

Lady Gardeners



Lady Gardeners

Seeds, Roots, Propagation,
from England to the Wider World

Edited by

Francesca Orestano
and Michael Vickers

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Introduction

Lady Gardeners, from England to the wider world

Francesca Orestano

This book is the fruit of the creative impulse that Maria Theresa Ferraro Rossi imparted to our garden research and knowledge. For many years she was president of the Garden Club Monza and Brianza, actively and passionately engaged with her project of an annual conference which began on October 14, 2005. Every year since, the conference was devoted to the theme of 'Women Protagonists in Garden History.' The first conference focused on the work of Lavinia Taverna (1924-1997). This is part of Maria Theresa's opening address to the members of the club and the audience:

Our visit to the Landriana gardens occurred a few years ago, during a tour of the gardens of Latium. All the members were affected and moved by the silent presence of Lavinia: she was not there anymore, but it was as if she was still there, among her flowers, with her dog still guiding us along the garden paths. When I realised that the Villa Taverna at Canonica Lambro, which I knew since my childhood as a very mythical place, had been the house Lavinia Taverna had loved, I suddenly conceived the idea of realizing here a long-cherished project.

The whole event was the outcome of Maria Theresa's work, of her love for detail and passion for creating harmonious conditions in the best possible environment. The place where for years the conference took place was indeed the magical Villa Taverna at Canonica Lambro, from where in a sense everything had begun. The site of Villa Canonica had been celebrated since 1559 by Bartolomeo Taegio, in his treatise in the form of a dialogue entitled *La villa*:

Here comes the wise and great Taverna [...] in the sunny and celebrated Villa Canonica, of whose proximity the Lambro River and Monza are so proud. This place is so merry, jocund, marvellous [...] with the happy hill behind it, whose beauty always makes me wonder [...]. The boughs, the flowers, the herbs, the perfumes, the well-measured paths: such is the pleasant condition of this felicitous place. (<http://villataverna-canonica.it/storia-2/>)

The speakers chosen by Maria Theresa were scholars and experts in garden history; with the conference, the Lavinia Taverna prize was also initiated, and every year it was conferred on a landscape architect or a young woman whose work in the field of horticulture, in botanical drawing, or other gardening activity was deemed outstanding. After the success of the first event, Maria Theresa was able to replicate it for many years. The essays collected in this book reflect the themes of the yearly conferences, in which the activity of women protagonists in garden history and landscape gardening was explored and presented to the public. In the end, after a decade, the Associazione Orticola di Lombardia took the conference beneath its aegis, under the guidance of Filippo Pizzoni; but the first ten conferences are engraved in our

memory as a unique event, as the realization of a green thought generated by the passion of Maria Theresa, then president of the Garden Club Monza and Brianza.

The idea of the conference had found its purpose and development in the fusion of two distant places, the Villa Taverna at Canonica Lambro and the Landriana Gardens of Lavinia Taverna, at Tor San Lorenzo. In 1956, Lavinia Taverna had bought at an auction an arid piece of land on the Latium coast, where mines, bombs, and other remnants of the landing of the allied troops in nearby Anzio were still present. The name she gave to the estate, La Landriana, was chosen as homage to the history of the aristocratic Taverna family. The dream of a garden began to come true when a friend gave Lavinia a packet of seeds. Indeed, each garden is the recreation of a phantom of the past, an Eden cherished in memory before being materially realized on earth.

The essays contained in this book, with very few changes or additions, are the presentations offered at the conferences held at Canonica Lambro. On several occasions, the editor of this book was directly involved in the conferences. Yet, since the passion for gardens propagates just like plants do, the project grew thanks to Anna Rudelli and Anna Zappatini, who during their university years had chosen to write about gardens and landscape: Anna Rudelli focussing on Dorothy Wordsworth and the Lake District, and then on John Muir in the United States, Anna Zappatini working on Kew Gardens and on Marianne North. And inasmuch as English gardening culture and history were the core of our studies, this collection, from its very title, follows the circumstances of a style that from England did spread to the United States, to Australia, to very distant parts of the world. We wanted to set a special emphasis on the presence of women in the context of gardens and landscape: not just a decorative, passive role, but a practical, active, promoting presence; our starting point, England in the eighteenth century, would gradually open up to a global notion of gardening, to a cultural discourse following migrations and transformations, adapted to different climatic conditions and environments. The essays trace a garden history originally developing in England, but likely to migrate elsewhere in the course of time, owing to the faculty of many plants – and of those who foster them – to move across different continents.

