This paper provides a conceptual thinking on sustainable garden conservation. It argues that, by focusing on garden culture rather than garden art, garden conservation is more sustainable, and can better contribute to social and environmental sustainability.

When talking about ‘garden conservation’, historically there are two main theories: to freeze the garden design (e.g. John Harvey) and to have a ‘creative conservation’ that allows new design in the old garden (e.g. Geoffrey Jellicoe). Today the understanding of conservation in the field of historical environment (including gardens) is about managing change to sustain or enhance heritage values (see ‘Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance’ by English Heritage, 2008).

In a time when sustainability becomes a central issue worldwide, people may question that if there is a conflict between conservation and sustainability. Many garden conservations throughout the world have mainly focused on those with high aesthetic, artistic or historical values. A conservation approach based on authenticity and integrity (key principles for the conservation of World Cultural Heritage) is often costly and not always sustainable. This requires us to rethink ‘why to conserve a garden’, or indeed ‘what to value’. We are to use David Philips’s ‘quality of life and sustainability’ and Jonathan Haidt’s ‘happiness hypothesis’ as our main theoretical base to seek a meaning of garden conservation, and to show the compatibility of conservation and sustainability.

The paper finishes with some examples from Norway, where conservation policies have a clear preference in garden culture more than garden art due to its democratic political and societal tradition.

Keywords: garden conservation, values, sustainability, garden culture