

# A Magician With Tender Plants

Carolyn Keep

Between 1889 and his death in 1915, Samuel Wyndham Fitzherbert wrote prolifically about an impressive range of plants and their cultivation. Eden Phillpotts referred to his friend in *My Shrubs* as one who had succeeded with various tender plants such as *Bowkeria gerardiana* from South Africa which was described and illustrated.

This rare and beautiful shrub is recommended to all who dwell in the south and can give it wall space.

Indeed, Mr. Wyndham Fitzherbert, who probably possesses the finest specimen in England, will show it to you seven feet high upon a southern slope far from all shelter. But he is a magician, and we common men can only admire without seeking to emulate his feats of horticulture.<sup>1</sup>

In his companion volume, *My Garden*, Phillpotts' chapter on tender bulbs included an accolade to Fitzherbert for cultivating *Bessera* (probably *Bessera elegans*, Coral Drops) successfully in the open air.<sup>2</sup> In 1934, Phillpotts wrote a series of articles in a monthly magazine also called *My Garden* and Fitzherbert was again mentioned, as his 'late friend' with a plot on the banks of the Dart.<sup>3</sup>

Fitzherbert was born in 1854 at Marston Magna, Somerset, where his father was the Vicar. He spent four years at Sherborne School (1864–8), just across the county boundary in Dorset, but in 1871 he was one of a group of boys who were living and studying with the curate of St Mark's, Torquay.<sup>4</sup> He then spent two terms at Clifton College, Bristol, before entering Trinity Hall, Cambridge, in 1874. He married Agnes Sarah Penny in July 1882, while resident at Radipole, Weymouth. According to the 1891 census, he was living 'on own means' at Penn House, 21 Brunswick Terrace, Weymouth, with his wife, their daughter Dorothy aged 7, son Herbert aged 5, a cook, a nurse and a housemaid. By 1910 they were at Morton House, Weymouth.<sup>5</sup> Fitzherbert died at the Royal Dorset Yacht Club, Weymouth, in 1915, leaving his estate totalling £13,175 to his widow.<sup>6</sup> Agnes died at Bournemouth in June 1943.



*Bowkeria gerardiana*  
Eden Phillpotts, 1915

Clearly Fitzherbert, a keen yachtsman, maintained strong links with Weymouth. However in 1883 he was recorded as residing at Rookville, Dartmouth, where his daughter was born, although Dorothy was baptized at Holy Trinity, Weymouth.<sup>7</sup> His son was born at Kingswear in 1885. This seems to have influenced Herbert's choice of career, as he entered the Royal Navy aged 15 on

HMS Britannia, then a training ship moored on the Dart, and rose to the rank of Admiral. In 1889 the family was living at 'The Cottage, Kingswear' and at 'The Cot' in 1890.<sup>8</sup> 'The Cottage' was shown on the 1904 OS map occupying a plot between the ferry and the Royal Dart Yacht Club. The clubhouse was built in 1881 and comparisons between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> OS maps suggest that 'The Cottage' was built around the same time. The first article by Fitzherbert published in *The Garden* was entitled 'Fine-foliaged Plants at The Cottage, Kingswear' and he commented that the planting was four years old in 1889:

Subtropical gardening can probably be pursued under no more favourable circumstances on the mainland of England than on the north-eastern bank of the estuary of the Dart, the mild South Devon climate being here supplemented by a maximum of sunlight and an entire immunity from the evil influences of the north and east winds.<sup>9</sup>



*Garden of The Cottage, Kingswear, 28 December 1889*  
Courtesy of RHS Lindley Library

Unfortunately, the rented eight-roomed house was totally destroyed in 1890 as a result of a fire in Fitzherbert's darkroom around midnight while he was in the garden watering some plants. Almost all his 'curios' were lost; mainly souvenirs of his visits to South Africa.<sup>10</sup> The building now on the site is called 'Longford House'. Its style of red-tile hanging and steep gables fits the end of the nineteenth century.

In 1893 and 1897, he was resident at 'Lanscombe, Cockington', near to Torquay and the coast but not on the Dart. He was certainly at Lanscombe by 1892, as he recorded planting fruit trees in that year.<sup>11</sup> This house and garden are situated on the narrow road leading from Torquay to Cockington and retain many of the features described by Fitzherbert. Known as Lanscombe House Hotel, it is currently run as luxury bed and breakfast accommodation. The entrance court is dominated by a large *Magnolia grandiflora*, which has been cut or died back at intervals. An Exmouth magnolia in the same position produced over 300 blossoms in 1895 and Fitzherbert had been 'told by a resident seventy years of age that it was a big tree when he was a little boy'.<sup>12</sup> The sheltered south-facing rear garden has a lawn running parallel with the boundary wall to a stream and boggy pond area. Fitzherbert described in great detail the creation of 'a garden streamlet ... of under 50 yards' and the planting, which fits the Lanscombe site.<sup>13</sup>



*Longford House,  
Kingswear  
Carolyn Keep,  
2013*

To the west there is a series of terraces, now grassed over but likely to have been where Fitzherbert would have grown some of his tender plants. Others would have been on the many stone walls or in the greenhouse, which was shown on the 2<sup>nd</sup> OS map of 1906 on the road boundary wall and is still visible today. The terraces curve gently to the west and lead to a steep path, which curves back into a wild garden, now densely shaded by mature trees and shrubs. Snowdrops still bloom there and are probably descended from those that Fitzherbert recorded as ‘long naturalised in their present location’.<sup>14</sup> The woodland path opens out onto a grassy plateau above the house. This seems the most likely site for Fitzherbert’s fruit and vegetables, which are occasionally mentioned in his articles. The stream is now fenced off but there seems to have been direct access across it into a green



