

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



A Little History Of British Gardening

Jenny Uglow

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About the Book

Did the Romans have rakes? Did the monks get muddy? Did the potato seem really weird when it arrived on our shores? This potted history of gardening in Britain takes us on a tour from the thorn hedges around prehistoric settlements to the rage for decking and ornamental grasses today. It tracks down the ordinary folk who worked the earth - the apprentice boys and weeding women, the florists and nursery gardeners - as well as the aristocrats, grand designers and famous plant-hunters.

Coloured by Jenny Uglow's own love for plants, and brought to life in the many vivid illustrations, it deals not only with flowery meads, grottoes and landscapes, ha-has, parks and allotments, but tells you, for example, how the Tudors made their curious knots; how housewives used herbs to stop freckles; and how the suburbs dug for victory in World War II.

About the Author

Jenny Uglow is the author of biographies of Elizabeth Gaskell and William Hogarth (both shortlisted for the Whitbread) and most recently, *The Lunar Men*, winner of the PEN International Prize for history and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize.

Also by Jenny Uglow:

The Macmillan Dictionary of Women's Biography
George Eliot

Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories

The Vintage Book of Ghosts

Henry Fielding (Writers and their Works Series)

Cultural Babbage: Time, Technology and Invention (ed.
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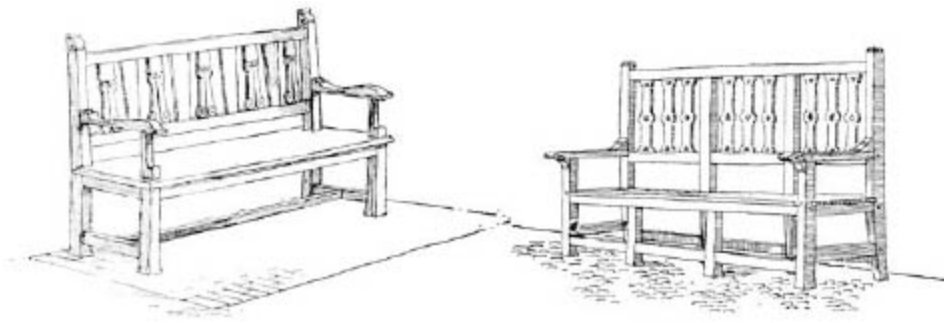
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For Alison and Penny



A Little History of
BRITISH GARDENING



JENNY UGLOW

Chatto & Windus
LONDON



Introduction: 'Mrs Woodcock's irises'

IT IS A misty November morning. Each blade of grass gleams and leans, heavy with moisture, and the air is so still that leaves from the oak tree at the end of my garden fall straight down, twirling and landing like a whisper. Across the road the young lime trees with their conical shape are bare at the top, their lower branches still clad in skirts of pale yellow-green. Behind them, towering over the mock-Tudor semis, a copper beech burns orange and brown. It is the end of the year when gardens are fading. The shabby annuals are pulled up, the geraniums taken in, the bulbs are planted: sturdy souls are dividing their perennials. On vegetable patches and allotments cabbages are swelling, Brussels sprouts budding, waiting for the first frost. Smoke from illicit bonfires curls through the streets.

Because I want to write about the history of gardens, as I walk to the shop I lean over every wall and wonder. Did the Romans grow broccoli? When did that prunus reach our shores? What genius first noticed that dung made things grow? Which tools hung in an Elizabethan shed? Do many people, like myself, know their plants better by the person who gave them to them - 'Mrs Woodcock's yellow irises' - than by their proper Latin names?

I am writing this book out of curiosity and pleasure, and because a friend asked me some intriguing questions about who had gardens in earlier times and what they grew in them. My aim is modest: a quest to uncover the gardens, plots and people of Britain in the past. I hope to find glimpses of the gardens of both rich and poor, and to see

how they changed in response to new conditions - the coming of the monasteries or the rise of empire, the journeys of plant hunters and the building of bungalows.

The British Isles have an amazingly varied, complicated geology and since the old truism that the answer lies in the soil is undoubtedly true, gardens in one area are very different from those in another. Climatic conditions vary, too, from the gulf-stream-warmed western coasts to the frosty moors of the Pennines. The climate has changed often: in the 'sub-Atlantic' period, from around 500 BC, it was wet and cool, but between AD 1000 and 1300, the south was hotter and vines could be grown here. Then, from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century the weather was colder, a 'mini Ice Age', while today we are moving into warmer times again. In addition, over centuries tastes change, new plants arrive. So although we all probably have a vague idea of 'an English garden', this is a fluid term - I suspect that I will find no such thing as a true native garden, any more than Defoe could find his 'true-born Englishman'.

