

BRIGHT HENRY ARTHUR

THE ENGLISH FLOWER
GARDEN

Henry Bright

The English Flower Garden

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The English Flower Garden

with illustrative notes

PREFACE

It is just a year ago since this Essay on “The English Flower Garden” was published in the *Quarterly Review*.

It was written with a twofold object: to give in the smallest compass an outline history of English gardens, and to show once again what makes the true charm and happiness of a garden. Many – perhaps too partial – friends have urged me to reprint this article. They have reminded me that, when the immediate circulation of any one number of a Review has ceased, its articles are virtually lost and buried, and they assure me that there are readers who may not have already seen, and who would yet care to read, this Essay. I hardly know how this may be, but I do know how very much I am indebted to the proprietor of the *Quarterly* for his great kindness in allowing me the opportunity of this reprint. Should this little book succeed in retaining the friends that *A Year in a Lancashire Garden* was happy enough to make, it will indeed be fortunate. It has been to me a matter of no little surprise (as, naturally, of pleasure) to find from the generous notices of the Press and from numerous private letters from owners of gardens, to whom I am entirely a stranger, that the views I have expressed as to the necessity of a reform in our gardens are very widely held. So long as a garden is only regarded as a means for displaying masses of gay colouring, half the delight and all the real interest of it are gone. It is only when we learn to make friends of individual plants, and recall their history and associations, that a garden becomes a pleasure for the intellect as well as for the senses. But I do not wish to carry my opinions to any extravagant length. It is Voltaire, I think, who says that “a man may have preferences but no exclusions,” and I certainly would exclude nothing that is good in the present system. Bedding-out is occasionally very effective and sometimes necessary; and, on the other hand, a garden – such as I saw suggested somewhere the other day – which should contain only flowers known to Chaucer, would be extremely disappointing. However, bedding-out can take very good care of itself, and Chaucerian gardens will not be largely popular. Meanwhile, I sincerely hope that flowering shrubs and hardy herbaceous plants may be far more generally grown and cared for than they are at present.

It has seemed on the whole best to leave this Essay as it was written. I have made a few verbal corrections and inserted one or two short sentences, and that is all. I have, however, added illustrative Notes on points which seemed of some little interest.

THE ENGLISH FLOWER GARDEN

As spring comes on, the fancy of any man who cares about a garden, “lightly turns to thoughts” of flowers and the gardens where they grow. Never, perhaps, was the art of gardening so popular, – I wish we could say so intelligent, – as at present. The stately homes of England, the villas that line the roads of suburban districts, the cottages clustering round a village green, often even a back yard or window-sill in the heart of some manufacturing town, all testify in their different ways to the desire of having an adornment of flowers. Indeed this desire, as Bacon long ago pointed out, in his famous and often-quoted essay, is as old as man himself; or, if any one prefer to trace back the instinct, not to the Garden of Eden, but to the habits of a bird, he may be reminded of the Gardener Bower-bird (*Amblyornis inornata*) of New Guinea, who, making a bower for the pleasure of his mate, will decorate the front of it with flowers carefully stuck into the sod.¹

Nothing more strikingly shows the interest that is now taken in gardening than the number of books that are published on the subject. Besides those that deal less with the craft of the gardener than with the flowers themselves, we have Manuals of gardening, with their annual and monthly calendars of gardening operations, their practical advice and technical knowledge. Then there are the almost countless catalogues of the nurserymen and seedsmen, which often add excellent, and sometimes coloured, engravings, and always supply much useful information. Moreover, in addition to the gardening articles that appear in the *Field* and elsewhere, there are no less than six weekly newspapers, and five monthly periodicals, all devoted to gardening. Lastly, from time to time some publication comes out in parts, as a monograph on some particular species or group of plants, which, with its beautifully-painted illustrations, will one day take its place among other magnificent folios in the botanical libraries of the world.

