

GARDENERS' WORLD

British gardening is famous the world over. Gardening writer *Fill Hopper* casts an eye back over its illustrious history

The activity of growing plants is almost as ancient as humanity itself. From the moment when people realised that, if they sowed seeds, they would no longer have to roam around in search of food, gardening has been planted deeply in our DNA.

Perhaps that is why it is such a satisfying activity. Just like building a fire or baking a loaf of bread, it links us to our past. Every seasoned gardener knows, as they work their plot, that they are connected not just to the soil but to the generations of gardeners who have gone before. Even the tools we use have remained unchanged over the centuries. In Canterbury Cathedral, a stained-glass window shows Adam with a spade. The window dates back to 1178 and yet the spade's design – a wooden handle attached to a metal tip – is essentially the same as you would find in a B&Q or Homebase today.

So just how far back do the roots of the British garden extend? It may come as no surprise to you that, as well as bringing roads, sanitation and public baths with them when they invaded Britain in AD43, the Romans also imported their notion of growing plants for aesthetic rather than purely practical purposes. The garden at Fishbourne Roman Palace near >



THE GARDENS AT VERSAILLES

OXFORD UNIVERSITY
BOTANICAL GARDEN

➤ Chichester, created in AD75, was the first in Britain to boast topiary. Roman horticulturalists are believed to have introduced many of the plant varieties we still rely on today: plums, cherries, walnuts, mulberries, box vines, leeks, garlic, parsley, turnips, cabbages and roses.

According to Colin Crosbie, curator of RHS Garden Wisley in Surrey, it is partly this ability to grow a wide range of plants from far-flung places that explains our worldwide horticultural reputation. “We have a wonderful temperate climate that allows these plants to be grown here,” he says. “Over the centuries, people have brought back many different species of plant and we can grow them all.” Alongside this natural advantage, British gardeners also have an openness to new ideas that Crosbie believes is crucial. “Our gardeners have always been very experimental and willing to try new things,” he says.

This early period of innovation under the Romans was a relatively brief flowering, however, and after their departure in around AD436, there is little evidence of gardens until the medieval period. Sadly, no gardens from medieval times have survived intact anywhere in Europe and there is scant documentation, but paintings, tapestries and books give us a tantalising glimpse. They convey a sense of the garden as not just a place of labour but of relaxation, contemplation and romance.

In medieval times, monasteries were extremely powerful institutions and their extensive estates, complete with orchards, fish ponds, herb gardens and vegetable plots, laid down many of the traditional components of modern gardens. They also had a cloister garth – a rectangular plot of grass surrounded by

arcades that served as a place of retreat and meditation. It was a prototype of the lawn that is still the centerpiece of most British gardens today.

DECADENT PLAYGROUNDS

In gardening, as in every other sphere, the Renaissance caused a revolution. The Italians developed a highly formal horticultural style that represented the ancient Roman virtues of harmony and order. In this model, geometrically shaped planting beds, or parterres, were laid out in symmetrical patterns. Fountains and cascades brought life and movement and statues, labyrinths and grottos evoked mythological stories.

In the early 1500s, this Italian model was imported into France. Baroque French gardens reached their apogee in the stunning gardens of Versailles, created for Louis XIV. These grounds show monarch and man subjugating nature in a display of authority, wealth and power. They are vast outdoor playgrounds for the elite, with areas dedicated to plays, concerts and firework displays – perhaps the forerunner of the ‘outside room’ so popular today.

While England certainly had pleasure gardens almost as ambitious as France’s, for example at Hampton Court, things also began to take a more scientific turn. The Tradescants, John the Elder and John the Younger, were two of the first professional gardeners to scour the world for plant specimens that could survive in English soil. John Tradescant the Elder (1570–1638) was Head Gardener to Charles I and travelled to Holland and France to collect specimens, while his son went to Virginia. Many of the plants commonly thought of as typically

English were introduced by these two pioneers, including phlox, lupins and Michaelmas daisies.

In 1621, Britain’s first botanical garden, the Oxford Physic Garden, was founded by Henry Danvers, who gave the equivalent of £3.5m in today’s money to establish it for “the glorification of God and for the furtherance of learning”. Renamed the Oxford Botanical Garden in 1840, it quickly became an important centre of research and set the stage for the establishment of the Botanical Gardens at Kew in 1730.

PICTURESQUE WILDERNESS

The architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner called the landscape garden “Britain’s major contribution to the visual arts”. This 18th century reimagining of the garden as a picturesque wilderness was central to the Romantic appreciation of nature ‘in the raw’.

When this style first emerged, garden designers such as William Kent and Capability Brown strove to recreate the allegorical paintings of European artists such as Claude Lorraine and Poussin, with lakes, trees and manicured hills dotted with allegorical temples. By the 1790s, these gardens were seen as stereotyped, and landscape theorist William Gilpin started to advocate ‘natural’ landscape and a response to the topography of a given site. The picturesque garden became all the rage, with open vistas, waterfalls, and architectural follies – Gothic ruins, grottos and so on – adding focal points to the view.

