

Village Gardens of the Past

For this year's autumn exhibition, SAVA is focusing on our village gardens, so for our April talk we invited garden historian Anne Wilkinson to tell us how they used to look. She began by exploding what she called the myth of the traditional cottage garden, so familiar from the tops of biscuit tins and the works of dreamy late-Victorian painters. Such gardens, she said, were created in response to writers like Gertrude Jekyll and William Robinson who were talking about the flowers they liked. A painting by Myles Birkett Foster captured a more realistic image: a vegetable patch and a broken-down shed. Robinson himself used an illustration showing mostly vegetables growing in serried ranks with just a few flowers along the straight path down the middle. Real cottage gardens were more like allotments, while the early allotments – started in response to the enclosure of common land – were more like small-holdings, complete with pigs. Gardening as we know it started a little higher up the social scale.

Ms Wilkinson based her research on the books and magazines written for gardeners. Up to 1850, she noted, most such books were written by professionals for professionals, but then amateur gardeners started writing their own, with gardening magazines following some years later. The authors were mostly clergymen or middle-class women who couldn't afford to employ professional gardeners and their expensive teams of workers, but still wanted to set a good example in their localities. Jobbing gardeners were not well thought of, as they needed to be told what to do. Jane Loudon, who published part-works on gardening, pointed out that professional gardeners like her own husband were hopeless at explaining their techniques to amateurs like herself. Women who didn't go out to work could now do so in the privacy of their gardens, but early photos often show them doing so in wildly unsuitable clothes, and the heavy hoses and wooden wheelbarrows hardly made for light work. An important breakthrough was the introduction of the first ready-made greenhouse, the Paxtonian Plant House, recommended by James Shirley Hibberd, author of *Rustic Adornments for Homes of Taste*, and founder in 1884 of the long-running magazine *Amateur Gardening*.

As well as flowers, the new breed of amateur gardener produced many varieties of fruit and vegetables, not all of them familiar today. But attitudes could be very different – for instance tomatoes were long considered poisonous unless cooked. Melons were not only grown in greenhouses, but also on the hot dung-heaps found in cottage gardens. And enthusiasm for gardening was encouraged by competitions both in villages and market towns. The earliest flower shows were promoted by florists, and mainly featured flat flowers such as primulas. Village shows also gave prominence to vegetable growing, and were encouraged by seed suppliers like Suttons. They often had separate classes for amateurs and cottagers, allowing the latter late entry at a cheaper rate.

But the First World War brought big changes – many of the gardeners never made it home, and there was little money for greenhouses. The amateur gardening movement took many years to recover its early bloom.

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