



Chris's own Garden of Eden

.....

He describes the garden at his home in Newport as a mere “square of grass with an apple tree” - so it’s ironic that as Curator of Ventnor Botanic Garden, Chris Kidd has helped to shape and develop a stunning 27 acres, at what is widely accepted to be one of the greatest gardens in Britain. Here he tells us how he ended up in his dream job, despite the odds being stacked against him.

.....

There was never any doubt that gardening was in Chris Kidd’s genes – it was right there staring at him from both sides of the family.

His mother Pam, who hails from East Wight, was descended from a market gardener in Lake, while his father Brian was not only an enthusiastic allotment

holder and competitive grower - but carved a successful career in horticulture, eventually becoming the Director of Parks for Portsmouth City Council.

Chris clearly recalls spending hours on the allotment with his dad, from pretty much as soon as he could walk, so it was always an environment in which he felt at home.

School was a different matter, though: he never enjoyed it and was keen to leave the classroom as soon as he could.

And as a school leaver at 16, he came up against the harsh reality of 1980s unemployment, with many of his friends opting to sign up for the Army to avoid the dole queue, though that was never going to be a route for him.

One careers advisor suggested he should try gardening and he’s under no illusions about why.

“Horticulture was seen as a kind of dumping ground if you couldn’t get anything else” he says.

Interview

But when he saw Portsmouth Council were advertising for apprentices in its Parks Department, it seemed too good an opportunity to ignore.

As it turned out, Chris was one of the last apprentices to be taken on by the council (ironically, his father had been one of the first) before the competitive tendering system was brought in.

Now, he counts that apprenticeship as the best step he ever took: "My life didn't really start until I went into that job" he says.

Not that it wasn't without its challenges: in those days many of the apprentices and supervisors were drawn from tough military or even criminal backgrounds and Chris recalls that racism, sexism, violence and homophobia were rife, making for a tough and uncomfortable environment.

"Among them though were some fantastic people, from whom I learnt the most about horticulture" he says.

Memorable mentor

One such was Jim Heyworth, who had trained at Kew Gardens, and took the young Chris under his wing.

"If you showed you were interested, he really nurtured you, and that was my saving grace" says Chris, who went on to gain his Master of Horticulture and become foreman of the showpiece Rock Garden at Southsea by the time he was 20.

When competitive tendering was introduced by the council in 1989, Chris was faced with redundancy - but the cloud had a silver lining because, with Jim's encouragement, he went on to land himself a place on the Diploma course at Kew.

