



## *The best of British gardens*

Andrew Baskott charts the ever-changing design styles of British gardens and our great obsession with them through the centuries, beginning this month with an overview of the garden through the ages

# A potted history of British gardens

The spark that was to eventually ignite the British passion, or perhaps that should be obsession, for gardens and gardening can be traced back to the Roman conquest.

Despite encountering the British climate, the Romans weren't to be deterred, and built their large villas with flower and vegetable gardens, as well as areas for herbs and orchards, bringing with them new plants such as roses, leeks and vines, and trees of pear and cherry. Even the more humble houses would have a small courtyard with flowers and a fountain.

With the departure of the Romans came the Saxons, and while they kept orchards and vineyards, it seems the floral aspects of a Roman garden were lost, and it wasn't to be until the Christian monks began building their monasteries in the ninth century that flowers and gardens returned once more.

The monastery garden enabled the monks to be self-sufficient, growing

vegetables for food, herbs for medicine and flowers for wreaths and decoration. But they were very much working gardens, and not intended for pleasure.

It was the Normans who made the garden a place in which to escape and relax. These gardens, within the castle walls, consisted of small enclosed squares often with seats turfed with grass and lawns, planted with wild flowers and surrounded by trellises cloaked with honeysuckle and roses. While Norman castles can still be seen in England and Wales, sadly, none of their original gardens have survived.

By the end of the thirteenth century the fortified manor house had replaced the mighty castle, and brought another change in garden style. Simple green spaces, often enclosed by hedges or fences, were created, and games such as

**The rose parterre with its box hedge borders and the stable-block of Rousham House in Oxfordshire.**



bowls played on the lawns. Broughton Castle in Oxfordshire is a fine example, complete with moat, built in 1300.

The Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1563 by Henry VIII saw the building of many fine stately homes on the once monastic lands gifted by Henry to his loyal followers. With these fine houses came even finer gardens, as well as parkland and forests for hunting.

The Tudors were heavily influenced by Italian gardens for their designs, especially so with the knot garden. These intricately designed patterns of lawn hedges, usually of box, with the spaces inbetween planted with flowers, shrubs and even herbs, were intended to be viewed from raised areas within the garden.

The Elizabethans took complex

hedge designs even further, with the introduction of high-hedged mazes.

For the Stuarts, it was very much French fashions that were followed. The parterre (the French take on the knot garden) and broad avenues became the height of fashion. The Dutch too, weren't without their influence — here water was the major design feature, along with topiary and flowering bulbs. The earliest example of a Dutch water garden can be found at Westbury-on-Severn near Gloucester.

By now, gardens were no longer simply the preserve of the wealthy, for ordinary smallholders were also creating their own, more modest, plots. Like the earlier monastery gardens, vegetables were grown for food, while flowers were vital in the production of



The sunken garden at Hinton Ampner House in Hampshire, with its decorative clipped-yew topiary and hedge. Topiary was a popular design feature in Dutch water gardens.



Deep double herbaceous borders lining a wide grass path at Kiftsgate Court gardens, which is a fine example of an Arts and Crafts garden near Chipping Campden in the Cotswolds.

honey. With many new plants arriving from around the world, such as lupins, asters and phlox, it wasn't long before smallholders obtained these new seeds, leading to the birth of the cottage garden.

Flamboyant gardens and exotic plants were frowned upon during Cromwell's rule. With the coming of the Restoration, however, gardens once more become places of extravagance, although the fashion for formal gardens was coming to an end.

In the early eighteenth century, the 'natural' look for gardens became a revolutionary departure from what had gone before. Now, gardens were to

blend almost seamlessly with the surrounding landscape, and flowers relegated to secluded corners. For this was the age of the great garden designers such as Bridgeman, Kent and Capability Brown. It was also to be the first time that the Continent had been influenced by English garden design, with *jardins Anglais* becoming fashionable.

Architectural features, water and trees now replaced flowers and parterres. Classical temples, follies and statues dotted the landscaped grounds beside man-made lakes. And trees, sometimes new non-native species, were carefully planted so as not to obstruct the views. The gardens at



Above, a colourful cottage garden in Monks Risborough, Chilterns. Below, a small recreated knot garden, ready to be filled with plants at Mottisfont House in Hampshire

Built in the seventeenth century, Coton Manor in Northamptonshire today has an Arts and Crafts style garden of the early twentieth century.



Stowe in Buckinghamshire were Capability Brown's first major commission, and are a prime example of this new 'natural' look.

For the Victorians, flowers of bold colours planted in blocks within geometric-shaped flowerbeds were the new style and began appearing within newly created municipal parks throughout the country. As towns grew and the suburbs spread, so too did the desire to recreate these styles in household gardens.

With the Edwardians, however, informality reigned once more. Writer and garden designer Gertrude Jekyll advocated the planting of flowers and shrubs in more natural drifts, blending harmoniously rather than as

regimented designs, and so building on the traditions of the cottage garden. Hardy perennials became a favoured stock, and colourful herbaceous borders, often set against hedges or walls, replaced geometric-shaped beds.

Although most country houses preferred the Jekyll style, some were influenced by ideas from China and Japan in the form of lakes with ornamental bridges, willows, maples and bamboo. Jekyll's ideas and designs were to continue as the twentieth century progressed, within gardens created in the Arts and Crafts style, with their clean lines and natural planting.

Over the centuries, Britain has embraced a diverse range of garden styles with many, thankfully, still here

to be enjoyed — some original, some recreated. Today, our passion for gardens has probably never been stronger and perhaps best expressed, not in the gardens of grand country houses, but in those of the millions of homes throughout the country, each lovingly created by their owners.

It may have been the Romans who first brought gardens to our shores, but today the concept of the garden has come to be seen by many as something very British. ■

*Next month: the birthplace of the English garden landscape; Andrew visits Rousham House in Oxfordshire to explain its seminal place in horticultural history.*