

# The Development of the English Formal Garden

By A. M. SAUNDERS

OKLAHOMANS are perennially enthusiastic gardeners. They dig, plant, prune and make their enthusiasms vocal throughout the changing seasons. Some are already conning their seed and flower catalogs and visualizing gaudy palettes of daffodils, narcissi, irises, tulips, marigolds, dahlias, zinnias, petunias, chrysanthemums, and roses. Others are anticipating exchanges of horticultural lore with their fellows at the state convention of gardeners at Guymon in April. (Last spring the Oklahoma Association of Garden Clubs celebrated its silver anniversary at Norman.) Still others are planning pilgrimages to such shrines of floral beauty as the Municipal Rose Garden at Tulsa, where some two hundred varieties of roses have been nurtured under the Argus eyes of the official "rosarian," Mr. Leonard Kennedy.

Interest in gardening as a fine art is of recent growth in Oklahoma, as it is in the rest of the country. The garden-pilgrimage idea so popular with thousands of Americans in love with old houses and old gardens had its beginnings only a generation ago. Now everyone is familiar with the gardens of Old Natchez, the Azalea Trail and the Bellingrath Gardens near Mobile, and the Ashley and Middleton Gardens of Charleston.

The gardens of America are a heritage of the Old World and in particular of England. The early settlers along the Atlantic seaboard brought with them the horticultural knowledge of their forebears, and they kept pace with changing taste in their Mother Country. The restored gardens of eighteenth-century Williamsburg reveal a similar taste and love of beauty on both sides of the Atlantic.

English gardening was a heritage of Roman civilization, a heritage that was practically lost after the barbaric invasions of England in the sixth century. Only fragmentary bits of knowledge about plants and floral terminology survived in the English monasteries of the Middle Ages. The Old English word for garden was *wyrtyerd*, a plant yard; our modern words "wort" (from OE. *wyrt*, *wurt*) and "drug" (O.E. *drigan*, to dry) are examples of expansion

of meaning in Modern English. The former once meant vegetables and herbs collectively, and the latter signified dried herbs shipped from the Continent.

The monks, especially those of the Benedictine Order, were essentially practical in their horticultural activities. They raised fruits and vegetables for food, and herbs and flowers for medicines. Herbs were used for stuffing and for flavoring meat and fish. Such recipes as the following were common: meat or fish cooked with pears or apples, spices, sugar, ground leeks, onions, and garlic sauce. No one kept a garden solely for beauty or pleasure. Flowers were also used symbolically at marriages and funerals and for wreathing candles, adorning shrines, and crowning priests. The appreciation of their beauty, a gradual development in the history of Western taste, came only after the twelfth century.

During the years following the Norman Conquest, life and property were so insecure that gardening on any wide scale was impossible. There was almost no space within or without the bounds of the feudal castle for raising anything but fruit trees and herbs. Gradually, however, with the coming of more settled times, walled places were set aside for the growing of herbs, especially within the grounds of the monasteries and the larger castles. A typical garden of this type—a "pleasaunce," it was called—was that of Eleanor of Provence at Woodstock, laid out by her husband, King Henry III, in 1250. Two high walls enclosed a well-ordered herbary, a fish pond, a leafy bower with tufted seats, and sanded alleys. The pleasaunce was used for holding audiences, receiving guests, and enjoying the songs of troubadours, and the spectacles provided by jugglers, tumblers, and dancing girls.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when internal peace brought about an expansion in trades and industries and a consequent development of horticulture, monastic gardens reached their highest point of development. In the midst of the cloisters of a typical monastery was *paradise*, a square grass plot thickly studded with flowers. Two bisecting paths divided the paradise into quarters. In the center was a

*savina* in the form of a tub of water for washing or a well. A physic garden, laid out in oblong beds near the lodging of the physician, was planted with peppermint, sage, rosemary, pennyroyal, rue, roses, fennel, watercress, lovage, camomile, tansy, fennel, and savory. The oblong beds of the kitchen garden were planted with onion, garlic, parsley, dill, lettuce, chervil, poppy, coriander, savory, beet, radish, cabbage, parsnip, carrot, leek, shallot, and celery.

The typical garden of the nobility and gentry was a square enclosed by walls of mud, stone, and brick or by thick hedges pierced by two doors, one facing the house and the other the orchard. Around the enclosing wall was a bank of earth planted with aromatic herbs. In selected places along paths of sand and gravel were recesses with benches and low mounds of earth covered with grass or herbs. In a conspicuous position was the fountain. An arbor, without which no garden would be complete, was frequently sheltered by a thick hedge and surrounded by flowers, most of which were used as salad herbs: periwinkles, primroses, daisies, lilies, marigolds, violets, hawthorne shrubs, and roses. The rose had by this time come to be valued for its loveliness, its perfume, and its symbolism, which was to reach its apogee in that loveliest of all medieval poems, *The Romance of the Rose*.