In 1617 the *Country Housewife's Garden* by William Lawson was addressed to women and their kitchen gardens; a role that saw them as the purveyors of jams or herbal remedies. In those years, gardens tended to be a prerogative of royalty. Anne of Denmark (1574-1619), the wife of James I Stuart, and Lucy, Countess of Bedford (1581-1627), appointed two great architects, Inigo Jones and Isaac de Caus, to redesign their estates. Anne owned gardens at Greenwich and at Somerset House; Lucy inherited Twickenham and, in 1617, by the King's concession, she became the owner of Moor Park in Herefordshire.

Another royal protagonist was Henrietta Maria (1609-1669), wife of King Charles I, and daughter of Maria de' Medici: she appointed the garden architect André Mollet with the new planning of St. James Park, and the garden at Oatlands, in Surrey, where John Tradescant, plant collector and botanist, was at work. Such royal projects were theatrically complemented by the production of masques, in which the queen appeared as the goddess of light in the fabulous Britanides garden; the dream, however, was to be short-lived. After the trial and execution of Charles I, Henrietta moved to France, statues and fountains were sold, her garden dismantled and destroyed.

With very few exceptions, and until the nineteenth century, the history of the presence of women in gardens was that of royal representatives, whose role is remembered today on account of the extravagant sums spent on gardens and whose name is constantly linked to that of the royal gardener on duty, who would then interpret their taste and aspirations. The wife of James II, Queen Mary (1662-1694), received the projects of Daniel Marot; Queen Anne (1665-1714) ascended the throne in 1702 and in that same year elected Henry Wise as royal architect; Queen Caroline (1683-1737), wife of George II, appointed Charles Bridgeman as royal gardener in 1728, promoted gardening works at Richmond, and the remodeling of Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens, also employing John Vanbrugh and William Kent. Last but not least, Augusta (1719-1772), wife of the Prince of Wales, collaborated with William Chambers for the realization of the gardens at Kew. Such royal tradition is the subject of the first chapter in this book, written by Anna Zappatini.

Today very few gardening books examine the life and work of Dorothy Wordsworth (1771-1855). The diaries of the sister of the celebrated Romantic poet are examined by Anna Rudelli, who has also explored the Lake District, the region the Romantic poets elected as their residence, living at Dove Cottage, near Grasmere, in an environment at once archaic and pastoral. Dorothy would write about the wild character of the environment she lived in, and its spontaneous natural abundance; she would buy seeds from the catalogues then available, but she would also transplant wild species into her small garden, where she would grow flowers, strawberries and beans, welcoming at once beautiful and edible plants.

During the Victorian age the cultural conditions for the active presence of women in gardens were gradually becoming a feature of the age: middle-class women were not only working in the kitchen garden, but might aspire to grow a flower garden of aesthetic and botanical value. Jane Loudon, in *Gardening for Ladies* (1840), while admitting the difficult task of tending fruit trees and vegetables, stated that a woman was perfectly capable of growing and maintaining a flower garden. The pioneering role of Jane Loudon, as active promoter of women's gardening skills, is the subject of Anna Zappatini's chapter, who writes Jane's story and details the nature of her partnership, at once original and collaborative, with her famous husband, John Claudius Loudon. The author of the *Encyclopaedia of Gardening* (1822), the promoter and editor of *The Gardener's Magazine*, would be supported by his wife who launched in 1840 *The Lady's Magazine for Gardening*; in that same year, Jane published *Gardening for Ladies*; and in 1841, *The Ladies' Companion to the Flower-Garden*. Together with the indefatigable Jane Loudon, many other women would write for a gendered public who took an interest in gardening: Louisa Johnson authored *Every Lady Her Own Flower Gardener* (1837; 1843) and *Every Lady's Guide to Her Own Greenhouse* (1851). Juliana Horatia Ewing wrote *Letters from a Little Garden* (1886). Theresa Earle composed *A Pot-Pourri from a Surrey Garden* (1897).

Victorian women gardeners could speak the language of flowers, could engage in botanical excursions, gathering ferns and mosses; they were able to take notes, organise a catalogue, make drawings of plants. And, beyond these activities, they tried to get hold of the secrets of gardening, without resorting to a well-informed man by their side, because, as Jane Loudon stated, it is very unpleasant to watch the dissimulated grinning of a male gardener who thinks you are doing the wrong thing. Among the women who travelled well beyond the borders of England there was Marianne North (1830-1890): Anna Zappatini follows the biographical

tracks of this courageous lady, a painter of exotic plants that she would seek, identify, and depict in the most inaccessible parts of the world.

