London Parks & Gardens
*Protecting our Green Capital*

# SHARING Humphry Repton
# Landscape gardener 1752-1818

**HUMPHRY REPTON** produced garden designs for many wealthy house owners of both large country estates and more modest villas in towns and cities. He designed improvement schemes for more than 400 properties, of which almost 60 were in London. Many of his landscapes are still available for us to enjoy today, such as Kenwood.

## The Flower Garden

Humphry Repton led a revival in flower gardens, proposing ornamental flower beds with groups of herbaceous plants, bulbs and flowering shrubs, rose gardens, and terraces around homes.

Flowers were highly valued for their beauty and there were many flower gardens in England in the 17th century. Colourful and rare flowers were studied and arranged in beds for individual show, and visitors were invited to admire them. However these flower gardens disappeared from the larger estates during the 18th century when the new Landscape style of 'Capability' Brown introduced smooth green lawns sweeping right up to the walls of the house. This approach is favoured today for its ability to support biodiversity.

The return of the colourful flower garden in full view of the house had gained momentum by the 1800s thanks to Repton. The plants were grouped in masses of a single type rather than single specimens, for ornamental effect and impact. Repton was not a 'plantsman', and his designs did not specify which flowers or shrubs were to be planted. However the ornamental hardy plants described here were all readily available in England during Repton's time.


## The Kitchen Garden

Humphry Repton saw 'an intimate connection between the kitchen and the garden for its produce, and between the stables and the garden for its manure'.

The walled kitchen garden was traditionally attached or close to the house which it served. However the new landscape style of 'Capability' Brown relocated these walled gardens out of sight, screened behind shrubberies and trees.

Repton agreed the kitchen garden should be out of sight of the house, but criticised Brown for placing it *too* far away from the house as he thought tit should be easily reached.

The newly relocated walled kitchen gardens were well equipped with heated walls, mushroom houses, gardeners' huts, root stores and cold frames, and became a status symbol amongst the larger and wealthier estates.

## EXOTIC BULBS

Travellers to Turkey, Syria, Iran and the shores of the eastern Mediterranean (known as the Levant) in the 16th century brought back news of Persian-inspired gardens filled with more beautiful flowers than any found in Europe. Bulbs and seeds could easily be transported and a busy export trade between Constantinople (now Istanbul) and Europe soon developed. An estimated 70% of the plants in our gardens today are not native to the UK.


## TULIPS

The vibrant colours of the tulip, *Tulipa,* with one vivid colour breaking into another, are now known to be due to a virus.

Such astonishing beauty led to fantastic sums of money being exchanged for a single tulip bulb in Holland in the 1630s, and laid the foundations of today's Dutch tulip industry.

Legend has it an ambassador stationed in Turkey came across exotic tulips, hyacinths, and narcissi blooming in the wild. He pointed enquiringly at a single tulip worn as decoration in the turban of a Turkish farmer, who replied 'tulipand'.

The ambassador recorded the name, only to discover later it was the Turkish name for turban. So 'tulip' was derived from the turban, instead of the Turkish name for tulip which is 'lâle'.