Gardens are always unfinished, telling a long tale of immigration and connection and transformation. Even a small backyard or a window box, conceals stories of conquest, empire, aspirations and ideas: you can see this in miniature in the recently created period gardens at the Geffrye Museum, in east London, which show how town gardening changed from the sixteenth century to today. Yet every garden is also the personal creation of those who work in it. Gardening is hard work, as a Victorian apprentice up before dawn in January to sweep the gravel paths of the great could certainly tell you. And it can bring fears as well as pleasure, frets as well as promise: in the middle of the eighteenth century a stout doctor, Erasmus Darwin, was stomping around his garden in his boots and greatcoat, writing the name of every plant in a scuffed brown notebook and mapping his small kingdom 'near the

sundial', 'behind the shed', 'between the house and the river' and writing anxious notes like 'lost', or, even more poignant, 'lost?'. Men and women before and after him know what it feels like to breathe deeply when spring comes, smelling the warm earth but wondering what the frost has done.

Gardens are an intimate clock of the seasons. I sometimes imagine a time lapse sequence, sitting in a garden chair, while plants rise and fall, flowers open, the leaves bud and open and darken and fall; fruit swells and ripens and vanishes back to the bare branch. It happens almost imperceptibly, but you only have to be away for a weekend to be amazed at the change. The novel *August* by Gerard Woodward has a vivid encapsulation of this, as his north London family return from holiday in Wales:

The return to Fernlight Avenue after three weeks' absence in midsummer was always to a garden of dizzying voluptuousness. Entering the kitchen they were taken aback by the thickening of greenery beyond the windows. The lawn would be a yard high with hay, the trees would be scraping the windows and would have unloaded their fruit on the ground ... The roses would have bloomed and fallen, leaving puddles of pink petals on the grass, and the lower end of the garden, where it narrowed to an avenue between soft fruits, would be impenetrable, the blackberries and raspberries having closed the gap between themselves.

Although we set out to control nature, whether we plan sweeping landscapes or small roof gardens, year in year out it still takes us by surprise. The garden is merely a boundary between us and the wild, a tamed sphere that always wants to revert to wilderness. It is sexy and fecund, prone to chaos and pests, but controlled (we hope) into

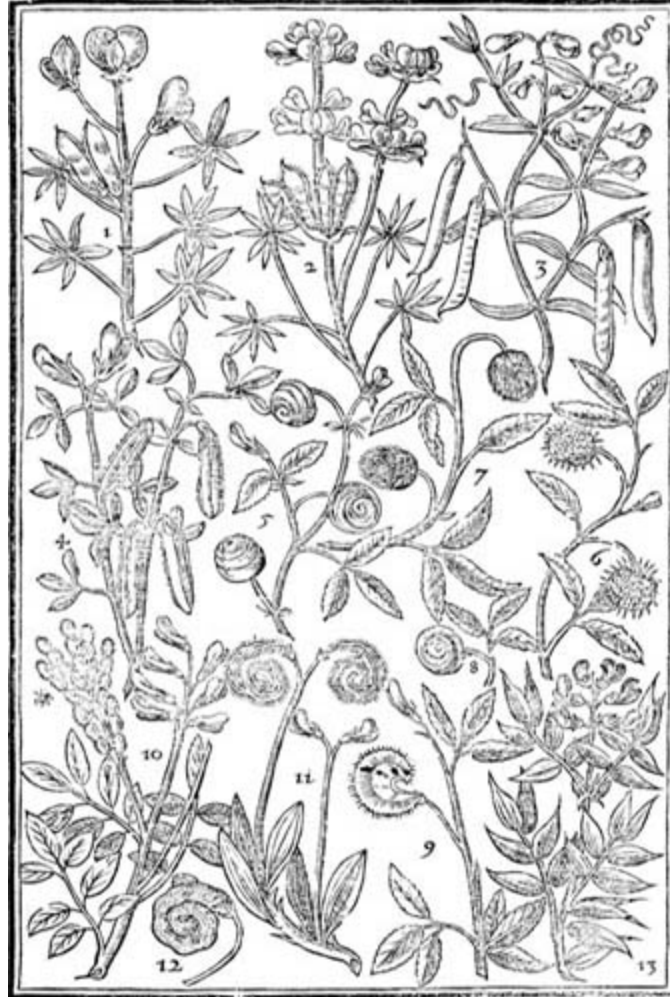
beauty and order. The word 'garden' itself comes from *ghordos*, an ancient Indo-European word for 'enclosure', and the same root is in 'yard' and 'orchard'. Garden historians remind us, too, that the ancient Persian word for 'enclosure' was *pairidaeza* - which applied both to the hunting parks of kings and to walled gardens for produce and ornamental plants. This became *pardes* in the Old Testament, *paradeisos* in Greek and our 'park' in English. But of course it is also 'paradise', the Garden of Eden and the fields of heaven, free from the ravages of death and of time. There have always been two main types of garden, although often mixed together. One is the useful plot of vegetables and herbs and fruit for the household, at one remove from farming. The other is the pleasure garden, which may be a sensual haven of flowers and trees and scent, or a tended green landscape. Beyond them lies the park, the tamed landscape, and mingled with them all, perhaps, is the idea of the garden as the sacred grove, the haunt of gods.