In England, in 1870 and 1882, the Married Women's Property Acts were the laws that allowed married women to keep control over their paternal family inheritance. These laws facilitated the presence of women in gardens of which they were the lawful owners: the last decades of the century saw engaged in gardening activities, not only ladies coming from the upper classes, such as Lady Emerald Cunard, Sybil Colefax, Nancy Astor, who worked on their family estates, but also women who chose gardening activity as a profession, such as Norah Lindsay (1873-1948), who did design the garden plots full of forget-me-nots for Nancy Astor at Cliveden; who also worked at Trent Park, Port Lympne, and Blicking. Her informal style, the use of bricks as decorative elements, the abundance of flowers and the care bestowed on their colours would influence Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932), a student of arts and painting at the Henry Cole School of Art at South Kensington. Jekyll met members of the Arts and Crafts Movement, and specialised in interior decoration. Yet the quality of leaves and petals, their texture and colours in all their different shades, would be the topic examined by Jekyll in *Wood and Garden* (1899), with a gaze at once microscopic and aesthetic. For Jekyll, no planting could equal the spontaneous planting of nature. Nature teaches moderation, simplicity, and that pictorial quality that can be defined as its wide-ranging breath. Her apprenticeship as a painter trained the eye of Jekyll in her gardening work: she looked at the garden as if it were a palette full of colours. Anna Rudelli has focussed on a particular aspect of Jekyll's activity, her commitment to children whom she would teach how to create and maintain a garden. Here the presence of Edwin Lutyens, a constant partner of Jekyll in gardening activities since 1896, is just in the background. *Children and Gardens* was written for children and the simple text is enriched with amusing drawings and photographs taken by Jekyll. There were, at the time, excellent women authors of gardening books for children: *Short Studies in Botany* (1892), by Harriet C. Cooper; *The Garden Book for Young People* (1908) by Alice Lounsberry; *The Children's Book of Gardening* (1909) by Mrs Alfred Sedgwick and Mrs Paynter. The role of Jekyll confirmed the established connexion between women and gardening activities, which would be institutionalised when gardening schools for women were created, such as the Glynde School for Lady Gardeners, founded in 1902 by Frances Wolseley (1872-1936): three famous lady gardeners were the patronesses of the school, Miss Jekyll, Miss Earle, and Ellen Wilmott. The number of schools for women who aspired to become gardeners increased: in 1896, the Kew Gardens apprentices were allowed to wear practical trousers, a real 'Kewriosity.' As mentioned by Sue Bennett, in 1908 there were seven schools for women gardeners in England and in 1915 the Committee for the Agricultural Education of Women stated that the demand amply exceeded the available posts. In 1927 Beatrix Havergal and Avice Sanders founded the school known today as Waterperry Gardens, open until 1971. In order to obtain the diploma, students had to master horticulture in its many branches, such as the nature of soil, the use of fertilizers, hothouse cultivation; they were allowed to wear trousers regularly. The former angel of the Victorian household was then enjoying a vaster sphere of activity and influence, since from domestic interiors she would appropriate the outside grounds: gardens, however, were often designed and modelled as so many rooms in a house, mysterious and hospitable, offering intimacy and reflection, spaces for conviviality, amusement, work and contemplation.

Away from London, and again in the romantic Lake District, the stories for children spun by Beatrix Potter (1866-1943) tell of rabbits and squirrels, kittens and dogs, owls and sheep,

frogs and hedgehogs. Anna Rudelli writes the chapter on Potter, after having examined both the illustrations for her children's books and the scientific drawings she was able to make. The activity of this woman was deeply entwined with the Lake District, where she chose to live. After her death, a hefty patrimony of farms, vernacular buildings, cottages, stables, hay-barns, and her greatly cherished Herdwick sheep, would be placed under the aegis and protection of the National Trust. Gardening activities and landscape preservation: these are the themes pursued with more conviction and professional energy by women gardeners in the twentieth century.

Here a detour to the United States is needed to focus on Beatrix Farrand (1872-1959), the heir to an American tradition that while accepting the English gardening style transforms it profoundly, modifying it ideologically and eventually also practically.

To draw a map of the American territory means to enter a space where visions of Eden teem with explorations of nature and its threatening wilderness. Eden and wilderness are two aspects of a cultural discourse involving geography, politics, history, and literature, a discourse that deploys their mythical force in mutual accord or in opposition. According to the dream of Gonzalo in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, the new world restores human society to a pristine and providential state of nature. Prospero's island – or rather Caliban's – would spontaneously provide fruit and harvests, grown without sweat and toil. But the New Jerusalem, reached by the Pilgrim Fathers at the beginning of the seventeenth century, offered loneliness, danger and chaos, challenging them against a cruel, inimical, wild nature, and against diabolic temptations that could well upturn all human plans.