So much has been written about the old English or Elizabethan garden, that I need hardly enter into great detail on the subject. Bacon has told us what his ideal garden was – the outside lawn, the enclosed garden, and the wilderness. Of course few gardens can ever have approached the perfection of which he dreams, but his general type was the type of the garden of his day. He does not approve of “the making of knots or figures with divers coloured earths” near the house; but in the garden proper, which is enclosed by hedges with green alleys running past them, he will allow of “variety of device.” Each month is to have its own flowers, and he values flowers, as Milton seems to have done, more for fragrance than for colour. And the variety of flowers of the old garden was, even in comparatively small places, far greater than we might at first suppose. Thomas Tusser, who was then a Suffolk farmer, published his *Points of Husbandry* in 1557, and he gives a long list of the plants he grew for the kitchen, for salads, for physic, and of flowers for “windows and pots.” The New Shakespeare Society, too, has lately been reprinting Harrison’s *Description of England*, first printed in 1577, and he, in a chapter on gardening, describes his own “little plot, void of all cost in keeping,” as having, “in the varietie of simples,” “verie neere three hundred of one sort and other contained therein, no one of them being common or usually to be had.”

Two of the most celebrated gardens of those days were Nonsuch and Cobham. Nonsuch seems to have had a number of statues, and a wonderful fountain, with Diana and Actæon; and its lilac-trees are particularly mentioned. Of Cobham, in Kent, then belonging to Lord Cobham, but now to Lord Darnley, Holinshed says, “No varietie of strange flowers and trees do want, which praise or price maie obtaine from the furthest part of Europe or from other strange countries, whereby it is not inferior to the Garden of Semiramis.” A little later, Lord Fairfax’s garden at Nun-Appleton was glorified by Andrew Marvell. It was built, as was supposed to be appropriate for a soldier’s garden, in the form of a fort with five bastions, and

¹ See Note I., on the Gardener Bower-bird.

“the flowers as on parade
Under their colours stand displayed,
Each regiment in order grows,
That of the tulip, pink, and rose.”

Later on still (in 1685) Sir William Temple, in his celebrated essay, described the gardens in his day as not often exceeding six or eight acres, enclosed by walls, and “laid out in a manner wholly for advantage of fruits, flowers, and the product of kitchen gardens.” He goes on to say, that

“In every garden four things are necessary to be provided for, flowers, fruit, shade and water, and whoever lays out a garden without all these must not pretend to any perfection. It ought to lie to the best parts of the house, so as to be but like one of the rooms out of which you step into another. The part of your garden next your house (besides the walls that go round it) should be a parterre for flowers, and grass-plots bordered with flowers; or if, according to the newest mode, it be cast all into grass-plots and gravel walks, the dryness of these should be relieved with fountains, and the plainness of those with statues.”

He then quotes the garden at Moor Park, made by the Countess of Bedford, as “the perfectest figure of a garden I ever saw.” He says, “the length of the house, where the best rooms or of most use or pleasure are, lies upon the breadth of the garden:” the “great parlour” opens upon a broad terrace walk, and then three flights of steps descend to a very large parterre, with its standard laurels, its fountains, and its statues. This garden must obviously have been a garden of an architectural rather than of a horticultural character, and was not at all the ordinary garden of the ordinary country house. But the garden, which we properly associate with those described by the poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was the garden “enclosed by walls,” within which were flower-beds and herb and kitchen gardens, divided by flowering shrubs, and green walks, and verdant alleys. It was in such a garden that Spenser’s butterfly met its untimely end, and such were

“The gardens of Adonis, fraught
With pleasures manifold.”

It was in the “pleached bower” of such a garden, where the ripe honeysuckles obscured the sun, that Shakespeare’s Beatrice was to hide. Of such a garden Andrew Marvell was thinking when he described the lilies and roses, on which Sylvio’s fawn was wont to feed. In these old gardens Cowley wrote his essays; and Herrick gathered the fancies of a poet, or the warnings of a moralist, with his early violets and fading daffodils.

And so, with but few changes, these Elizabethan gardens grew on from year to year, till a certain modification occurred when William III. introduced a taste for whatever was characteristic of Holland: statues were fewer, and hedges of box or yew, clipped into fantastic shapes, became all the fashion. These clipped hedges, indeed, were no new invention, as Sir Walter Scott appears to have thought, for Bacon had denounced them. He did “not like images cut out in juniper or other garden stuff, they be for children.” Earlier still, Leland, in his *Itinerary*, speaks of the Castle of Wrexhill, and says that outside “the mote” were orchards, and “in the orchards were mountes *opere topiario*.”²

But the most famous specimen of Topiarian work in England is probably that at Levens Hall in Westmoreland. It was the work of Beaumont, a well-known gardener of his day, and dates from 1701, the last year of William III.’s reign. Colonel Graham was at that time owner of Levens, and

² See Note II., on *Ars Topiaria*.

some curious letters from his steward still exist, describing the laying-out of the grounds and the planting of the yews, of which one group was clipped into the shape of Queen Elizabeth with her maids of honour.

