

## Kitchen gardening: some aspects of past, present and future

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‘ . . . . In the wages of 1 boy digging in the vineyard, and in the curtilage from the last day of December until 17th day of April, in the feast of Easter, for 106 days, 17s. 8d., taking by the day, 2d. In the stipend of the same boy for the same time, 5s.’ (Amherst, 1896). This passage is taken from the accounts, of 1373, of Adam Vynour, gardener to the Bishop of Ely, at his house ‘Ely Place’ in Holborn, London. If the dates were inclusive the poor lad worked seven days a week with one day off, perhaps Good Friday. What tedious and laborious loneliness did the boy endure? This is about as far as one could get from the interest, excitement and pleasures that the practice of productive gardening can provide. However, perhaps the situation was very different, for the same accounts mention ‘divers labourers and women’ working there too. So, though the boy might have been the butt of jokes and pranks, and teased by the women and the work tedious, conviviality and camaraderie could have been adequate diversion. Over the past hundred years or so, mechanization has succeeded in making gardening, for professional and amateur, a largely solitary occupation, except in larger gardens where more than one gardener is employed.

The accounts also reveal some of what was grown then, by listing sales of onions, garlic, leeks, parsley and other herbs. A number of extracts from mediaeval accounts quoted in Alicia Amherst’s book give some idea of the place and importance of kitchen gardening in the Middle Ages. Without rapid and refrigerated transport, as far as fresh produce was concerned, what was not grown fairly close by would not have been available. In rural areas and in the wealthier parts of town and cities, although little mentioned in histories, productive gardening must have been a significant part of many people’s lives, given the absence of machinery and, therefore, the hand labour required. As Amherst says (p. 100) referring to early Tudor times ‘It was only the large landowners who indulged in a garden specially set apart for flowers and pleasure. The garden of every small manor and farm-house in the kingdom was essentially for use.’ Elsewhere she reminds us that most people, ‘the poorer classes’, lived mostly on vegetables. Dried peas and beans were staples, probably mixed with barley and eaten with bread. For the wealthy, meat was plentiful but all manner of herbs and spices were highly valued to flavour it, or mask the taste of decay. Some knowledge of gardening, therefore, must have been widespread throughout the population.

In Elizabeth the first’s reign legislation was enacted to the effect that no cottage could be built with less than four acres around it. This law remained until the Enclosure Acts began to deprive countrymen of their ‘plots and cow-keeps’ (Carter, 1984). Indeed, in Loudon’s ‘An Encyclopaedia of Gardening’ (1834 ed.) he wrote that the cottage garden is ‘generally something under half an acre. The extent of the garden of a labourer might never to be such as to interfere with his regular employment.’

The practice of enclosing gardens with walls or hedges has a long history. If you wish to grow things which are tastier than the natural vegetation, neither four-legged grazers nor two-legged thieves are welcome. In ancient Persia the concept of the paradise garden arose. These were, initially, planted parks, the main purpose of which was for nobles to hunt in but exotic trees were also planted. The term 'Paradise' comes from the Greek *paradeisos* in their 2nd century translations of the Hebrew Bible, where the word did not appear. The Greek word 'comes from the Zend word *Pairidaeza*, meaning a walled pleasure garden designed to offering shade, beauty and a place for contemplative strolls or liaisons' (Palmer & Manning, 2000).

In ancient Egypt and in the Roman Empire there were also walled gardens. They were always rectangular. In civilizations renowned for their architecture, knowledge of geometry and general order of things, it would seem natural to lay out gardens using straight lines and right angles. Campbell (1996) suggests that Greek, Roman and early Arab gardens were all rectangular in order to facilitate a complex watering system along channels between raised beds; for they were gardening in the Mediterranean region, where summers were and are hot and dry.

The earliest references to raised beds are Roman (Campbell, 1996) but the system was probably in use before then. A bed system, raised or level, seems to have been universal in Britain at least until the early eighteenth century. In wetter areas, such as Scotland, there were raised, or 'lazy' beds to help with drainage. Beds are simply the most practical way of gardening, allowing a maximum cropping area and minimum area of compaction caused by walking.

