

CONVERSATIONS

Ethne Clarke: Launching the New *Organic Gardening*

by Jane Roy Brown for COGdesign

Under new editor-in-chief Ethne Clarke, the Pennsylvania-based publisher Rodale relaunched its 67-year-old Organic Gardening magazine with the February/March 2010 issue, saying that it was responding to “a changing mindset among Americans who are choosing to lead healthier, more environmentally conscious lifestyles.” Ethne Clarke brings a breadth of experience to the magazine: Trained as a horticulturist, she also is an internationally known garden historian and the author of 15 books on gardening and landscape history.



*Ethne Clarke’s most recently published book is a revised edition of *Hidcote: The Making of a Garden* (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2009). She is currently working on a new book, a biography of the English architect Cecil Pinsent, architect and garden designer of choice for the Anglo-American ex-pat community in Florence, Italy, during the early 1900s.*

***Organic Gardening* is very snazzy now, with high-quality photos, a fresh look, and more diverse content, including design. Which parts of the new magazine reflect your direct influence, vs. that of publisher Rodale?**



Organic Gardening is the cornerstone of Rodale and was instrumental in bringing organic practices to America, but the magazine was beginning to look its age. As far as snazzy goes, I believe that gardening is a beautiful pursuit, and a gardening magazine should reflect this. Also, gardening writing is a rich historical vein, and every gardener I know (myself included) gets as much enjoyment from reading about gardening as we find in doing it. So, the changes very much reflect my influence, my belief and my passion for gardening, and for doing so organically.

Rodale dedicated the magazine’s relaunch to the late Ardath Harter Rodale, the company’s former Chairman and one-time Chief Executive Officer, who founded *OG* out of her desire to change the world. In expanding its content, has *OG* strayed from her original mission, or expanded it?

The Rodale mission is “to help people live their whole lives,” and we have added our recently trademarked line “living lightly from the ground up” to the *Organic Gardening* title. From what I

have learned about Ardie, that is exactly what she did—Live fully and lightly, firmly rooted to the belief in the necessity of following one’s heart. So we are on track and will remain so.

The magazine’s information to advertisers says that *OG’s* readers “live ahead of the curve” and are “the resounding voice of the new green generation.” Yet the median age of your readers is 56.6 years old, and fewer than a third are under age 50. How are you reaching out to younger readers?

Who says one has to be under 35 to be ahead of the curve? One of the edgiest people I know is 70 years old! But, *Organic Gardening* will be the first gardening magazine to launch an e-reader version on iPad later this year. That will take *OG* to new arenas, as will the website, which has been given a new design. And our Facebook fans grew from some 700 people to nearly 12,000 in the past five months. How old are they, you ask? Five to 75. We even have some dogs and cats . . . and chickens.



Aesthetically, the relaunch speaks to an affluent audience. Can everyone enjoy the benefits of organic gardening and beautiful landscapes, or are these activities available chiefly for people with means?

I don’t agree about us speaking aesthetically to an affluent audience. Beautiful gardens and organically grown vegetables, fruit, and flowers can be enjoyed by anyone of any means; there is nothing exclusive about digging in the dirt and applying layers of compost and manure. Beauty, good writing, and gardening transcend artificial economic boundaries. Anyone can join in—even wealthy folks.



***OG’s* circulation has increased recently. Are we in the middle of a fad or a long-term trend?**

Gardening organically is here to stay. People are concerned about their children’s future, which depends on the health and well being of the planet. Even one tiny step toward organic makes a difference. People realize this, and in the heritage and authenticity of *Organic Gardening’s* message, they recognize a trustworthy resource.



About Jane Roy Brown



Jane is a writer, editor, and landscape historian. Her writing has appeared in the *Boston Globe*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Garden Design*, *Landscape Architecture*, and other publications. She works part-time as the director of educational outreach for the Library of American Landscape History. Jane was recently awarded a Gold Award from the Society of American Travel Writers Foundation. Jane lives in western Massachusetts with her husband, photographer Bill Regan.

Photo by Bill Regan.