Long rows of trees, moreover, were now formed on the several sides of great houses, and at Cobham (the varied fortune of whose garden is singularly instructive) a semicircle of trees was planted near the west front, from which radiated five avenues. But the Dutch fashions and the Topiarian work and the long avenues were to be of no long duration. It is more than probable that political feeling, as well as mere fashion, may have had something to do with the change in many cases; but, however this may be, those who set themselves up as men of taste began to find fault with the existing style. Pope was among the first to discover that there was a monotony when grove nodded to grove and each alley had its brother, and he insisted that nature must “never be forgot,” and that one must “consult the genius of the place in all.” So he set to work to consult the genius of his own villa at Twickenham, and this genius certainly prevented anything monotonous. He had flower-beds, and slopes, and mounds, and vistas, and a cypress-grove, and a shell-temple, and an orangery, and a bowling-green, and, above all, a wonderful grotto, “finished with shells, and interspersed with pieces of looking-glass in angular forms.”

And it was about this time that Batty Langley, also of Twickenham, wrote his *New Principles of Gardening, or the Laying-out and Planting Parterres, Groves, Wildernesses, Labyrinths, Avenues, Parks, &c., after a more Grand and Rural manner than has been done before*. This “grand and rural manner” expresses pretty clearly the confusion we find all through his book. He must have known Pope’s villa, and probably the poet himself, and it is evident that he too intended to consult nature and the “genius” of a place. He says there is not “anything more *shocking* than a *stiff regular garden*, where, after we have seen one quarter thereof, the very same is repeated in all the remaining parts, so that we are tired, instead of being further entertained with something new as expected.” He thinks “our gardens much the worst of any in the world, some few excepted,” and is severe on the late Mr. London and Mr. Wise for having laid out gardens for the nobility “in a regular, stiff, and stuff-up manner,” with crowded evergreens and “trifling flower-knots.” But the compliments which he pays to nature are, after all, not much more than lip-homage. His principles seem very right, but his designs, of which we have very many, show that the “grand” had quite got the better of the “rural.” Even the design of “a rural garden after the new manner” consists of “a fine large plain parterre, environed with an easy, agreeable slope,” and “adorned with Apollo, Minerva, and Pallas (*sic*), the Seven Liberal Arts, Mercury, and Pytho;” then there is an octagon basin, with Neptune, and avenues and canals and more statues, and “we can never know when we have seen the whole.”

And now the period of the so-called “landscape gardeners” began, though in reality their business was rather with the *grounds* than with the garden proper.

Of these Kent was the first of eminence. Their idea was to destroy all the old-fashioned formalities, at the sacrifice of a certain stateliness which the style possessed, and to bring the scenery of an English park up to the house itself. But they were constantly haunted and harassed by the word “picturesque.” Was Nature more picturesque when closely followed or carefully improved? Was it the duty of the landscape gardener to arrange his clumps and belts of trees in the way in which they would look best in a *picture*? This was evidently Kent’s idea, and Daines Barrington, speaking of him, says it was reserved for him “to realize these beautiful descriptions [in the *Faery Queen*], for which he was peculiarly adapted by being a painter, as the true test of perfection in a modern garden is that a landscape painter would choose it as a composition.” Kent’s great work seems to have been the carrying out of the alterations at Stowe, on which Bridgeman had been originally employed, and much of the beauty of those famous grounds – which, however, were at least as artificial as natural – was owing to his taste. The two peculiarities now generally associated with his name are the planting of *dead trees* to look picturesque, and the constant use of *Ha-ha*’s (or sunk fences), which he is often said to have originated, though, as matter of fact, Batty Langley also (and I think previously) advocates

their adoption.³ “Capability Brown” was perhaps the next most noted landscape gardener. His idea was always to improve nature, and he was particularly strong in artificial lakes and canals, with rather formal clumps of trees. He had many disciples, and it seemed as if half the fine places in England were to be reformed on the new principles.