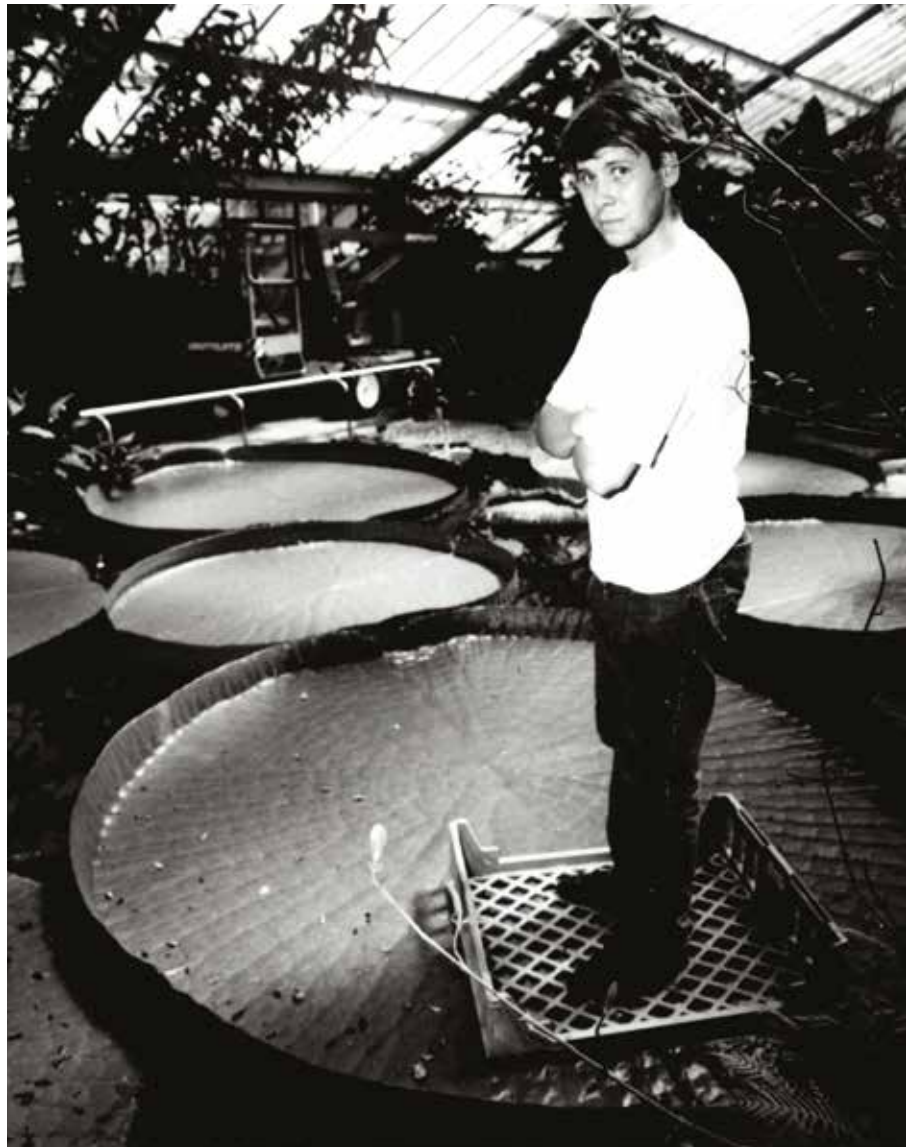
Going back to being a student was a challenge - especially at the world-renowned Gardens that attract top students from all over the world.

"At first I always felt very much like the bloke from the council!" he says, "but I began to realise that I had actually built up a lot of valuable practical skills and that gave me more confidence."

The joy of being at Kew, he says, was working with extraordinarily rare plants that hadn't been seen before.

"That was what I was really interested in" he says. "I found it exciting to be the first person to grow something from a rare seed".

After finishing his Diploma at Kew,



Chris was employed as a supervisor in its famous conservatory, which further developed his knowledge of tropical plants - and in particular his own personal favourites, Water Lilies, which he would later go on to introduce with great success at Ventnor.

Outward bound

Before his move to the Island, though, he continued his own personal voyage of discovery and learning by heading off and working in Sweden, Russia, and then, perhaps the most exotic location of all, the Limbe Botanic Garden in Cameroon. Originally developed in Victorian times as a nursery for cash crops such as rubber, coffee, sugar, bananas and oil palm, the garden is now dedicated to conservation

and science as well as leisure and tourism.

At just 26, Chris was the youngest curator the garden had ever had, and he describes it as "hugely exciting" to have been involved in tropical plant conservation.

"The real kick for me was having the opportunity to get a close-up view of the Rainforest before it goes" he says. "I was able to get out into the Bush on plant-collecting trips, a bit like the plant hunters of Victorian times."

After a year in the tropical idyll, Chris came back to the UK to set up home with his partner, supporting himself as a freelance, lecturing in colleges and doing various horticultural commissions - from working on big garden developments to once sourcing an Olive tree for the late opera singer Pavarotti.

Boom and bust

He recalls it as a precarious financial existence, during a time of 'boom and bust' in London. "Sometimes you might earn a lot of money and then there would be nothing, so it wasn't ideal, especially when we were expecting our first child".

Hence, when a permanent full-time job came up working on the garden and arboretum of then Deputy Prime Minister and later Lord Heseltine in Banbury, Chris was more than happy to accept.

It meant not only a roses-round-the-door existence in an idyllic cottage on the estate, but a bigger working budget than Chris had ever known.

