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Green Thumbs Unite

By TOVAH MARTIN
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YOU could pin it on an acute case of homesickness. Or you might ascribe it to one gardener's stubborn allegiance to Britain's ancient apprenticeship program. But whatever motivation drove him to action, Clive Lodge is determined to make a go of the North American arm of the Professional Gardeners' Guild.

Although Clive Lodge came to this country seven years ago to serve as head gardener on the Connecticut estate of a famous fashion designer, he never broke ties with his British buddies. He kept in contact as much as possible, but he felt slightly alienated, to put it mildly. Mr. Lodge, who is the guild's North American representative, said he had missed the camaraderie held by those who work the land in his native Britain. Most of all, he pined for the frequent opportunity for fellowship that the Professional Gardeners' Guild provided.

Mr. Lodge, 50 years old, learned the ropes from age 15, his education spanning a five-year period as an apprentice at the municipal parks department in his native Britain. "I worked in the tree bank, on the golf courses and in the greenhouses and conservatories," he said. "Every six months I was rotated so I got the complete picture. That was before they abolished the apprenticeships in the 1970's."

The apprentice system had been in effect for centuries. At one time, boys 12 or younger would begin their education as gardeners doing the hoeing, digging, cleaning and raking, living in garden-side dormitories known as bothies, earning minimal wages while paying for their board, keep and training in addition to working from dawn to dusk. Even after labor laws restricted the employment of children, many in the gardening profession still feel that an internship program is as critical to gardening as it is in the practice of medicine.

The Professional Gardeners Guild, founded in 1977 in England, has begun a training program that addresses this need. The guild is geared primarily for head gardeners (sometimes called caretakers in this country), helping them link, exchange ideas and find employment.

But the guild, here or overseas, is not intended for nursery managers and other horticultural professionals like your neighborhood lawn service, although they can join as associate members without voting privileges. It is meant for head gardeners with gardens sometimes up to several hundred acres and perhaps a staff of 15 to supervise, said Mr. Lodge, who joined the British guild in the 1980's not long after securing his first job as a head gardener.

As part of its services, the guild runs a three-year hands-on training program in which aspiring gardeners are given training doing a one-year assignment on each of three large English estates.

"Anybody can talk a good garden," Mr. Lodge said. "But in our trade, is there anything more valuable than hands and knees work? Gardening is no gift. It's no green thumb. It's just practical experience."

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The traineeships provide "purely practical experience," said Peter Fields, chairman of the British guild, which has about 1,000 members. "Our gardeners learn as part of a team. The range of skills that I need as a head gardener, I could not learn in a textbook. These skills have to be learned at the knees of the masters."

After three years, the gardener is awarded a certificate, receives aid in finding a job and has plenty of calluses. That's what comes with hours of raking seedbeds, digging, deadheading plants, balling and burlapping trees and planting.

Mr. Fields, who has been a head gardener for 43 years, leads the gardening staff at Bradenham Hall, a 250-year-old estate in Norfolk, England, with 27 acres of gardens including an arboretum, kitchen garden, nuttury, fruit cages, rose garden and perennial beds, plus 2,500 acres of farm. (A look at the garden may be seen at www.bradenhamhall.co.uk.)

"This is gardening on a serious scale," Mr. Fields said of his job. "You can't muck about at that level."

Like its British counterpart, the North American chapter, started three years ago by Mr. Lodge, has no headquarters per se or paid staff. Its members are all full-time gardeners from around the country (but most are from Connecticut) and Canada who spend their scant spare moments attending to the guild's affairs. They receive a subscription to the guild's quarterly magazine and stage conferences and study tours. Best of all, the 40 members (two-thirds are men) are invited to visit other gardeners on estates that aren't generally open to the public. They plan to begin arranging traineeships similar to the British program.

Travis Rumsey, who cares for a four-acre estate in Denver, said the group provided a "connection to this historic craft."

"What I get out of it is a tie to the Victorian ethic," he added. "The guild has given me a certain pride in what I do. I'd love to see it become a recognized trade. What we do is the difference between being an architect and a handyman."

One of the guild's objectives is to alleviate the isolation some in the profession feel.

"People like us often work behind the closed gates of private estates. This is an opportunity to meet together," Mr. Lodge said.

There are several levels of membership within the guild. A full voting member must hold a senior position with five years of working experience under their belt and manage at least one full-time employee. Assistant head gardeners and gardeners working solo with ample experience are also encouraged to apply. Other gardeners might become associate members.

"Basically, we don't refuse membership to any paid professional gardener," Mr. Lodge said.

But, so far, interest in the United States has been modest. "It's been a trickle rather than a gush," Mr. Lodge said. But he's trying to drum up additional participation. "We need to do a launch on a national level. I do recruit," he said.

"I've done my share of cold calling. But I prefer to visit in person, and this is a big country."

More information about the guild can be found at www.pgg.org.uk

Photos: Clive Lodge with many of the ornamental plants he cares for in the greenhouse on the Kent estate where he is the head gardener. (Photo by Thomas McDonald for The New York Times); Views of the garden on the 250-year-old estate of Bradenham Hall in Norfolk, England. The grounds have 27 acres of gardens, including an arboretum, kitchen garden, nuttury, fruit cages, rose garden and perennial beds. (Photo by Jerry Harper)

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