But two formidable critics came into the field, Knight and Price. Their plan was to leave Nature as much as possible to herself, to let the stream wind about as a stream should, instead of being dammed into a canal, and to allow trees to grow as they liked. Price’s famous *Essay on the Picturesque* is still full of interest, and shows good sense in the exceptions he allows to his general rule, as, for instance, where he admits “architectural ornaments” in the garden round the house. He speaks, too, with regret of having once destroyed a beautiful old garden, “sacrificed to undulations of ground only.” But he certainly seems to carry his general rule to very considerable length. He thinks that “many of the circumstances that give variety and spirit to a wild place might successfully be imitated in a dressed place;” and although he cannot advocate modelling a carriage-drive after a cart-rut, or having water-docks or thistles before one’s door, he still thinks the cart-rut and the thistles might furnish useful hints. In another chapter he discusses “the connection between picturesqueness and deformity,” and explains how large heaps of stones or mould may at first be considered as deformities and afterwards appear picturesque. It is impossible not to be reminded of Mrs. Rafferty’s description of her garden in Miss Edgeworth’s *Absentee*: “‘Yes,’ she said, ‘she hated everything straight; it was so formal and *unpicturesque*. Uniformity and conformity,’ she observed, ‘had their day, but now, thank the stars of the present day, irregularity and deformity bear the bell and have the majority.’”

Another novelist, Miss Austen, in her *Mansfield Park*, preserves the name of Repton, who was the last of the noted landscape gardeners of the last century: “Repton, or anybody of that sort,” says a certain Mr. Rushworth, “would certainly have the avenue at Sotherton down; the avenue that leads from the west front to the top of the hill, you know.” And this is just what Repton would have done. He was for ever cutting down avenues, and out of the five beautiful lime avenues at Cobham, which must have given such a stately appearance to the place, no less than four fell victims to his axe. The idea was of course that avenues prevented the ground from being picturesque and natural, and Mason, in his *English Garden*, urges “the cruel task, yet needful,” of breaking “th’ obdurate line” of trees, though

“A chosen few, – and yet, alas! but few —
Of these, the old protectors of the plain,
May yet be spared.”

The next marked development in gardening refers more particularly to the flower-garden itself. It was between the years 1835 and 1840 that the mode which we call “bedding-out” began to come into general fashion. John Caie, who was gardener to the Duke of Bedford, and afterwards at Inverary Castle, is often said to have originated the system; but Mr. Frost, writing from Dropmore to the editor of the *Gardener’s Chronicle*, says:

“I helped to fill the beds here in the spring of 1823, long before Mr. Caie had charge of the Campden Hill gardens. It was Lady Grenville who began the bedding system in the first place, but she quite abhorred both ribbon and carpet bedding. The dowager Duchess of Bedford used to visit the grounds here, and much admired the garden, and when she went to Campden Hill to live she sent Mr. Caie here to see the place, and very probably to take notes of what he saw.”

³ Horace Walpole says that Bridgeman invented the sunk fence, “and the common people called them ‘Ha! ha’s!’ to express their surprise at finding a sudden and unperceived check to their walks.” He adds that Kent “leaped the fence, and saw that all Nature was a garden.”

It would thus appear that to Lady Grenville in her Dropmore gardens the credit of being the first to bed-out may fairly belong. But some fifteen years passed before the system was generally adopted. It then grew rapidly in favour, and before long it was clear that the whole character of the English garden would be changed. One of the first plants to be bedded-out extensively was the “Tom Thumb” pelargonium, or geranium as it was then more commonly called; it was a dwarf scarlet, and was considered to be of great beauty till the better varieties were introduced. Then followed verbenas, calceolarias, and other flowers, which could be kept as cuttings through the winter, and then be planted out when summer weather made it safe to do so. And there were many advantages in bedding-out. In large public gardens, where a glow of colour only was wanted, where no one stopped to look at any particular plant, and where a certain uniformity of growth was essential, it answered extremely well. In gardens which are, as it were, the approaches of great houses, and which seem laid out rather by the architect than the gardener, the bedding-out system was both convenient in itself and striking in its effect. Nothing for instance, in its way, can be more beautiful than to look down from the long gallery at Crewe Hall upon the formal garden with its curves of variegated gravel and its thick box edging, its broad terraced walks and flights of steps, guarded by quaintly-carved balustrades and strange heraldic monsters. But it hardly strikes one as a garden; it is rather an appendage to the house itself, adding to its stateliness, and recalling, by its prevailing colours of buff and blue, the old traditions of the family.