## CROWN IMPERIAL FRITILLARIA

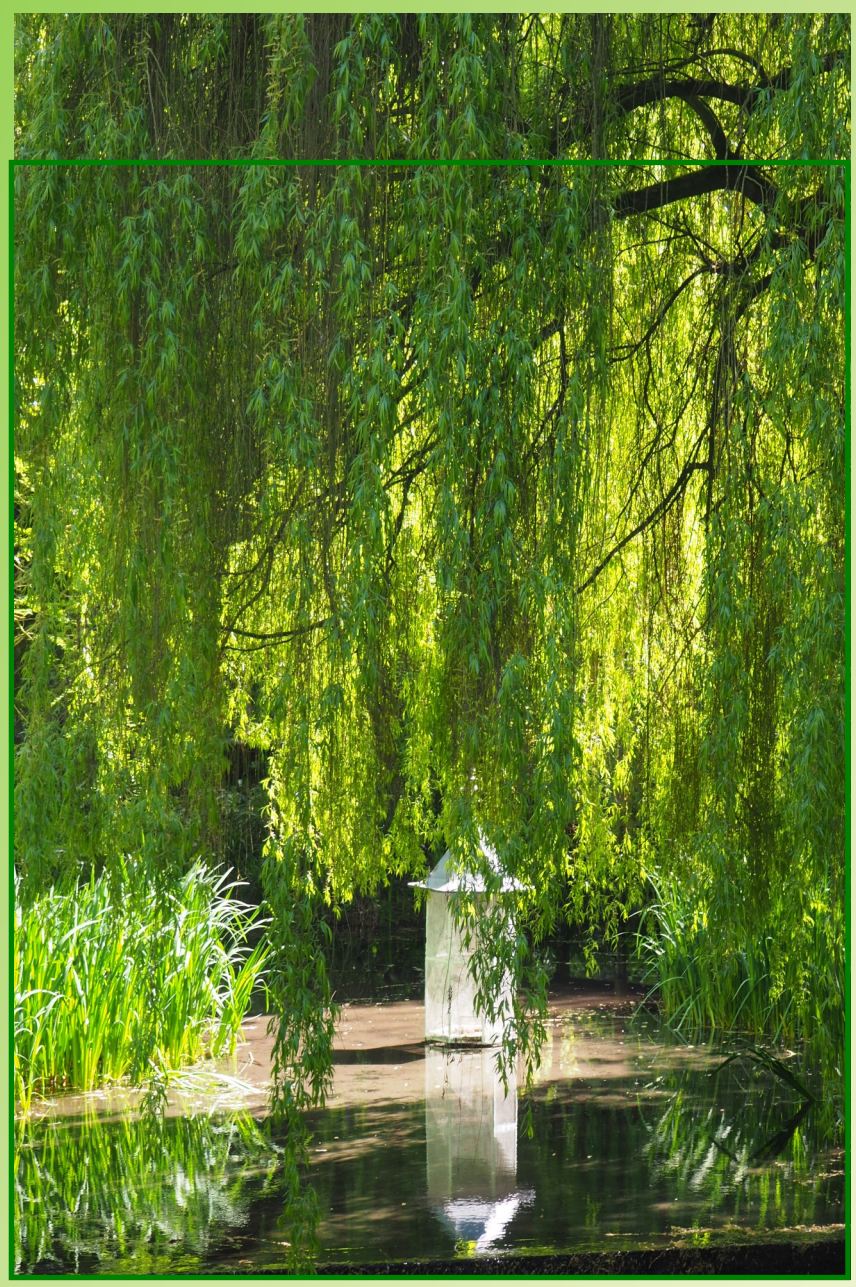
By the early 17th century, Crown Imperials (*Fritillaria imperialis*) had become very popular and were given pride of place in many flower gardens.

You will see them portrayed in numerous paintings and decorative tiles from that period. The species is native to mountainous regions across Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and the Himalayan foothills.

The Crown Imperial is so distinctive it became the stuff of myths and legends.

Only a few species carry their flowers in this way - with the florets drooping gracefully downwards.

One popular legend relates it is the only flower which did not bow its head on the passing of Jesus on the way to his crucifixion but it now bows forever, weeping eternal tears.



## Weeping Willow

These iconic trees, *Salix babylonica*, originate in north China. Specimens were transported west along the Silk Road into Persia, Asia Minor, Turkey and into Europe.

Beautiful to see and useful too. Its wood is lightweight, easy to work and makes good charcoal. The branches can be woven into baskets and the bark has well known medicinal properties as a painkiller and antiseptic.

One of the first trees to show leaves in spring, the weeping willow is valued as a source of early pollen for bees.

The tree is a symbol of sorrow and is often planted in cemeteries.

The weeping willow was well-known in Repton's time. They were imported into Britain by a trader from Aleppo (at that time part of the Ottoman Empire) . Repton planted a specimen in his garden near London in the early 1700s.

By 1730, London nurserymen were offering specimens in their catalogues.


## Jasmine

Jasminum officinale, now widely cultivated, was introduced into Britain from central Asia in the mid 1500s.

White jasmine, *Jasminum officinale*, is native to a wide area from the Caucasus, northern Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Himalayas and western China. Its name, jasmine, derives from the Persian and Arabic names of the plant.

Damascus is known as the City of Jasmine.

The oil from the flowers is prized for its rich honey-like scent and is called the King of Oils.

A symbol of grace, elegance and amiability, jasmine is also valued for its highly scented flowers which not only fill the garden with fragrance but are used for perfumes.

There are a number of related shrubby varieties but white jasmine, a vigorous climber with white, star-shaped flowers is the most common.

Repton recommended growing jasmine on a wall 'to form a luxuriant decoration to a garden in summer'.