Mediaeval monastic kitchen gardens in England also used a grid-like layout of beds and water channels, as they tended to follow classical methods (Campbell, 1996). Campbell reminds us that between about 750 and 1215 our climate was warmer and drier. So, it was not unreasonable to be following methods of husbandry developed for a Mediterranean climate. In all matters of gardening it was the monasteries, with their good land, ordered lives of the inhabitants and their contact with mainland Europe, that ' . . . . through those troublous times. . . . kept alive the science of Horticulture, and spread the knowledge of it to those around them' (Amherst, 1896).

By the late sixteenth century, from which time a representative number of paintings still exist, the Tudor kitchen garden is seen, more or less square, on one side of the house or to the side of a formal garden which directly faced the rear façade. There might be an orchard on the other side. Paintings provide a very valuable record of garden history (Harris, 1979):

In an oil painting by Jan Siberechts the large kitchen garden of The Grove, Highgate, London, appears to be dominated by neatly placed fruit trees. The modern agronomic description might be agroforestry.

John Stevens' oil painting of Hampton Court, Herefordshire, circa 1705-10, depicts two formally laid out gardens to the north east of the house. The further one appears to be a kitchen garden. Having visited this place I would say that the walled gardens have been relocated since the date of the painting. The present double walled gardens

are further away in the same direction. The estate was bought by a wealthy American some years ago and around £4 million was spent on the gardens. The walled gardens were thoroughly 'done over.' One features a canal with two timber framed island pavilions and a profusion of plants and clipped trees. The other is a highly ornamental kitchen garden. Both have an extravagance of coloured hard landscaping. Everything seems to scream incongruity with the soft, old brickwork of the walls. It is amazing how too much money can spoil a thing.

John Harris the Elder's engraving of Ashurst House, Highgate (the site of the present Highgate cemetery) c. 1710, shows a large area of very neat, intensively-cropped gardens in several compartments – a real feast for the eyes.

An oil painting of Ashcombe, Devon, c. 1770, shows numerous plots, subdivided into beds for vegetables and probably soft fruit. Although there are trees along the walls there does not appear to be an orchard.

By the eighteenth century the increasing wealth, of a few, enabled more grand houses to be built and the enlargement of existing ones. With larger households and more servants, larger kitchen gardens were needed. They became more industrial in size and character. At the same time, aesthetic tastes were changing. The concept of 'natural landscapes' was evolving: an Arcadia of carefully placed temples, bridges, boathouses, mausoleums, hermits' cottages, grottos and haystacks, was increasingly at odds with a vast brick or stone box formed by 15 foot high walls enclosing dung heaps, frameyards, work sheds, bothies and primitive glasshouses, each with its smoking chimney (Campbell, 1996). Straight lines had to go.

In 1728 Batty Langley, landscape gardener, architect and author, directed 'That all gardens be grand, beautiful and natural', and that the main front of the house should lie open to 'An elegant Lawn or Plain of Grass, adorn'd with beautiful Statues . . . That grand Avenues be planted from such large open Plains, . . . That Views be as extensive as possible. That such Walks, whose Views cannot be extended, terminate in Woods, Forests, misshapen Rocks, strange Precipices, Mountains, old Ruins, grand Buildings &c . . .' (Langley, 1728).

Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, active a little later, from the 1840s, is the better known name associated with persuading estate owners to relocate their kitchen gardens to somewhere out of sight and surround them with trees (a practical advantage, anyway, for shelter) that they might be seen merely as distant woods. Brown was also responsible for clearing away all formal gardens next to the house in order to achieve a 'Plain of Grass.' The gentry did not even wish to see the gardeners. A separate road would connect the walled garden with the kitchen, sometimes involving a tunnel under the carriageway. William Cobbett (1829) disagreed with this attitude towards kitchen gardens. ". . . it is most miserable taste to seek to poke away the kitchen garden, in order to get it out of sight. If well managed, nothing is more beautiful than the kitchen garden." However, 'it is an ill wind . . .' new, relocated gardens were usually larger and it presented the opportunity to build more sheds and stores for garden use. Perhaps, too, the gardeners were not sorry to be out of sight, no longer always wondering if they were being watched from the house.

Curiously, at the same time that gardeners were being banished, the apparent social antagonism was accompanied by a certain pride in kitchen gardens. Gentlemen engaged in a friendly rivalry with their neighbours 'to produce the rarest, the newest,

the earliest, the latest, the biggest and the best of luxuries. It is largely thanks to their amiable rivalry, combined with the challenge of growing curiosities from climates totally different from ours, that so many horticultural innovations and developments were made in the kitchen garden' (Campbell, 1983).