But what is all very well for public parks and very important mansions is out of place in smaller country houses, and becomes absurd in small villa gardens. However, the fashion had seized hold of gardeners and masters both, and every one must have what was called an Italian garden. But to make their Italian garden they must do one of two things. They must either root up the old herbaceous plants, which year after year had blossomed and scented the air in the old walled garden; or they must take a piece of their lawn, and, cutting it up into segments, then plant out their nurslings of the greenhouse. It so chanced, moreover, that a few years after the new fashion came in, the duty on glass was taken off, and greenhouses, which had once been a luxury, now became a supposed necessary of life. Hence, bedding-out, instead of being an expensive form of gardening, became a singularly easy and not a very costly method of having a certain show of bright and effective colouring. But this colouring was all. In the old walled garden, instead of the plants, which so long had had their home there, each of which knew its season and claimed welcome as an old friend, there were bare beds till June, and then, when the summer was hottest, a glare of the hottest, brightest, colours. But the walled garden was better than the newly-cut circles on the lawn. In the garden there would at least be the shade of one of the garden walls. In the outside Italian garden, where, with the smooth old turf, trees had been cut away, there would be no shade whatever. Nobody would really care to walk there, and probably no one would be allowed to gather flowers, for fear of spoiling the symmetry of the beds. Nor can any one feel the slightest interest about the hundred little pelargoniums in one bed, or the fifty calceolarias in the next. Each plant is exactly like its neighbour. All individuality has gone, and it is impossible to forget that some four months is the limit of their short lives, and that the next year a new “crop” of pelargoniums and calceolarias, equally without interest or character, will appear in their place. Then too the bedded-out plants are plants with no associations as regards the past. No poet ever sang their beauty, and no legend tells the origin of their birth. Again, they are almost entirely destitute of scent, and to our forefathers at least the scent of flowers was their chief attraction. Often too it is questionable whether a number of small beds cut out of the green turf really looks well; in nine cases out of ten it has a make-shift appearance; flowers were wanted, and the lawn has been sacrificed.

“Nothing,” says Bacon, “is more pleasant to the eye than green grass nicely shorn,” – a sentiment which Mason, in that somewhat tiresome poem of his from which I have already quoted, has sense enough to approve —

“For green is to the eye, what to the ear
Is harmony, or to the smell the rose.”

But green lawns all over England were being destroyed. The flower-borders, where there had been no walled garden, had hitherto generally followed the line of the shrubberies and plantations, and the windings of garden walks; but these and the flowers that grew there were now neglected.

Still worse was the effect on the smaller villa-gardens. They had had their flowers on the sunny side of the garden wall, their pleasant bit of lawn with specimen trees, their fence of scented shrubs. The trees were destroyed, the lawn was cut up; and all for the sake of red and yellow patches during four summer months. Even the cottagers in many places seem to have forgotten the old English flowers, such as grew in Perdita's garden, the “hot lavender,” the marygold, the crown-imperial and the lily, and have taken to slips of pelargonium and the like.

Nor even yet had the abuse of the bedding-out system done its worst. There were still, as we have said, in many gardens, strips of border which, not being in the form of rounded beds, were allowed, half under protest as it were, to harbour some of the old flowers. Unfortunately for them, ribbon borders were invented, and the last sanctuary of herbaceous plants was often ruthlessly destroyed. Pelargoniums again, and calceolarias, with lobelias in front, and dark-leaved perillas in the background, made up the new ribbon border. It was no doubt effective enough in its way, but we have now seen it almost everywhere, and for the last fifteen years at least. Of course there are happy variations of it in great places, and where the gardener is a man of taste and ability; but it sometimes appears to us that such gardeners must be very rare exceptions. Such a ribbon border as I have described, and extremely badly grown moreover, is, or was a year or two ago, supposed to be the appropriate adornment of Shakespeare's garden at New Place in Stratford.

A further modification in the round beds has been introduced still more recently. It is the bedding-out of zonal pelargoniums, of echeverias, and of other plants, whose beauty lies in the foliage rather than the blossom. No doubt they give softer tints to the general effect, but they are a poor substitute for the varied beauty of an old garden. It may be difficult to find interest in the ordinary “bedding-out stuff,” but they are poetry itself compared to plants which chiefly remind one of the last days of the garden of “the Sensitive Plant,” when, instead of all odorous flowers, there were only growths

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