## Bugloss

Bugloss, *Anchusa azurea,* was found in western Asia, the Middle East and the Maghreb, as well as in southern Europe. It was cultivated by Philip Miller, head gardener at Chelsea Physic Garden from 1722-1770, and used in floral displays in Repton's time.

Its famously intense, deep, rich blue flowers are rarely found in other flowers or indeed in nature.

A favourite of bees, butterflies and other pollinators, bugloss is edible so makes an attractive addition to salads.

Numerous cultivars have been selected for garden use, of which 'Loddon Royalist' has gained the Royal Horticultural Society's Award of Garden Merit.

## Roses

The rose needs no introduction.

The birthplace of the cultivated rose was probably in Persia about 4000 years ago.

It was almost certainly exported into Europe in the form of precious rosewater before it came as a flower.

By the 1500s, the rose was well-established in European gardens. The damask rose, *Rosa damascena*, was particularly admired as it was highly scented and its petals could be used for their fragrance as well as for flavourings in cookery, primarily in desserts, sweets and jams. You can even find a recipe for rose petal sandwiches!

There are about 300 known species of rose. Fossil evidence shows they have existed for about 35 million years.

The oldest known living bush can be found on the wall of Hildesheim Cathedral in Germany and is estimated to be more than a thousand years old.

The rose symbolises love and romance. Red roses signify love, yellow friendship and white peace.

In 1998, a miniature rose named *Overnight Scentsation* was launched into space for a study on the impact of microgravity on scent and growth in plants.

Roses were often used for herbal remedies. Even in the late 1500s there were numerous recipes using roses for ointments, oils and syrups to help treat all sorts of illnesses.

Repton favoured rose gardens and was influential in making them popular in British gardens.

He designed large rose gardens for Woburn Abbey (1805) and Ashridge (1813), both of which have been restored and can still be seen today.

In the capital, Queen Mary’s Gardens in Regent’s Park is a popular destination for rose lovers.

**The Aubergine**

The Aubergine (*Solanum melongena*), also known as brinjal or eggplant, has long been cultivated in southern Asia.

Sanskrit documents record it used in food and medicine in India more that 2000 years ago.

There are numerous Arabic, North African and Ethiopian names for the aubergine. It may have been brought to Spain by the Arabs as they moved through North Africa in the 9th century.

It was not known in England until much later.  At first, the strange looking plant with its spiny stem and white to black-violet egg-shaped fruits was not trusted, and it was called “*mala insana*” in Latin meaning “apple of craziness” suggesting anyone who ate it would go mad.

Cultivating aubergines became popular in England where they were said to require a '*strong hot bed to bring them to perfection*'. These 'hot beds' were a common feature of the walled kitchen garden. They were often conveniently close to the stables, and filled with fermenting manure and a deep mulch of tanner's bark (the bark of the oak tree used in the preparation of leather). This made them warm enough to grow a variety of tender plants including pineapples, melons and cucumbers.

Aubergines feature in Bengali poetry:

'the deep purple aubergine symbolises the summer sky at the moment shortly after the sunset when night comes.

The white aubergine symbolises in contrast the hazy morning sky just before the summer sun'.

**Quince**

The wonderful golden fruits of the quince, *Cydonia*, are the 'golden apples' of mythology, and have featured in Persian cooking for at least 2500 years, in both meat and sweet dishes.

They are thought to have originated in the foothills of the Caucasus mountains, stretching east from Iran, but have long been naturalised in southern Europe.

Quince grow successfully in England's cool, damp climate.

Whilst the tenderest fruits were planted against south-facing walls of kitchen gardens, quinces thrive on the less sheltered walls.

Harvested early before the fruit is fully ripe, they were historically stored in drawers with ladies underwear, imparting their heavenly scent to the clothing.

Today, stored in cool dark conditions, their scent still has the power to impress as they ripen.

Quince were popular throughout the 17th and 18th centuries.

English cookery books gave recipes for quince pies and preserves more commonly than recipes for apples.

However, by the 20th century, apples and pears had pushed the quince out of both kitchen and orchard in England.

Ripe quince fruits are hard, tart, and astringent, making them a challenging ingredient for many cooks.

They can be eaten raw but the slow application of heat releases their perfume, turns the flesh a soft, pinky-red adding a new dimension to a crumble pie instead of using apples.

They are also commonly processed into jam, alcoholic drinks and of course quince cheese or membrillo to accompany cheese.