From England, together with etchings representing landscape and plants, garden maps, garden guides and topographical poems, a different notion of wilderness also came to the United States, a wilderness entirely decorative, artificial, exquisitely aesthetic, inasmuch as for the Old World a natural style was one of the elements that best contributed to the design of gardens.

In the United States, among the pioneers of systematic gardening, one has to mention David Hosack (1769-1835), founder of the first botanical garden and of the New York Horticultural Society, and André Parmentier (1780-1830), who imported trees and shrubs from Europe, and opened his successful nurseries in Brooklyn, landscaped according to the English tradition, in a natural or informal style.

This tradition was still alive in the projects designed by the so-called 'apostle of taste,' Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852), the American disciple of John Claudius Loudon. Loudon's periodical, *The Gardener's Magazine*, would inspire *The Horticulturalist*, edited by Downing from 1846. Loudon's most famous text, *The Suburban Gardener and Villa Companion* (1838), which dealt with small suburban estates, terraced and semi-detached houses, was openly endorsed and imitated by Downing. The English gardening tradition would be adapted and adopted in the United States, upholding those elements that promoted social control and harmony. Beatrix Farrand was able to interpret and implement such issues, not only in the gardens she designed for private customers, but especially in her projects for American universities, their green areas and campuses. From Princeton to the University of California, Farrand developed

methods and a style that extolled the democratic inclinations of the educational institutions she worked for. For Farrand, gardening was a fully-fledged professional activity.

In England, by contrast, a woman descended from an old aristocratic family had to leave the home of her ancestors which she could not inherit, being a woman: she would build another home for herself and her family at Sissinghurst, while a great writer, Virginia Woolf, wrote a book in which childhood memories are moulded by the present moment. The life and spaces of the past were re-created and rebuilt in the garden of Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962). The ghost of her ancient home, Knole, is transplanted in the features of Sissinghurst, pervading its rooms and long corridors.

Far from England, a young woman whose family migrated to Australia, Edna Walling (1895-1973), would mould her own destiny as a professional gardener. Interpreting the nature of the Australian climate, of the natural environment and landscape, Walling designed gardens and landscapes in a style partly influenced by Jekyll and Lutyens, but transformed by the nature of the continent she worked in, by its character and by the conditions shaping the territory.

More and more frequently, in the twentieth century, women involved in gardening activities were also professionals, whose range of action extended to environmental issues and landscape conservation. Sylvia Crowe (1901-1977) was active in nature protection and landscape conservation, and with Crowe, Maria Teresa Parpagliolo Shephard (1903-1974), in Italy, was committed to the same issues. These women gardeners were involved in great projects of urban development and urban landscaping. Their professional authority is a given: the challenges they had to face were dams, electrical power lines, the parcelling out of suburban areas and the preservation of green areas in the cities. Here memory evokes a friend, Mavis Batey, who after Bletchley, where she worked during the war, committed her life and research to English gardening history, from the eighteenth-century tradition to recent campaigns for landscape protection, as in her *Indignation! The Campaign for Conservation* (2000), where these issues are made cogent and urgent.

Our stories lead to the concluding chapters, but not their ending, on Rosemary Verey (1918-2001), and Beth Chatto (1923-2018), by Anna Zappatini. Cultural awareness of the gestures that mould a garden induced Verey to re-examine the history of English gardening, culling from old books inspiration for her own age. Beth Chatto was the interpreter of an ecological commitment that fostered her keen observation of plants that adapt to difficult conditions, in areas that are arid, inhospitable, in short impossible. From her observations, Chatto learned the lessons that are so valuable not only to gardeners but to all those who care for our green environment.

This is altogether the office of roots, seeds, and propagation, that allow plants to move from one place to another, to adapt to distant climes, to bloom again in conditions that are very different from their native soil.

The chapters in this book confirm the vocation of the English garden, that can enlarge its boundaries, transform and adapt itself to modern times without foregoing its old roots. However, and this is the reason why this collection differs from other excellent models that deal with women and gardens, the essays also dwell on women who, without writing books

or treatises, have lived in gardens, and enjoyed landscape while jotting simple notes in their diaries, describing it in stories for children, portraying strange exotic plants in their paintings, and defending such spaces with their strong commitment to conservation and preservation. Last but not least, even though the authors are at home with academic writing, they decided to offer easy reading, with no notes, and a minimum quota of references, so as to provide an experience that the reader may expand just with the works cited at the end of each chapter. And, once again, if this book succeeds in crossing the Channel, such a chance is due to the advice and scholarly help of Michael Vickers, himself a gardener and archaeologist, who has contributed to the editing of *Lady Gardeners* with his famous kindness, great scholarly learning and unflinching generosity.

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