

INSPIRE

From Tudor rose-covered arbours and Victorian plant hunters to the drought-resistant gardens of the future, we dive into the fascinating evolution of horticulture

BY *Caroline Roberts*



HAYLEY MOORE PHOTOGRAPHY

# GARDENS THROUGH TIME

The knot  
garden at  
the Museum  
of the Home

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One of the perennial delights of spring is watching a garden burst into life. But in admiring their beauty, we often forget that each plant has its own story to tell. The gardens we enjoy today are the product of centuries of scientific discoveries and intrepid journeys, with a fair bit of wheeling and dealing thrown in too.

Details of the earliest British gardens are sketchy, save for the formal planting of Roman villas, the kitchen gardens of monasteries, and the castle courtyards of the Middle Ages. From the 16th century, it's easier to pick up the threads of the garden's evolution, and the Museum of the Home has woven them into its Gardens Through Time exhibition, created in the ground of former almshouses in Hoxton, East London.

The journey begins in the museum's Tudor knot garden, its low hedging of cotton lavender and germander planted in symmetrical patterns, inspired by the intricate

embroidery and carvings popular at the time. Other common features of Tudor gardens were rose-covered arbours, providing shade and a private space, and the chamomile seat, where you could relax on a cushion of the springy herb and run your fingers through the tendrils, releasing its delicate scent. "It probably helped with courting as people would have been a bit smelly in those days," says head gardener, Heather Stevens.

Coincidentally, Hoxton was the setting of one of history's most significant horticultural developments. In the summer of





The Museum  
of the Home

1716, local nurseryman Thomas Fairchild carefully dusted pollen from a sweet William onto the stigma of a carnation with a feather. The result of his experiment, "Fairchild's mule", was the first artificially-produced hybrid plant to be recorded. But only God was permitted to tamper with nature and, greatly troubled by his creation, he claimed it happened by accident. It wasn't until a century later that hybridisation became acceptable practice, and today most plants are a result of the process. Fairchild eased his guilt by leaving money to fund an annual sermon on the "wonderful works of God in the natural world", to be preached at his local church, St Leonard's in Shoreditch. The

"Vegetable Sermon" is still delivered to this day.

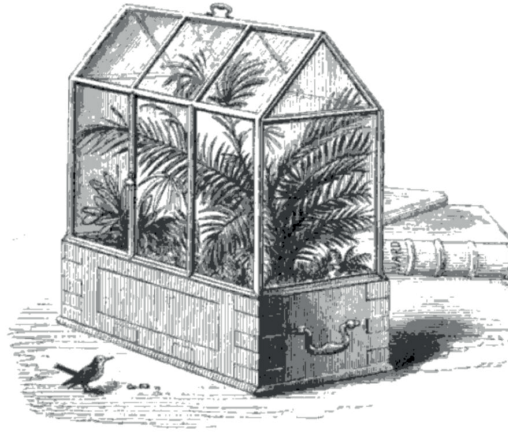
**MOST EARLY TOWN GARDENS** were functional spaces in which to grow food, medicinal plants and herbs, and do the laundry, explains Heather. But from Georgian times they took on a more ornamental character as well as being status symbols. "Plants were expensive and people often only had one of the most prized species, which would be planted with a lot of space around it so it could be admired."

Foreign plant species were sought after and travellers had been bringing them back from abroad since late Tudor times. But by the beginning of the 19th century,

PHOTO: JANE LLOYD



Clockwise from top left:  
David Douglas,  
a Wardian case,  
Gertrude Jekyll  
and Thomas Fairchild



we were entering the era of the professional plant hunter. Wealthy garden enthusiasts craved more exotic species—camelias from China, rhododendrons from the Himalayas, begonias from Brazil—and botanists were paid to undertake hazardous collecting missions to the far corners of the globe.

