

THREATENED WITH DEATH IN THE JUNGLE

Tales of a modern day plant hunter – Tom Hart Dyke

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Gun-toting guerrillas in the dangerous Columbian jungle have just captured you. Threatened with death and miles from anywhere, how would *you* spend your last terrifying hours? Most people might resort to prayer but Tom Hart Dyke decided that the best course was to design his dream garden.

Using his pocket diary as a sketchpad, Tom settled down and sketched plans for a unique garden – his World Garden at Lullingstone Castle in Kent.

Plant collecting had been the reason he'd gone to Columbia in the first place and, as Tom explained at last month's Civic Society talk, his World Garden would contain the plants he'd collected from across the globe, planted out in beds each shaped in the form of their respective countries of origin. At the end of that day, thankfully, Tom survived but he had to endure a further nine months of captivity; the ordeal eventually ending when he and his friend, Paul Winder, were released in time for Christmas 2000.

A full audience of Society members and friends heard Tom tell of his early introduction to the beauties and varieties of flowers, particularly orchids. This had taken him on plant hunting expeditions to many remote places – many of them dramatic but none certainly so personally dangerous as the clutches of the guerrillas on the Columbian border.

On his return home to Lullingstone near Sevenoaks, where he is known locally as the "plant nut", Tom and Paul penned the best selling book *"The Cloud Garden"* detailing their experiences in the jungle. The sequel to this story was filmed for two series on BBC Two, *"Save Lullingstone Castle"* and *"Return to Lullingstone Castle"* which followed the progress of Tom's project envisaged and planned in those jungle days.

He is still working hard to complete his task and illustrated the efforts involved in converting an overgrown one-acre walled area into the burgeoning show garden that it now is. Not the least interesting of his tales was the use of two pigs to "snoutovate" the ground - successfully and rapidly removing the endemic couch grass, ground elder and other underground nasties from the area. All this while also trying to save his ancestral home of Lullingstone Castle, an historic mansion frequented by Henry VIII and Queen Anne and home to the Hart Dyke's for twenty generations.

What came across in the talk was his immense enthusiasm and zest for life. His slides showed colourful flowers from every continent and scenes from Tasmania, the remote Andes, South Africa and many others. Indeed his World Garden requires him to win suitable plants from every Continent and region bar the Arctic and the Antarctic.

Tom finished by answering questions divided between his experiences in captivity and his plans for the World Garden and signing copies of his books which were on sale at the event.