

Remembering Geoff Hamilton, 1936 -1996

Christine Costello

During the storms and floods at the end of 2013 and the start of 2014, I was reluctant to venture far from my Exmoor home. It was pretty impossible to get out into the garden or allotment; both were saturated and little was accomplished apart from the odd visit to add waste to the compost bin and to pick winter greens, chard and spinach. I decided to wallow in nostalgia and reacquaint myself with Geoff Hamilton and his Barnsdale garden. From December to February, I watched several hours of Geoff's most popular BBC series of programmes from 1990 -1997.

It was a pleasure to be reminded of Geoff's clarity, style of presentation and horticultural knowledge, and how and why he was successful at inspiring viewers with his 'hands on' step by step garden projects. The programmes were influential in their time, and remain just as relevant for gardeners today.

Each of the three DVDs in my boxed set comprises six half-hour programmes, illustrating the history, practicalities, formation and construction of the cottage garden, in which Geoff designs, builds and plants a budget 'Artisan's Cottage Garden' and spends a little more cash on his 'Gentlemen's Cottage Garden'. 'The Paradise Garden' and 'The Ornamental Kitchen Garden' follow different formats and within each set of programmes, Geoff includes just enough relevant horticultural history in context. It is clear how much planning and thought was put into building the different gardens from scratch on Geoff's own land, demonstrating the hard labour and detailed plans required to create hard landscaping in a garden.

Geoff's aphorisms were infectious and it was great to be reminded of them. I tried to ration my viewing with little success - each programme is a gem of nostalgia that I relished. Among my favourite items are his exchanges with some wonderful characters that Geoff interviews in their own gardens in East Anglia, the Isle of Wight and other areas of the UK. I loved his ruminations on life generally and his lack of vanity; he asked advice of these senior gardeners with real respect and humility.

I was reminded how professional Geoff was as a lone presenter, talking to camera on his subject. He had a real knack for making viewers feel he was addressing them personally and with his 'can do' attitude, made me believe I could tackle pretty much anything! No wonder he resisted the magazine format for his series, how sensible. A man of great charm, he shared his knowledge in a most engaging manner and was easy to understand, Geoff was no softie though, and was always happy to air his views. During one of the series, filmed long

before our era of political correctness, he reports from a supermarket and comments on the chemicals used on the perfect fruit and vegetables he handles, saying 'No thank you!' I am not sure that could happen now, but I bet he enjoyed making this episode.

When my dear friend Pat, an allotment holder from London, came to visit in February, the extreme weather conditions prevented most outdoor activities, keeping us housebound. I was unsure whether my enthusiasm for Geoff's programmes would be shared by Pat. I need not have worried - she absolutely loved them! We watched them together and realised how fortunate we had been to have Geoff on our screens for seventeen years. They reminded us that Friday's Gardeners' World, in Geoff's time, was an absolute must.

The Geoff Hamilton DVD Collection was produced to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Gardeners' World. I understand the proceeds from the sale of a Barnsdale DVD goes towards a foundation set up to provide a bursary for students of any age and level studying practical horticulture at Writtle College, Chelmsford, Essex, where Geoff himself studied.

I had given Geoff's biography as a Christmas present, along with the DVD set, to another friend, as I had thought it an interesting read, portraying with honesty the man we all felt we knew so well. Fortunately the book was a great success. I would highly recommend it to Geoff's devotees; the book was written by Gay Search and Geoff's twin brother Tony Hamilton. It is simply written, humorous and tells us of Geoff's life and family background. We learn of his love of music, shared with his wife Lynda; whilst Geoff appreciated classical and jazz, Lynda and Geoff enjoyed singing together locally and on annual trips to the Albert Hall for the 'Messiah from Scratch'.

Following this winter's difficulties, with so much UK land inundated, it would be great to have heard Geoff's views on climate change. I feel sure that he would have offered interesting perspectives as he was involved in environmental campaigns, following from his enthusiastic ideals and commitment to garden organically. For myself, as a consequence of weather enforced confinement, I now collect Geoff's excellent gardening books to which I refer almost daily, confirming that there is often a silver lining where gardening is concerned. Tony Hamilton aptly quotes Geoff as saying 'The more people I can get to garden, the better the world will be'.

Christine Costello gardens on the edge of Exmoor, Somerset.