One of the most successful was David Douglas who, sponsored by the Horticultural Society of London, travelled to North America and Hawaii and introduced over 240 species, including the Douglas fir. His journals tell of the hardships he endured—snow blindness, being caught in a whirlpool for an hour after his canoe capsized, groping through thick forests, and falling down ravines. He finally ran out of luck at the age of only 35, when he fell into a pit trap and was quickly gored to death by its occupant, an enraged bull.

These adventurers must have been heartbroken when around 90 per cent of the specimens they had collected died during the long journey home. But a solution was around the corner. In 1829, a London medical doctor and keen botanist, Nathaniel Ward, placed a moth pupa in a sealed glass bottle and was waiting to watch it hatch when he noticed meadow grass and a fern sprouting from the soil inside. It led to his invention of the Wardian case, a sealed glass container in which

plant hunters could transport tender young plants across the world, protected from the elements and watered by condensation.

“Victorians suddenly had this incredible variety of plants to play with, and commercial nurseries were busy hybridising them so they were hardier for everyday use,” says garden historian Advolly Richmond. “The middle classes began to move to the suburbs of towns and cities and, when it came to new money, the hallmark of a gentleman was having a showy garden.”

But increasing commercial opportunities meant more plant hunters and more exploitation of other countries' natural resources,

## BOTANISTS WERE PAID TO EMBARK ON HAZARDOUS PLANT- COLLECTING MISSIONS ALL OVER THE GLOBE

she adds. “It was about money and competing financial interests. These dedicated plant hunters were a law unto themselves. They were often loners, misfits and quite ruthless, and there are some appalling stories in their journals. They'd find an exquisite orchid, fill baskets and baskets and then destroy the habitat so their competitors, who were



The roof garden at the Museum of the Home

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MUCH LESS WATER

hot on their trail, couldn't get their share." Cultivars of rare, exotic plants went straight to the auction house, sometimes fetching more than 1,000 guineas.

**A FEATURE OF MANY** Victorian gardens was tightly packed "carpet bedding", resembling the brightly-coloured floral carpets popular in the home. But towards the end of

the period there emerged a trend for a more natural or "wild" garden, partly influenced by the rustic and romantic ideals of the arts and crafts movement. It was also during this time that notable female horticulturists, such as Vita Sackville West and Gertrude Jekyll, made their mark. "Jekyll's later influences came from little roadside cottages with wisteria growing above the door and all these self-seeding plants like foxgloves, hollyhocks and sweet peas. We still love those cottage gardens with their romantic and slightly chaotic feel," says Advolly.

Now, with so many plant varieties at the local garden centre, we're spoilt for choice when it comes to our green spaces. But the final garden at the Museum of the Home

is a reminder that we won't always have that luxury. Rather than

reflecting the past, it's a garden designed for the uncertainties of the future: a green roof packed with succulents and Mediterranean-style plants that need little water and thrive in sparse soil.

"Green roofs help keep buildings cool, absorb rainfall, and provide a wildlife habitat where there would otherwise be bare concrete," says its designer, green infrastructure specialist Dusty Gedge. He estimates that there are now around 2.5 million square

metres of green roof, mainly in large cities, across the UK. "It's about climate change adaptation for the urban environment as well as access to green space for city dwellers. We can't be irrigating all the time so we need planting that thrives in dry spells and that also benefits biodiversity."

And in the future, gardens on the ground will need to be designed to use much less water too. "They can still be full of beautiful plants, just not lots of roses or privets and expanses of lawn that we normally associate with the traditional English garden. Now, what each of us does in our individual gardens is part of the story of climate change adaptation. We all have that responsibility." ■



## The Wisdom Of Elvis

"Some people tap their feet, some people snap their fingers, and some people sway back and forth. I just sort of do them all together, I guess" (1956)

"Man, I was tame compared to what they do now. Are you kidding? I didn't do anything but just jiggle" (1972)

"A live concert to me is exciting because of all the electricity that is generated in the crowd and on stage. It's my favourite part of the business" (1973)

"Til we meet again, may God bless you. Adios" (1977)

source: [graceland.com](http://graceland.com)