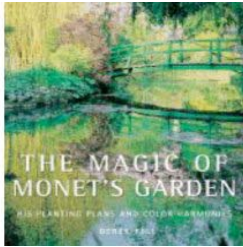




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**The Magic of Monet's Garden: His Planting and Colour Harmonies, by Derek Fell. Frances Lincoln. 160 pages. £25.00. ISBN 9780-7112-2737-8.**

Irritatingly, Nature never really succeeds in imitating Art. Try as she might, Nature never came up with the perfect Claude or Poussin setting, and it was left to the landscape designers of the 18th century to create Stowe and Ermononville. Two centuries on from Claude, the Impressionists found the same problem. They had a clear idea of what Nature should look like but, all too often, Nature failed to oblige. So, Nature must be helped on her way. Probably the longest-lived and most prolific of the Impressionists was Claude Monet (1833-1926). He worked on the principle that for artists to starve in garrets and die young may be romantic but does not pay bills. Having family money himself, Monet made sure his paintings sold, particularly to American buyers. With this capital behind him, in 1890 he bought two hectares of unpromising land (with the railway running through it) on a sloping site in Giverny in the Seine valley, between Paris and Rouen. There he created the ultimate Impressionist garden and then spent the remaining 26 years of his life painting it.

In fact, there are three gardens at Giverny: a flower garden in front of the house, a fruit and vegetable garden and the world-famous water garden on the far side of the former railway (now a road). The gardens fell into decline after Monet's death but were lovingly restored in the 1970s and are now amongst the most visited gardens in France. If you are to say anything new about Giverny you need to have both literary and artistic talents. Fortunately Derek Fell has both. As both a writer and a photographer, he has been able to bring fresh insight into what would otherwise be a hackneyed subject. In *The Magic of Monet's Garden: His Planting and Colour Harmonies*, Fell's thesis is to describe the layout and planting of the gardens from an artist's perspective, explaining how Monet's colour effects and the famous "shimmering sensation" were consciously created by careful choice and siting of plants. Monet gave a lot of thought to his effects and, perhaps surprisingly, he was an admirer of Gertrude Jekyll whose articles he collected. He was also a voracious reader of plant catalogues. Fell's photographs are quite stunning, even given the fact that the gardens themselves are a photographer's dream – and were designed to be. Almost every garden-lover will visit Giverny at least once in a lifetime. If such visitors were to read Fell (preferably before going), their visit would be enriched and enlightened.

Two small niggles: the Franco-Prussian War was 1870-1, not 1875, and the spelling is not standardized. Some of the book (including the cover) is in English ("colour") but most of the text is American ("color"). Either would be acceptable: a mixture is sloppy.

**Review by Philip Stephen (November 2007).**

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