Head gardeners were respected, valued and well paid. His employer and family would not dream of picking a flower or any of the fruit without his consent (Davies, 1987). He was at the top of the hierarchy in his particular domain. Crock boys, improver journeymen, journeymen and foremen came under his command: 'Told off to do as they are bid and do it without noise' as Kipling wrote in *The Glory of the Garden*.

The glory days of the walled garden were in the late Victorian period. They were still being built late in the century. A three acre one I worked in was built in 1889. Gardens of that size tended to have more subdivisions but the standard lay out was for two paths, crossing in the centre, creating four large 'quarters'. If there were more they were still called quarters. Surrounding the quarters would be another path, leaving a border against the wall, the height of which would be matched by the width of the border. At the centre there might be a dipping pool for watering the garden. Paths were, of course, aligned with walls, creating rectangles to work with. The only exception to this I am aware of is at Highgrove, where the crossing paths run from corner to corner, creating triangles everywhere for the hapless gardener to contend with. His Royal Highness has many qualities but perhaps on this occasion allowed patriotism to override practicality!

When Persia was overrun by Arab invaders they found enclosed gardens divided into four squares by canals aligned north, south, east and west, with a pool at the centre (Bisgrove, 1990). The rectangular design has, it seems, stood the test of time. In Britain, walled gardens were also aligned with the compass, although there were variations – in the north, tilting towards the west to capture the last of the afternoon warmth, for example. From the eighteenth century onwards the east-west axis tended to be longer than the other. This was to gain more length of south-facing wall, inside and out, on which to grow tender fruit.

Meanwhile, in the rapidly expanding cities, people with agricultural ancestry were being crammed into high density housing with hardly space for a cabbage, never mind a cow. Perhaps it was a combination of their pressing need and a realization by employers and government that access to land upon which to grow fresh produce would result in healthier, fitter workers with less time for drink, although many employers were against the idea, fearing men would spend too much time gardening and not wish to work. In 1845 the General Enclosure Act allowed for the provision of 'field gardens' of no more than a quarter of an acre. This particular act applied to the rural situation where workers had lost common grazing land but it was too late; most of the land had already been enclosed. The Penny Magazine of 1845 described the Government's motives: 'The object in making such allotments is moral rather than economic: the cultivation of a few vegetables and flowers is a pleasing occupation and has a tendency to keep a man at home and from the ale house.' (Seddon & Radecka, 1975). However, the allotment movement did get going, especially in towns and cities. By the end of the nineteenth century there were nearly 500,000 allotments. Just before World War I there were 600,000 and by the end 1,250,000. This declined

to 740,000 by the start of World War II. The Dig for Victory campaign boosted this to 1,400,000 at its peak. By 1950 the number had fallen to just over a million (Seddon & Radecka, 1975).

Since the 1950s interest in kitchen gardening has continued to decline. The 'media' keep reporting an upsurge in interest but I see little sign on the ground. True, many allotments have waiting lists but then there are fewer sites than there once were. Any train journey will reveal a tiny percentage of gardens growing vegetables; probably less than one per cent. Two generations have been brought up in households where no productive gardening was done. That widespread knowledge of how to produce food is no longer widespread. At the same time, as a nation we have become, as Graham Harvey (2006) points out, overfed and undernourished, a situation which could, to a large extent, be remedied by kitchen gardening.

In 2002-3 I had the privilege of working with children at two village schools where we made kitchen gardens. The children loved it and were always very keen to take home bags of vegetables. The long tradition, from the gardens of the ancient Middle East, to the monasteries and nineteenth century walled gardens encompass so much of civilized values, of skill and productive craft and provided so valuable an end product. Currently such end products are underappreciated, according to Harvey, because they are so tasteless through lacking nutrients, the result of modern techniques of growing and in depleted soils. Is it progress, or wise, to disregard all that past knowledge? Climate change is likely to reduce, globally, the area of productive land. People everywhere might need to use every bit of land they can to supplement diminishing outputs from farming. In Britain the techniques practised by the monks in the warm period of the Middle Ages might be worth taking a look at. Certainly we should be giving children the opportunity to acquire interest and skills in gardening. Giving them, also, some knowledge of past designs and methods can only enhance the experience.

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