously navigated stiles with wooden ladders over electric deer fences. After an hour's walk, the majority of the group decided to return to the car park. It was George, Dorothy, Ann, Barry and Elli who accomplished the quest. By the time they returned to the car park the remainder of the group had eaten lunch at the picnic tables. We were ready to continue the afternoon journey north to the Island of Fårö with its massive limestone sea stacks along the Baltic Sea at the Digerhuvud Nature Reserve.

Leaving our beach cabin Wednesday morning in Tofta we travelled south to the eastern side of the island to the small parish of Lau to visit the renovated 18th century farmstead and the garden of Stefan Haas and Helen Wahlström. To establish the perennial garden at the front of the house, stone dry clay was removed and replaced with new soil. They put down stone paths around small islands of planting with a *Koelreuteria paniculata* as a specimen tree. One winter Helen methodically built the drystone wall that defines this intimate space where they grow plants that adapt to hot dry summers and harsh winters. Geraniums in purple and pink, chives and pink dianthus, salvia, white cerastium with pale pink roses, hardy cranesbill geranium, and *Paeonia lutea* var 'Ludlowii', with cup-shaped yellow blooms were hardy specimens. Additional perennials, iris, lily, peony, are planted in borders in their kitchen garden. Stefan is a tomato and potato connoisseur with 14 different species of tomatoes and 20 species of potatoes in his



**Left: George meets Linnaeus
Right: the Tanto Allotment in
Stockholm**

extensive vegetable garden. Spring asparagus appeared close to picking. The spotless barn is used for plant breeding and the storage of seeds that Stefan meticulously sorts and labels.

It was time to leave Stefan and Helen's home, where they have lived since 1987, with no neighbours, self-sufficiency and a sense of humour at

being residents of a parish where horses outnumber permanent inhabitants. Lunch in the tourist-packed town of Visby and the botanical garden were next on the agenda.

The Visby garden (created in 1855) is small for a botanical garden but unique in its location by the Baltic Sea and with its medieval stone wall that shelters the garden from sea winds and storms creating a maritime climate. Trees that thrive in this sheltered microclimate (but not other areas of Sweden) are fig, tulip, handkerchief and magnolia trees with ginkgo, giant and dawn redwoods and cedar of Lebanon as rare mature trees. Some of Visby's many 11th century ruins are found in the garden with the remains of a medieval church, St. Olof, now covered with ivy. A rose garden with lavender as a companion plant, the garden of medieval herbs and a sundial garden with clematis and roses that climb stone pillars and a few of the older trees creating shade gardens under their branches provided an oasis from the crowded center of Visby in the summertime. After George had a short 'meet and greet' with a Linnaeus 'head' sculptured from a block of 200-year-old elm by contemporary sculptor Kaj Engström, it was time to travel south to our last garden on the Island of Gotland in the village of Tofta.

On this trip I have observed 'retirement' and 'empty nest syndrome' become an opportunity for part-time gardeners to become full-time gardeners. Gun Wallier, who worked professionally as a graphic designer in Stockholm, did not discover gardening until her retirement. Her husband Bosse, grew up in Gotland on a farm until he went to Stockholm for education and better opportunities at the age of 14. Retirement found him back on the Island, for a new time in their life. They spent long days clearing a plot in the woods and built their retirement home and garden. A Swedish Whitebeam tree

will be the predominant tree in the front yard once matured. The white blossoms of the mock orange bushes exuded a fragrance that permeated the garden. White was the predominant colour with masses of white cerastium against pastel blooms of lavender, rhododendron and

asters with the pale pink beauty bush (*Kolwitzia amabilis*) and 'White Rose of Finland'. Bolder splashes of colour were used as an accent. Raised beds and boxes provide a small vegetable garden.

Thursday saw us on an early morning three-hour ferry ride from Visby to the mainland and Stockholm's southern island, Södermalm. Our hotel was located adjacent to the Tanto Kolonitradgardar (allotments), originally a garden area for the city dwellers to grow potatoes during the first World War.

The Tanto allotments are the answer for the high-rise dwellers of the city to have their own garden. Each plot has a miniature cottage with a few basic amenities for eating, relaxing and weekend sleeping. It is their home away from home from spring until the first frost. Vegetable growing is to be expected in an allotment but here, a person can also show off their preference for ornamental gardening. Formal or cottage gardens (and, for the lucky ones, mature fruit trees on their plot) create a colourful mix on a hillside in Södermalm above the Årstaviken Bay.

Saturday afternoon flying out of Stockholm to the States the lakes below were shimmering from the reflection of the late afternoon sun. In a short time the clusters of towns and farmsteads of Sweden disappeared. Eight hours later I glimpsed a sunset haze of New York City with its bridges and skyscrapers - a different landscape than the one which my great grandfather would have experienced as a young man in 1876. This had been my first visit to a Scandinavian country and it has sparked an interest in the history of my mother's family roots and ancestral country.

