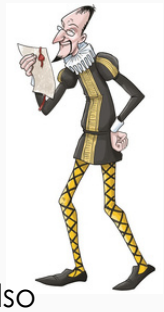
Tudor gardens

There are twenty-nine scenes set in gardens in Shakespeare's plays, including romantic scenes, comic scenes and scenes where politics or issues of national importance are discussed. Sometimes in Shakespeare's comedies, characters conceal themselves from each other in gardens and woods at key moments.



In 'Twelfth Night', Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Maria all hide in a box tree in Lady Olivia's garden so they can spy on Malvolio as he reads the letter he believes to be from Lady Olivia.

In Shakespeare's time, people recognised that flowers and plants had special meaning and importance. They often used them as medicines to treat different ailments. At the same time there were also superstitions around some plants. Shakespeare would have been aware of all this when he mentions different flowers and plants in his plays.

Disease was thought to spread through bad smelling air. To protect themselves, people would wear sweet smelling herbs and flowers. These small and sweet-smelling bunches were known as "tussie mussies". Shakespeare mentions roses over seventy times throughout his plays, more than any other flower.

In 'Twelfth Night' both Orsino and Lady Olivia make reference to roses. Olivia does so when she declares her love for Cesario.

Cesario, by the roses of the spring,
By maidhood, honour, truth and every thing,
I love thee so,
[Twelfth Night Act 3 Scene 1]

Roses have been associated with love, beauty and sweetness for centuries, but Shakespeare also used the rose to convey the painful side of love and the passing of time.

The world Shakespeare lived in was filled with roses. Elizabeth I used the white eglantine rose as her emblem. People not only admired roses for their beauty but also their medicinal uses.

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Other flowers mentioned by Shakespeare in his plays include primroses which were used in salads, soups and butter, various parts of the hawthorn bush, the flower of which symbolised love, and the carnation (or gillyflower) which could be made into a cordial to benefit the heart, reduce fevers and drive out poison. Rosemary symbolised remembrance, and it was used as a medicine to improve the memory.





Images of roses and red lillies from
John Gerard's book 'The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes' held in our collections
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In his book 'The Herball or General Historie of Plantes' (first published in 1597), John Gerard lists the medicinal properties of many plants including roses, which were thought to be good for pain relief and to encourage sleep. Another plant, the red lily could be used to treat serpent stings or boiled in wine to get rid of corns on the feet, and even to remove wrinkles!

For most people in Shakespeare's time, gardens were a place to grow extra food to supplement what they had to eat. They were also used to grow herbs used for cooking or medicinal purposes. It would only have been the wealthy who would also have sufficient space to grow decorative plants and shrubs to offer a pleasant space to walk in.

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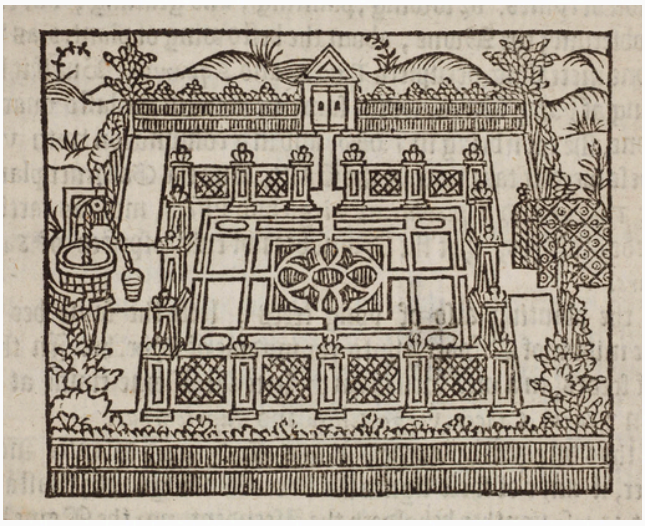
History

In those days the garden was often seen as an extension of a house, a bit like an,extra 'room'. Life indoors was never truly 'private' as servants and family members shared bedchambers, and holes or chinks between rooms would mean that conversations could be easily overheard.

Gardens, with a mix of open and covered spaces, offered the perfect place to find peace and quiet, have private conversations or just be alone. Bowers (a shady place under trees or tall climbing plants) and covered walkways were a good place for this.

The Tudors loved knots and knot designs made attractive patterns which they used to decorate not only their homes, but also their gardens. These were known as 'knot gardens'.

The knot designs in the garden were created from low hedges of hyssop and thyme that seemed to weave over and under each other. The gaps between the hedges created spaces that could be filled with coloured earths or sweet smelling flowers and herbs. The outer edge of the knot garden was a simple square shape. Inside the square was marked out into quarters, allowing the gardeners to create intricate geometric and symmetrical patterns, sometimes copied from embroidery. The hedges had to be carefully clipped to keep their shape, especially as knot gardens were designed to be viewed from above, either from an upstairs window or a special viewing point called a 'mount'.



An illustration of a knot garden from Thomas Hill's 'The Gardener's Labyrinth', 1577
Held in the Collections of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

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History

Thomas Hill was the first Tudor gardener to publish patterns for knot gardens. His first gardening book published in 1558 offered only one design, but a later book from 1577 called 'The Gardener's Labyrinth' contained twelve new designs for knot gardens.

There are still knot gardens to be found at various sites across the country, including at Shakespeare's New Place in Stratford-upon-Avon.



Activity

In Shakespeare's play 'Twelfth Night', Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew and Maria hide themselves whilst they listen to Malvolio read the letter they sent him.

Design your own garden and remember to include some good hiding places.

Draw Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew and Maria hiding in the garden and include some speech bubbles showing what they are saying to each other.



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