So, to begin at the beginning. Or at least in the prehistory of British gardening, when the last great Ice Age retreated. There were a few areas, perhaps, where the ice had held back, like the western coast of Ireland where old species from a warmer world such as the strawberry tree clung on during the frozen era, but elsewhere all that was left after the glaciers was a tundra-like desert of lichen and moss. Into this world men and women came from Europe across the land bridge - and plants came too, borne by the wind, carried by animals and birds, moving northwards as the climate warmed over millennia: birches and willows, oak and elm and Scots pine. Around 5000 BC Britain became an island, but as wanderers crossed the narrow straits they also brought their plants with them - and we have been introducing new species ever since.

As Timothy Mowl wrote recently, much of the history of gardens has been written from an academic or literary

perspective, seizing on a poem or a painting for evidence rather than ransacking record offices and then undertaking a 'walking history', searching and exploring Britain's hidden gardens. I have delved a little and walked a lot, but I still follow the trail of poets and painters and writers and I have deliberately included famous gardens like Hatfield, Stowe, Stourhead, Chatsworth, because so many of us visit them and they really do stand as landmarks of change. This is a long history but a shortish book, so birth and death dates have been placed, by and large, in the index. I am following in the footsteps of garden historians from the Victorians to today and we each, inevitably, echo each other - nipping quotations and examples, as avid garden visitors pinch irresistible cuttings. I hope I have acknowledged my many debts, but some odd gleanings may well have got transplanted without my thinking and if so, I apologise. And if the map I draw is familiar to experts, I hope that for many others - like myself - the changing landscape of the garden will be new.

I
SEED





1

Did the Romans have rakes?

WELL, YES - AND they grew turnips. When the Roman legions came, bringing their roads and amphitheatres, town plans and temples, baths and underfloor heating, they also brought their gardening lore. They created our first plant-filled spaces intended purely for enjoyment, adapting the patterns of the Mediterranean to the cold climate, just as they had in Germany and Gaul.

In 54 BC Julius Caesar described the land as thickly studded with homesteads. Tribes of Belgae, immigrants from the Continent two generations before, grew wheat and tended cattle in the valleys while the native British, the older Celtic peoples, lived on the uplands, 'on milk and meat and wear skins'. Caesar saw no true gardens, nothing

but clearings amid dense forests and swampy treacherous marshes.

Yet even the earliest nomadic peoples had cultivated the land, clearing the forests of birch, ash, hazel and holly with stone axes, grubbing up trees with scapula made from the shoulder-blades of oxen, tilling the earth with stone hoes and wooden digging-sticks. More settled ways of life began around 2000 BC and by 1200 BC the ancient wildwood had already diminished. Some long-lived settlements like Fengate and Flag Fen near Peterborough in Cambridgeshire, which lasted for nearly 2000 years, show Neolithic, Bronze Age and later Iron Age field patterns, a long record of tilling and toil. In winter the families stayed on the dry fen edge and in spring, when water levels fell, they moved out with their sheep and a few cows to the open fen pastures: among the treasures found here are beautiful bronze shears in a special wooden case. Were they gardeners?

When the Celtic tribes, spreading slowly west from the Danube, arrived around 700 BC they brought their own tradition of agriculture, tending flocks and using shallow ploughs, storing the grain in great underground granaries. Tall, blond, blue-eyed, the Celts lived in well-organised tribes, their ranks descending from the high-ranking nobles and warriors and the priestly Druids to the virtual slaves who worked the soil. They loved bright colours, gold and jewels, and they knew the power of plants: in Welsh myth the legendary Doctors of Myddvai were the sons of Nelferch, a fairy woman who came out of a lake in the Black Mountains and instructed them in the healing arts of herbs.