"Everything I'd done in terms of work before had been very economy-oriented" says Chris, "but suddenly there was no budget – you could have whatever you wanted, and I enjoyed having that much freer hand to develop the garden."

During the two years he worked at the Heseltine garden, Chris enjoyed putting things into order, relishing the challenge of building a significant plant collection whilst also making it look aesthetically pleasing.

"There were often high-profile visitors – a lot of big names from industry – and that certainly puts you on your mettle in terms of the job" he says.

Indeed in many ways, this was looking

like a job to hold on to – and the chances are that Chris would have stayed much longer than two years, had it not been for a certain other job popping up on his radar – Head Gardener at Ventnor Botanic Garden.

The dream begins

"Working at Ventnor was something I had craved for a long time" he explains. "I had visited it as a child when it was all very dark, a horrible relic of a landscape left over from Victorian times, and then saw it again in the late 80s and early 90s after the Great Storm, when a lot of trees had come down and it began changing.

"Basically I had admired it for years, and my dream job had always been Curator, although I realised it didn't come up very often".

Which was why Chris decided he was happy to play a waiting game if need be, applying for the Head Gardener role in 2000, despite the fact that in career progression terms it might be considered a downward move – and certainly meant a pay cut.

Chris got the job and began working with the previous Curator Simon Goodenough, who he describes as "a legend" and who had taken the Garden

"At first I always felt very much like the bloke from the council! But I began to realise that I had actually built up a lot of valuable practical skills and that gave me more confidence."

from one era into the start of another.

As a team Simon and Chris developed the Friends Society, benefitted from new sources of funding, including Lottery grants, and enjoyed the artistic freedom to develop the Garden, clearing, planting and landscaping with great gusto.

Chris recalls the excitement of the re-invigoration process, summed up





“There’s not a single part of the Garden I haven’t changed in the past 18 years. I suppose that makes it feel almost like my own”.

in a memory of being surrounded by JCBs, ploughs and woodchippers all contributing to a cacophany of activity.

One of his favourite recollections is of putting the first of the Garden’s famously popular giant waterlilies into place in 2000. Over the years more species have been added and there are now over 20,000, making it one of the biggest collections in the UK.

Other tropical plants that are on the verge of extinction were also brought into the Gardens, where they now thrive in its unique sheltered microclimate. These include one *Sophora toromiro* that can only be found growing in six gardens in the world.

“There’s not a single part of the Garden I haven’t changed in the past 18 years” says Chris. “I suppose that makes it feel almost like my own”.

All change

There were more big changes in 2011, when Isle of Wight Council decided to stop funding the Garden and things went into a period of uncertainty as the Council looked into ways of disposing of the site. Redundancies ensued, Simon left the Curator’s job and Chris found himself with three jobs rolled into one under the title of Garden Manager.

“It was a tough time and it was hard not to feel protective towards the Garden after putting so much into it” he says.

The 18 applications of interest in the

Garden included 16 that proposed to build on it – but with its international reputation, that – happily – was never going to be accepted.

That left two bodies in the running, including the Community Interest Company run by John Curtis that ultimately won the bid.

Now, with its portfolio of income streams from gate sales and rentals to catering, and retail gifts and products, Ventnor is the only Botanic Garden in Britain or Europe that is funded entirely by the money it generates itself.

Chris, who five years ago finally realised his long-time dream of becoming Curator, says: “There’s no garden in the UK that could be funded solely by ticket sales – if that was all we did, we’d have to close tomorrow”.

He’s rightly proud of VBG’s contribution to education and conservation and asserts: “It’s a totally unique garden and one of the great gardens of Britain – although to my mind, it is not given the recognition it deserves.

“In terms of

collections, it has no equal. We’ve created synthetic eco-systems mirroring diverse floral landscapes from around the world, that show plants from the wild as you would see them growing naturally.

“It’s quite a leap away from traditional horticulture, with its trees on lawns and plants in pots” he adds

And quite a leap, too, for Chris Kidd - from the manicured parks of Portsmouth to his own tropical paradise on the Undercliff.



Chris with Simon Goodenough