After the disastrous Wars of the Roses in the fifteenth century, a new style of domestic architecture supplanted the old fortified hold and castle of the Middle Ages. Houses were built on the sides of hills or in valleys and more space was devoted to gardening. Certain innovations followed. Flower beds were enclosed by trellises supported by gayly painted posts and rails, a custom persisting through Tudor times. Another innovation—the topiary garden, the trimming of shrubs and trees into fantastic geometrical shapes—was a Roman custom which lasted into the Age of Victoria and which is still to be seen in scattered gardens in England and America. Still another innovation was the gallery made of wooden poles and trellis work and planted with creeping vines that ran along

the interior of garden walls. Shady nooks and grass "banks" for seats and "artificial mounts" perpetuated the older medieval tradition. The mounds, made of earth, shaded by trees, and located in various parts of the garden, were ascended by stairs or spiral pathways bordered by shrubs cut in various shapes or by fragrant herbs and flowers. Atop the largest mound was an "arbor" to protect one from the sun as he enjoyed a view of the countryside outside the bounds of the garden.

With the disappearance of the monastic gardens after the Dissolution in the early sixteenth century and the absorption of the monastic property by favorites of Henry VIII, the art of gardening was furthered almost entirely by the king, by his newly-created nobility, and by the burghers of the great towns. The sense of security afforded by a settled succession allowed still more houses to be located in valleys rather than on hilltops, to give protection against cold winds and to allow greater space for gardens and cultivation. Careful consideration was given to the choice of a site to allow an extensive prospect of the countryside, an early anticipation of the eighteenth-century gardener's preoccupation with landscape views.

The Elizabethan garden was a compromise between the older and the new ideas imported from France, Holland, and more particularly from Italy. Many medieval features, such as trellises, walks, arbors, and carved stonework, remained in fashion. More important was the introduction of the idea that gardens might exist solely for beauty and not necessarily for utility, an idea that resulted in the development of the modern flower garden.

In 1618 William Lawson charmingly extolled garden flowers in his *A New Orchard and Garden*: "What more delightful than an infinite varietie of sweet smelling flowers? decking with sundrye colours the greene mantle of the earth, the universal mother of us all . . . colouring not only the earth but decking the ayre, and sweetening every breath and spirit."

Frequently house and garden were laid out as a unit by a single architect. From the terrace in front of the house, steps and broad walks—"forthrights"—connected the parts of the garden with the house. Smaller walks paralleled the terrace, the spaces between being filled with grass plots, mazes, or knotted beds. The main walks were modeled after the plan of the building; the pattern of the beds and mazes and the designs of the flower beds suggested the architectural details and the geometric tracery of the Elizabethan house. The enclosures of the garden were hedges of plants and trees trimmed to various forms of topiary