The great hill forts, like Danebury or Maiden Castle, with round dwellings and grain storage pits clustered within the mighty earth walls, tell a long tale of tribal conflict. But there were lowland settlements, too, where a palisade or ditch encircled round houses of timber and

thatch, or stone and turf, and webs of ditches marked out fields, with larger areas for cattle and cereals: the Celts became such skilled farmers that they were renowned for producing two crops in a year. Bones show that families kept sheep, cattle and pigs, and excavations turn up iron sickles and stone querns for grinding corn, while evidence from pollen reveals the plants they used: nuts and fruit, like crab apples, wild pears and strawberries and sloes; celery, carrots, beet, leafy brassicas and asparagus, black bindweed and the spinach-like Good King Henry and Fat Hen with its rich seeds.

This is farming and gathering more than gardening, but it does seem that they kept small plots closer to home, protected from animals by a sprouting hazel hedge, or belt of hawthorn set by striking winter hardwood cuttings. Some vegetables go back to the Iron Age, like the broad bean, the beet and the tall, celery-like alexanders (still grown in Victorian kitchen gardens), now more often found in roadside verges. The Britons also grew peas and the tubers of onion-couch, and herbs like mint and coriander and even the opium poppy, brought by traders from the East. They had domelike wickerwork beehives, covered with dung or clay. And they had sacred 'gardens', too, groves where they worshipped their gods at a tree or spring - often marked by later Roman temples.

At the start of the first millennium Britain was far from isolated. The tribes exported their surplus grain and metals to the Continent, and took in refugees from Roman-dominated lands, who brought new knowledge of tools and farming techniques. But within the first decade of Roman conquest the landscape changed. The old upland tracks were replaced by a new web of roads; garrisons were housed in forts and old soldiers were granted settlements or 'colonia'. When Agricola became governor in AD 78 he started to build towns, which pulled in the rural communities through their markets. Many farmers profited

from the Roman stay and British tribal leaders became local princes.

The Romans brought the legacy of the ancient cultures of the Mediterranean and Middle East. Before 3000 BC the Sumerian tribes were irrigating the swampy land between the Tigris and Euphrates, and in Egypt the first gardeners were protecting their produce from the desert winds with high palisades. Lotus, daisies, roses, lilies, olives and date palms all appear in ancient architecture or jewellery, and the first garden picture, from an Egyptian tomb around 1475 BC, shows a funeral ceremony, with lotus flowering on a deep blue pool, fringed with date and sycamore. The rectangular lines, easier for irrigation, dictated the formal shape of gardens for generations. This is the small, enclosed courtyard garden. But in Assyria, as the centuries passed the kings also laid out great hunting grounds, and made the beautiful parks of Nineveh and the seventh-century hanging gardens of Babylon, while to the east the Persians created their own intimate garden, their 'paradise'.

After Alexander the Great marched through Persia in 330 BC, the Greeks took to horticulture: Aristotle's students raised plants from seeds; Persian-style pleasure gardens were built; scholars made the first classification of plants and their medicinal uses. Later, in Rome, many such herbals were written and the most famous, the *De Materia Medica* of Dioscorides, remained a standard work for many centuries. Rome also had its agricultural authorities like Cato, Varro and Columella, a farmer from Gadez (Cadiz) in Spain who composed a down-to-earth manual, even providing a monthly calendar of tasks and writing a wonderfully energetic, plant-packed hymn to his own small garden, rejoicing in the good crumbly soil and bewailing 'the bramble-bush to legs unkind'.

By the time the Romans were building their first towns in Britain, gardening was fashionable. Rome was full of

plant hunters, outdoing each other in seeking exotic species from distant parts of the empire, or hunting down new forms of the ever popular rose. The city had nursery gardens and workshops to provide statuary and pots, and most houses, like those at Pompeii, had an inner courtyard garden with shrubs, pools, fountains and formal planting, and sometimes with statuary or stone dining couches and frescoes evoking the life of the country outside. The poets of the day celebrated the joys of retreating to the country life and wealthy landowners laid out lavish estates, practising 'rural simplicity' in luxurious style. In his letters, Pliny the Younger (whose uncle was also a great horticulturalist) described his two country houses, one by the sea and one in the Tuscan hills, surrounded by wild-flower meadows and woods. At the seaside he had a court for ball games, walkways edged with box and rosemary, a banqueting house and a large kitchen garden. In the hills there were beds of acanthus, a sunlit yard full of roses, a courtyard with a fountain and box alleys trimmed into curious shapes. Pliny's 'garden rooms' were always offset by outward-looking views, and the style he evokes would inspire the grand Renaissance gardens of Europe and the British landscape gardens of the eighteenth century.

