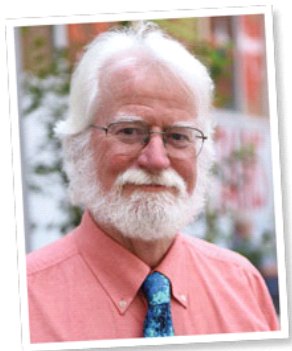


9/1/2023

Putting Up Roots

John Friel



John Friel

I recently visited Fordhook Farm, the historic home of plant breeder extraordinaire W. Atlee Burpee, where the world's largest stumpery is under construction.

I heard that: "The world's largest what?"

Stumpery. Per Wikipedia, that's "a garden feature ... made from parts of dead trees." It makes sense when you contemplate the suffix: A rockery is a garden containing many rocks, an orangery delivers citrus, a winery ... and so on.

Ergo, a stumpery involves a number of tree stumps, used as structural, even sculptural, garden elements, with their usually hidden, intricate root masses supporting shade-loving plants.

As designer Jerry Fritz explained, surrounded by his creation, stumperies are a British invention dating to the Victorian era, when avid plant collectors filled their homes with exotic plants, especially ferns—and ran out of room indoors. A windstorm provided material for the first stumpery, built in the 1850s by artist and plantsman Edward Cooke on the estate of one James Bateman. Known as Biddulph Grange, it's still there, with walls of stacked stumps up to 10-ft. tall.

Fordhook, now a National Historic Site, is still the research center for Burpee Seeds and The Cook's Garden. It's shrunk from the hundreds of acres W. A. B. purchased in 1888 (around the time stumperies were flourishing across the pond) to around 60, still plenty of room for greenhouses and trials. The property also comprises numerous gardens, rare trees and historic structures.

Normally closed to the public, Fordhook is open by appointment and on a couple of Garden Conservancy Days each summer. I attended Burpee Open Day, a tradition begun in 1895 when the company would host a yearly "Farmer's Picnic."

Fordhook is also the home of George Ball, CEO of W. Atlee Burpee Company. He wanted to do something with a large wooded patch. When Jerry proposed a stumpery, George was stumped. But he quickly got on board.

There are no stacked walls at Fordhook. Rather, the featured articles serve as focal points in a sort of living outdoor museum, arranged in a very walkable shaded setting with meandering trails—"a beautiful place to enjoy on a hot summer day," in the words of its creator. The woods contain many exotic ferns and also the shade-lovers you'd expect: helleborus, hakonechloa, astilbe, epimedium.

A fanciful pair of tall, gleaming, stalagmite-like metal sculptures remind you that you're in a sculpture garden whose namesake artworks will change constantly year-to-year as the organisms they support, micro- and macro-, return their elements to the environment. It's a slow process: The chosen species are long-lasting oak, locust, hickory and cedar.

What surprised me most about the project was not its quirky genre, nor its scale, but its pace. Fritz, his son Evan, and George Ball transcended the designer/client paradigm and became collaborators. Result: The space feels like it's been there for years. In fact, the first plants went into the ground last June. Now, crews are installing not just ferns, but mosses, lichens and fungi, turning each piece into live habitat.

Stumperies remain mostly a UK fixation. King Charles III, the gardener formerly known as Prince, has one at his royal digs, Highgrove. Composed of chestnut roots anchored by steel bars, it's a scaffold for ferns, helleborus and hosta. When his father, Prince Phillip, first saw it, he asked, "When are you going to set fire to this lot?"

It's a gauche, but understandable question. A stumpery's eponymous features are, after all, widely considered junk to be disposed of—burned, buried or shredded. When Jerry offered arborists money for good ones, they too were stumped. "I'll give you all you want!" was a common answer.

Yet the form has never gone away and is enjoying something of a quiet renaissance. Missouri Botanical Garden has one. There's one on Vashon Island, Washington, which, at 9,000 sq. ft. (a bit smaller than the king's) and featuring nearly 100 stumps, was—until now—the largest in America. The bar has been raised: Fordhook's version weighs in at over 2 acres and 253 stumps.

Someone needs to alert the Guinness Book of World Records. **GP**

[GO HERE](#) for a peek at the stumpery at Fordhook Farm.

John Friel is a freelance writer with more than 40 years of experience in horticulture.