

# SOCIETY OF GARDEN + LANDSCAPE DESIGNERS

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF BRITISH GARDEN DESIGN 43-2023

**ROMAN:**  
43-410  
**COMFORTS OF HOME**



Courtesy of Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales

The first pleasure gardens in Britain were Roman. Based on ancient models, they made parks around villas and enclosed peristyle courtyards had fountains, topiary and exotic species like roses from across their empire.

**ANGLO SAXON:**  
410-1066  
WE KNOW VERY LITTLE ABOUT ANGL0-SAXON GARDENS, PERHAPS BECAUSE GARDENING WAS NOT CONSIDERED TO BE IMPORTANT AT THAT TIME.



**MEDIEVAL:**  
1066-1485  
**GARDENS OF THE HEART AND HEAD**

1. Garden scene from 'Roman de la Rose', North Wind Picture Archives / Alamy stock photo  
2. Salisbury Cathedral Cloister, Wiltshire



The Normans brought stability and knowledge of gardens gleaned from contact with the Arab world. Hunting parks and designed pleasure grounds outside castle walls were virile male spaces, but the emblematic hortus conclusus was an enclosed feminine retreat with allegorical devices relating to Courtly Love & Chivalry. Monks made food and apothecary gardens, but their cloisters were designed to aid contemplation through a symbolic square grass lawn.

**RENAISSANCE:**  
1485-1603  
**TUDOR DISPLAY AND DEVICE**



1. Kenilworth Castle and Gardens, Warwickshire / English Heritage 2. Sudeley Castle Gardens, Gloucestershire

Tudor gardens were places of dynastic propaganda and politicking. Over the 16th century, Renaissance ideas were adapted to suit English tastes. Neoplatonic ideas resulted in gardens of strong geometry with intricate parterres and uniquely English knot gardens, augmented by fountains, mounts, scented flowers and banqueting houses. Symbolism, and the ability to read it, was key and the message from the top was clear - if you want to get ahead, get a great garden.



**BAROQUE:** 1603-1714  
**WE DID IT OUR WAY**

1. Wrest Park, Bedfordshire / English Heritage 2. Westbury Court Gardens, Gloucestershire Mike Hanney 1983 / Alamy stock photo 3. Aerial view Hampton Court Castle, Herefordshire Peter Fields / Alamy stock photo



The English had a bit of an on-off relationship with the grand Baroque style of Absolutist France. Endless avenues, scrollwork parterre and magnificent water features tamed nature, but The Commonwealth put the brakes on excess. The Restoration brought it back and in 1688 William & Mary inspired a low-key Dutch version with restrained form but an explosion of exotic plants from the Orient, India and the Americas, courtesy of their excellent mariners.



**ARCADIAN, THE ENGLISH LANDSCAPE:** 1713-1783  
**POETRY, POLITICS & PAINTINGS**

1. Painswick Rococo Garden, Gloucestershire 2. Petworth House, West Sussex. Andrew Butler / National Trust Images 3. The Temple of British Worthies and Shell Bridge at Stowe, Buckinghamshire. Andrew Butler / National Trust Images



New ideas emerged in the late 1600s. Rationalism gave way to Empiricism; formality was replaced by naturalism. Large estates were modelled to look scenic with classical buildings set in sweeping meadows with serpentine paths and sinuous water. Initially it was inspired by poetry and the 17th century paintings of Claude and Poussin, with a dose of political symbolism added. Simplified by Capability Brown in the 1750s, his version of the style was a huge success, supported by Enclosure and the development of the Ha-ha, more comfortable carriage suspension and the invention of shooting as a sport.



**PICTURESQUE:**  
1782-1832  
**WILDLY ARTY**

Scotney Castle from 'Bastion', Kent. Stephen Robson / National Trust Images



Brown's 'shaved nature' began to pall. Wild tourism, observing scenery as a painting and 'felt' experience became the rage. The rusticity of Picturesque theory fed into growing Romantic sentiment; translated from art into garden design by Humphry Repton as a lushly planted terrace foreground; a landscape-style middle ground and a dramatic background.



**GARDENESQUE:**  
1832 ONWARD  
**A GARDEN IS NOT NATURAL**

1. Waddesdon Manor, Buckinghamshire. Hugh Mothersole / National Trust Images 2. Trentham Victorian Gardens, Staffordshire. WhiskyBottle / Alamy stock photo 3. Chinese temple in the China garden at Biddulph Grange Gardens, Staffordshire. Ian Shaw / National Trust Images



Picturesque theory logically would lead to the death of gardens. J C Loudon's 'Principle of Recognition' in 1832 argued for planting unnatural exotics so that there could be no confusing a garden for Nature. The Gardenesque freed Victorians to be inventive: exotic-themed designs displayed a wealth of botanical species from the Empire. An Italianate framework was good for display; industrial technology and wealth powered excess and suburban classes read about horticulture, garden related inventions and taste and how to get it, in their new garden magazines.



**ARTS & CRAFTS:**  
1870S TO PRESENT DAY  
**ALL OUR GOLDEN AFTERNOONS**

1. The White Garden, Sissinghurst Castle Gardens, Kent. Andrew Butler / National Trust Images 2. Gravetye Manor & Gardens, West Sussex



The Arts & Crafts Movement of William Morris & Co. countered industrialisation and globalisation with a rediscovery of English tradition, Elizabethan glory, vernacular architecture, nature and the hand-made. House and garden were united in the work of architect Edwin Lutyens and the artistic planting plans of Gertrude Jekyll. Enclosed garden 'rooms' of Italianate formality had deep herbaceous borders leading out to woodland gardens inspired by William Robinson and his book, The Wild Garden, 1870.

**MODERN:**  
1930S-1980S  
**NOT WHO WE ARE**



1. Penguin Books' Canteen Courtyard, London by John Brookes. Courtesy of the John Brookes Denmans Foundation 2. The Water Gardens, Westminster, London. Garden by Philip Hicks. Courtesy of the London Garden Trust.

The Modern Movement had few fans in Britain outside an elite such as members of the Architectural Association like Jellicoe, Gibberd and Crowe. John Brookes was an exception. In his book The Room Outside, 1969, he showed ordinary people how to use grid-based abstract art to design an up-to-date template to family life and leisure, Californian style.

**POST MODERN:**  
1990S-TODAY  
**PLANTS, PEOPLE AND THE PLANET**

1. Urban Beach Garden, Barbican Estate, City of London. Garden by Nigel Dunnett. Kathy de Witt / Alamy stock photo 2. Hauser & Worth, Somerset. Garden by Piet Oudolph. Josie Elias / Alamy stock photo



Garden design has always expressed our relationship with Nature. Modern understanding of the inter-reliance of all living things and our part in that story has been the driver of new ways to make gardens, starting in the 90s with the New Perennial Movement. Bio-diversity, climate change, species loss, gardens for well-being and community are some of the challenges for future designers

DATES ARE A FRAMEWORK ONLY. STYLES WERE SLOW TO BE ADOPTED AND EVEN SLOWER TO BE REPLACED.