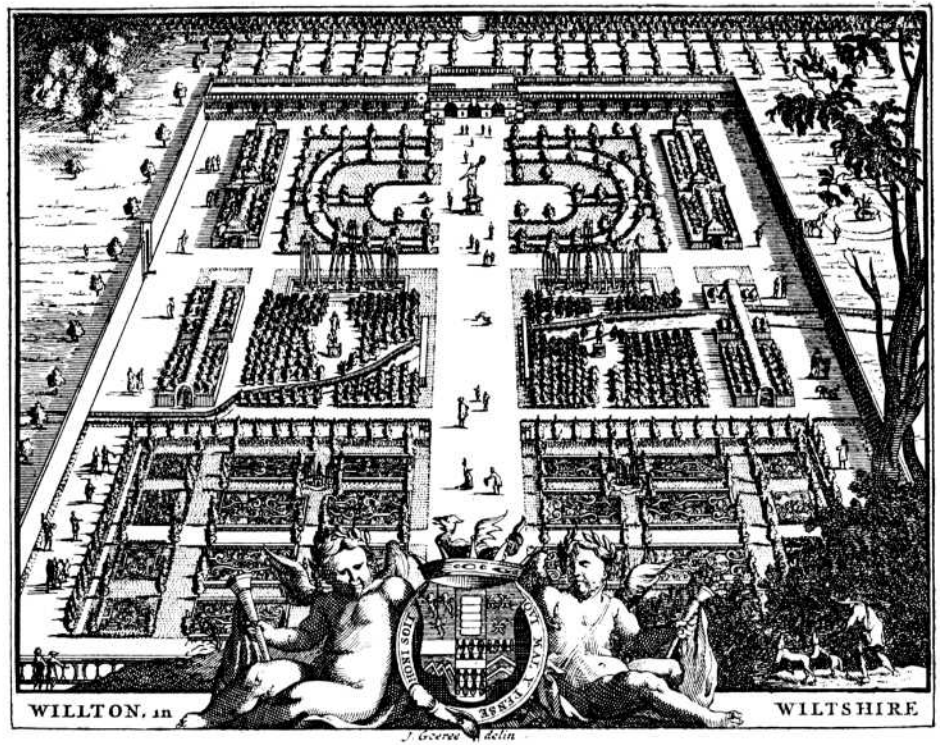


Figure 1

work, such as Queen Elizabeth and her Maids of Honor, the Twelve Disciples listening to the Sermon on the Mount, Adam and Eve in the Garden, armed men ready to do battle, and greyhounds coursing a deer. Inside were shaded or "pleached" alleys made of interwoven or intertwined trees, marble fountains, columns, pyramids, and obelisks. Artificial mounds, still fashionable, were surmounted by the banqueting houses of noblemen who could afford to entertain lavishly. One such mound was the Mount of Venus at Theobald's, the estate of Lord Burleigh. Other innovations were the maze, lead and stone vases (sometimes filled with flowers) along terraces or walks, fountains, sundials, and "artificial water." Sometimes gardens were planted on both sides of a small stream; sometimes a small stream was introduced into the garden; and sometimes a pond was laid out among the flowers. The intermingling of ornamental and useful plants was another indication of the transition from the Elizabethan to the garden of the seventeenth century. The shape of flower beds was more important than the flowers themselves. The four quarters of the main alleys intersecting the middle of the garden were enclosed by fences of lattice or striped railings. The quarters were subdivided into "knots" of geometrical patterns or fanciful shapes, either *open* or *closed*, depending on whether they were outlined with plants or colored on the inside with sand or flowers. The "maze" or "labyrinth" was outlined with plants or hedges.

The early part of the seventeenth century, that great century of scientific curiosity and advancement, is marked by the culture of economic plants and the exposure of many ancient floral superstitions by a growing class of professional horticulturists. The few great gardens developed during the first half of the century conformed to the growing popular taste for Italian garden styles admired by an increasing number of young men of taste who had made the Grand Tour in Italy. Wilton, seat of the Earl of Pembroke (See Figure 1), was designed after this fashion by Isaac de Caux, a German architect residing in England, in huge parallelograms with embroidered plats, fountains, terraces, walks through groves of wood, marble statues, columns, ponds, galleries, and among other features, a grotto, and a Palladian bridge. Castle Ashby and Shrubland Park were decorated and embellished in a like manner. Gardens with palisades, terraces, bowling greens, clipped yew trees, ponds, leaden statues and vases, and wrought-iron gates continued to flourish. Before and after the Restoration the tulip "craze" reached its height; vast numbers of bulbs were shipped from Holland each year. Tulips were valued for their brilliant pastel shades and for their costliness. Previously, in the time of Charles I, an American importation, the "sensitive" plant, had been introduced to English gardens. The gradual importation of foreign plants led to the growth of hothouses, conservatories, and orangeries. The latter, unlike our modern hothouses and green-

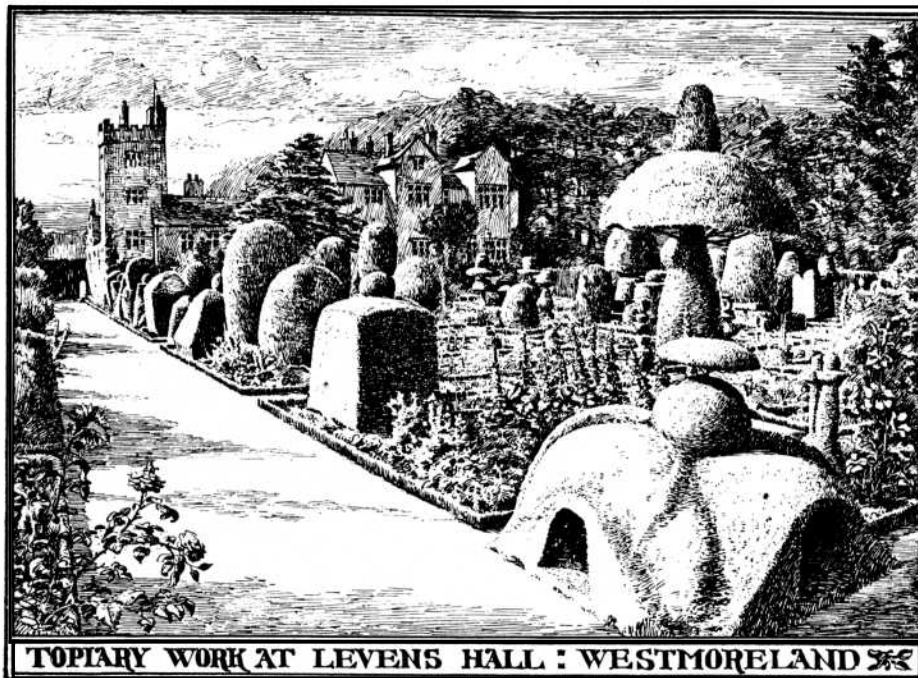


Figure 2

houses, were merely big rooms with large windows heated by stoves and fireplaces. Orange and lemon trees were grown in tubs and transplanted during the summer months to the garden.