Crosbie highlights the ambition of this period, when planting and landscaping were done on a truly grand scale. “We rarely garden on such a scale today,” he says. “But I think the generosity of vision remains the same. You have to plant knowing that you might not see a garden at its optimum, but that the generations after you will see it.”

The picturesque style ruled supreme until Humphry Repton brought back an element of formality during the Regency period. He reintroduced formal terraces, balustrades, trellises and flower gardens around the house in a way that became common later in the 19th century.

REGAINING CONTROL

The Victorians turned away from the picturesque to a much more controlled style of horticulture. The head gardener ruled supreme and the prevailing attitude was to separate different kinds of plants to create themed gardens within gardens. There was also a move towards outdoor leisure,

with cricket pitches, bowling greens and croquet lawns. Roses, chrysanthemums and dahlias were going through a rapid evolution via hybridisation and, by 1840, there were more than 500 cultivars of dahlias. This is another unique strand to the British horticultural heritage, says Crosbie: “We have breeders who cross-pollinate plants and come up with something that flowers for longer and is more compact. Our nurseries are full of plants that breeders have been cultivating for hundreds of years.”

With the dawning of the 20th century came one of the richest periods in English garden history. Women excelled, with pioneers such as Vita Sackville-West and Gertrude Jekyll challenging received wisdom. At the beginning of the century at Munstead Wood in Surrey, Jekyll introduced the idea of the mixed herbaceous border, freeing roses from the rose garden and allowing them to climb and ramble in a more organic way. ➤

SISSINGHURST
CASTLE GARDEN

Images: William Curtis Rolf/Gallery, Bridgeman

› Her planting schemes combined shrubs with perennials, annuals and bulbs in deep beds, planted with a keen, almost painterly eye for colour and texture. Vita Sackville-West's garden at Sissinghurst Castle in Kent is the most famous late blossoming of this romantic style.

NEW SHOOTS

There are some radical gardeners at work today. Colin points to the British designer Cleve West to demonstrate that the English tradition of innovation is very much alive. "You only have to visit the RHS Chelsea Flower Show to see the impact of global gardening styles, from Japanese-style gardens to dry-planting

schemes that require no watering," he says. Outside the showcase events, many 'ordinary' gardeners are embracing a less structured, more organic and wildlife-centred approach to gardening and growing their own food. Meanwhile, the 'guerilla-gardening' movement is bringing new life to neglected urban areas.

Whatever your personal gardening style, an awareness of the generations that have gone before and those who are to come makes gardening a very grounding activity: you cannot help realising that individual gardeners pass on, but gardens are immortal. As Rudyard Kipling said: "Live as if you are going to die tomorrow; garden as if you are going to live forever." ■

Our Chelsea garden

We couldn't think of a more fitting way to celebrate our 250th anniversary than with a very special Brewin Dolphin garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2012. When it came to deciding who would design it, we knew it had to be six-time RHS Gold medal winner Cleve West.

Cleve won last year's Best in Show at Chelsea with his garden for the *Telegraph*, and his new design (featured below), is already a winner in our eyes.

We have collaborated with Cleve to design a striking garden, which is both contemporary and traditional. Yew topiary, which represents our history, stability and creativity, will provide the centerpiece of the garden. Topiary has been fashionable since the days of ancient Rome but is presented in our garden in a very modern

context. This will be complemented by beech hedging, a mixture of shrubs, perennials and annuals and also reclaimed limestone, which will act as a grounding for the plants.

This exciting venture marks a proud moment in our history.



 To watch an exclusive interview with Cleve West about our garden and how he prepares for Chelsea, download the *Perspective* app at www.apple.com/uk/itunes



Images: Bridgeman, Getty, National Trust, Alamy, Top Foto

Tool timeline

See when the handy appliances that make gardening easier were invented

1178

This stained glass window at Canterbury Cathedral contains the earliest known image of a spade. However, the tool dates back far longer than any records show



1100s

Although wheelbarrows weren't used in Europe until the late 12th century, they are thought to date back to ancient times



1827

The lawnmower was invented in Gloucestershire by Edward Budding. It was granted a British patent in 1830



1841

Joseph Paxton designed the first conservatory, known as the Glasshouse, at Chatsworth. He later became a millionaire creating small conservatories for amateur use



1926

The Swiss engineer Andreas Stihl invented the first chainsaw in Germany. The company he founded, Stihl, is still in business



2012

As organic gardening methods increase in popularity, many people are harnessing the power of nature and purchasing nematodes and insects to naturally control pests. However, this is thought to be one of the reasons why our native ladybird population is declining

1974

Fisons launched the first growbag, called the Gro-Bag



1963

The first hovermower was invented by Karl Dahlman and launched by Flymo



Timeline images: 1926 - ANDREAS STIHL AG & Co. KG, Waiblingen. 1890, 1841, 1963 - Courtesy of the Garden Museum.