**Sweet Chestnut**

The sweet chestnut, *Castanea sativa*, is named after the old town of Castanea in Thessaly, Greece where these majestic trees still grow in abundance.

Brought to Greece from the ancient city of Sardis (Sart) in Turkey and introduced into Britain by the Romans, sweet chestnuts can still be found wild in southern Europe, North Africa, and Asia Minor.

They have provided a staple food for millions of years; the roasted nuts are eaten whole or ground into a sweet flour for baking. The chestnuts in Britain are usually imported as, unfortunately, they do not ripen well in this climate. The wood is also highly regarded for its resistance to rot.

The mature tree is magnificent making it a 'must have' in gardens for its ornamental impact.

Repton preferred the tree to firs or spruce, recording ‘let the staple of our plantations be oak and Spanish chestnut.’ Small surprise his design for Kenwood included several majestic specimens.

**Wild Strawberry**

The wild strawberry, *Fragaria vesca*, known since the Stone Age, was first cultivated in ancient Persia and then travelled both east and west along the Silk Road.

The tiny fruits of the wild cultivar can be found all over the Northern Hemisphere. By the1300s it was cultivated in Europe and appeared in paintings.

Today, cultivated strawberries are grown almost year round in polytunnels in the UK and Europe, prized for their fragrance and delicate flavour.

In medieval England, fresh strawberries were sold in the street from barrows.

It is said the dish of strawberries and cream, now a famous part of the annual Wimbledon tennis experience, was created for Henry VIII in the early 1500s.

Once widespread, wild strawberries are categorised as near threatened in England due to the decline of wildflower meadows and woodland fringes.

Wild strawberries were often used to make lotions and creams to whiten skin and remove freckles.

Humphry Repton described in detail how to make a raised strawberry bed in J. C. Loudon's publication Repton's Landscape Gardening and Landscape Architecture.


[Fig. 234. A raised ridge for strawberries.]

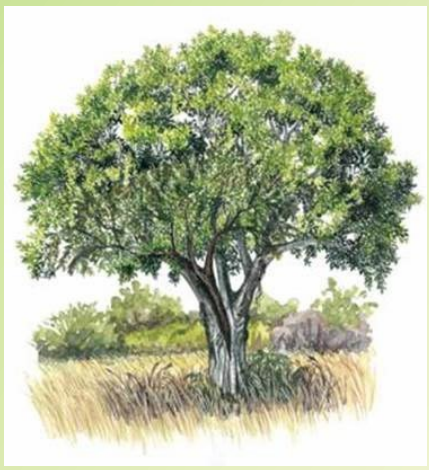
## Fig Tree

The common fig, *Ficus carica*, native to Persia, Asia Minor and Syria, has been cultivated since ancient times and is now grown widely throughout the world.


Repton would certainly have been familiar with the fig tree.

The plant may have been introduced into England by the Romans but was known to have been brought from Italy in the 1500s.

At that time some trees were planted in Lambeth Palace gardens in London where they, or their descendants, are still growing.



The fig has always been an important source of food; the Romans even used it to fatten their geese.

In England, figs were imported long before the tree was grown here; there are old recipes from the 1300s which include figs.

Archaeologists found evidence of domesticated figs in the Jordan Valley dating back to 9,400 BCE. That's older than the first known grain crops.

## Black Mulberry

Black mulberry, *Morus nigra,* has long been cultivated for its edible fruit. It is thought to have originated in the mountainous areas of Mesopotamia and Persia.

Widespread throughout Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, India, Pakistan, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Turkey, it is known as 'toot' or 'shahtoot', or, in Arabic, 'shajarat tukki'. Jams, sweets and sherbets are often made from the fruit.

Mulberry trees have thrived in Britain since Roman times, when the leaves were used to treat diseases of the mouth and sore throats.

By Tudor times they were common in royal gardens; Buckingham Palace gardens now hosts the National Mulberry Collection.

In the 17th century, thousands of black mulberry trees were imported ostensibly to establish a silk making industry in England - mulberries being the sole food of silkworms. Myth has it the wrong sort of mulberry was imported but at the time our climate in the UK was not suitable. It has however left a legacy of wonderful old mulberry trees in many country house gardens. Some mulberries have been known to live as long as 600 years.

Humphry Repton advised on the landscaping of the pleasure grounds at Golders Hill, and may have recommended the planting of a black mulberry which can be seen today lying semi-prostrate at the entrance gates of what is now Golders Hill Park. One of an estimated 1200 surviving mulberries in London of that period.