The period between the outbreak of the Civil War and the Restoration (1642-1660) is destitute of artistic development. During the time of Charles II a change came over the design of the larger English gardens. The French influence became paramount among certain of the nobility, who began to "improve" their old gardens or to design new gardens in imitation of Versailles. The great landscape artist of Louis XIV, Le Nôtre, had created vast parks to symbolize the immensity of the French king's sway. He understood the laws of balance, variety, contrast, and symmetry; and everything he designed was for a definite and practical purpose, e.g., wide walks for ladies wearing hoopskirts. The French formal design in landscape stressed things on the grand scale: waterworks, marble fountains, series of terraces, parterres of flowers, wildernesses of trees, vast avenues, long canals, and beautiful groves ornamented with architecture and sculpture (*bosquets*). The English imitated all of these features on a lesser scale in the larger gardens of St. James' Park, Hampton Court, Badminton, Chatsworth, and Holme Lacy. Marked characteristics of the English tendency to compromise were the retention of old-fashioned alleys and sundials, which were as a rule a center of the garden design. Increasing attention was paid to the over-all geometrical shape of the garden. The round form seems to have been less preferred to the

square, because the latter could be divided into three parts (See Figure 1). Brick walls were preferred for making enclosures, and seats along the walks were introduced. Sometimes the whole garden was laid out like a sundial in box or yew; and sometimes trees were clipped to imitate the most exaggerated and fantastic Dutch styles in topiary art. Flowers were considered of less importance than heretofore and planted in pots rather than in the ground. As a result, gardens tended to take on a cold and forbidding aspect.

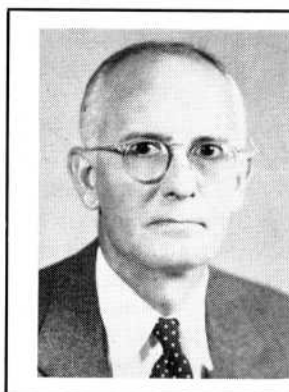
After the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and during the reign of Dutch William and Mary, the imitation of the Dutch taste in gardening became popular: waterworks of fantastic forms arranged to surprise visitors with an unexpected wetting; walks of gravel or grass; alleys shaded by yew and box clipped into fantastic geometrical shapes (see Figure 2) or into the form of cocks and hens, dogs, men, and ships;

orangeries and greenhouses; broad terraces with stone steps; "wild" spaces planted with pines; groves penetrated by alleys; ponds and canals; and fine gateways. The style stressed the straight line, undeviating rows of trees and shrubs, and the horizontals of canals and streams. The Tudor knot was replaced by the French parterre, a curious embroidery of grass and flowers in the shape of arabesques, animals, birds, shells, and scrollwork, the paths of which were of colored sand. Walls were pierced by grates designed as "peep holes" for glimpses into the countryside outside the garden: In addition to artificial mounts, these were a most significant development; for they led to a desire to extend the bounds of the garden to include the landscape by means of vast avenues and parks.

With the dawn of the Age of the Enlightenment the formal garden on the Italian, French, and Dutch model gradually came to be regarded as unfashionable in circles of taste; and the groundwork was prepared for the enlightened amateur, the patron of taste, and the professional landscape gardener to paint into the huge canvas of the landscape itself that most unique of all gardens—the Picturesque.

#### FACULTY BOOKS

Dr. L. H. Snyder, Dean of the Graduate College, has recently received from the publishers a Spanish translation of his book, *The Principles of Genetics*, which was published in Buenos Aires. The first edition (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company) appeared just twenty years ago. Dean Snyder's purpose was "to acquaint the beginning student of heredity with the facts and principles of inheritance." The material in the book was planned for use in a semester course in genetics; and so successful has the book been with both students and general readers that four editions have been issued, the latest in 1951. Each revision has incorporated the extensive developments which had taken place since the previous edition. Dean Snyder's book had earlier been translated into German, Russian, and Chinese.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*This is the first of three articles dealing with the development of English gardens. In the second article Dr. Saunders will discuss the landscape and picturesque garden of eighteenth century England. The articles are an outgrowth of his research for a book on picturesque travel in the British Isles during the eighteenth century.*