*A garden streamlet, 7 December 1895  
Courtesy of RHS Lindley Library*

lane leading to Cockington Court. This is a large estate, now managed by Torbay Council as a Country Park. A path around the three lakes in Hellinghay Plantation started almost opposite Fitzherbert’s stream crossing. While living at Cockington, Fitzherbert became Secretary to the Torquay Horticultural Society and in January 1895 was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Horticultural Society.<sup>15</sup>

From January 1894 to November 1899, Fitzherbert sent a monthly series of letters or articles to *The Garden*. These began with a detailed weather report and led on to a largely alphabetical commentary on the flowers to be seen in that month. Fitzherbert certainly displayed extensive knowledge of a wide range of ornamental gardening in his writing, some of which came from observation of other gardens rather than direct experience in his own. ‘A span-roofed peach house of over 200 feet in length’ was certainly not his but was not identified either.<sup>16</sup> *Acacia dealbata* was mentioned in ‘a sheltered garden overlooking the mouth of the river Dart’, while a eucalyptus ‘just outside the harbour mouth only a few feet above water level and 100 yards from the railway station’, was near or in his former garden at ‘The Cottage’.<sup>17</sup> Tuberoses which had been planted in the open border flowered at Kingswear ‘in a garden overlooking the entrance to the river Dart’, so Fitzherbert may have had access to another riverside property, such as ‘Butt’s Hill’.<sup>18</sup>



*Lanscombe House, Cockington  
Carolyn Keep 2013*

Other frequently quoted sites were Greenway and Coombefishacre House (now Combe Fishacre). Greenway is a couple of miles inland from Kingswear on the Dart. It was then owned by Thomas Bedford Bolitho, whose other residence was Trewidden, Cornwall, and who shared Fitzherbert’s interest in tender plants. Greenway was subsequently owned by the author, Agatha Christie, and is now in the care of the National Trust. Fitzherbert gave an account of the planting there in 1901.<sup>19</sup> Combe Fishacre, north-east of Totnes, was the home of T.H. Archer-Hind, who specialized in hellebores. *The Garden* published a tribute to him in April 1900 and Fitzherbert followed this in June with a description of the garden, concentrating on the bulbs in flower. Fitzherbert knew him well enough to consult Archer-Hind’s library during a dispute over the colour of

*Cypella herberti*.<sup>20</sup> By 1899 there was a mention of Archer-Hind's garden in most of Fitzherbert's monthly articles.

Cultural information was rarely included but was detailed and prescriptive when he did so. 'How to prepare cyclamens to be fit for showing in the first week of November' was a typical example and Fitzherbert displayed one dozen pots of white cyclamen 'of excellent quality' at the Torquay Chrysanthemum Show of 1894.<sup>21</sup> Responding to a request for a remedy for hollyhock disease allowed him to make the rare acknowledgement of a mistake. Syringing with potassium cyanide rather than potassium sulphide could have been a lethal error! Advice on using starworts (*Aster* sp.) for indoor decoration included a description of how the flowers wilted when he had not split the stem into four sections with a sharp knife.<sup>22</sup> A rare culinary comment was on Jerusalem artichokes: he recommended that they should be washed and dried but not peeled, then fried in boiling fat in a whitebait basket.<sup>23</sup>



*Cordyline banksii* in Dr Hamilton Ramsay's Garden, Torquay, 23 February 1907  
Courtesy of Biodiversity Heritage Library

Fitzherbert readily seized an opportunity to inform or respond to others in the pages of the horticultural press. As early as 1894, he commented on 'Rose Rêve d'Or' that 'my experience with this Rose is diametrically opposed to that of 'Dorset''. While agreeing that white honesty was 'a most valuable plant in the wild garden', he considered that 'the sickly purple-magenta of the type' was offensive and should never be allowed in the garden. He joined in a discussion on the naming of bamboos, 'as I consider it to be eminently desirable that growers should know the correct name of the plants they cultivate'. In November 1900, he achieved four comments on one page of *The Garden* on typically diverse subjects: azaleas attacked by rabbits at Whiteway, Devon; *Xanthoceras sorbifolia* flourishing in the south-west; his preference for the flavour of the wineberry to that of the raspberry; agreeing with Mr. S. Arnott that there seemed to be two varieties of *Tropaeolum tuberosum*.<sup>24</sup>

Fitzherbert appreciated cottage gardens and he deplored the replacement of thatch by tiles. His photograph of a Devonshire thatched cottage was included in several editions of *The English Flower Garden* but not always acknowledged.<sup>25</sup> His descriptions of countryside or garden scenes were particularly effusive and were usually found at the opening or conclusion of an article:

In the hedges, white Violets in thousands have been making the lanes odorous, and before the month [March] drew to an end, in a sheltered corner of the

Larch copse, where the "rosy plumelets" were largest and brightest, hibernating (sic) butterflies awoke from their winter's sleep and fluttered down the sunny glade, which the Oxalis had already etherealised with its fragile chalices.<sup>26</sup>

Sites mentioned by Fitzherbert where sub-tropical plants flourished included *Cordyline indivisa* at Tresco Abbey, *Solanum Wendlandii* in the garden of the late Rev. H. Ewbank at Ryde, Isle of Wight, and *Berberis nepalensis* at Abbotsbury Castle, Dorset.<sup>27</sup> A catalogue in 1899 listed 5,000 different plants at Abbotsbury and there is still an exceptional collection on the site.<sup>28</sup> In 1894 Fitzherbert reported that 'the Orange and Lemon trees on the walls, at Salcombe and at Coombe Royal [near Kingsbridge], from which the coverings had already been removed, seemed no worse for the severe frost of January'.<sup>29</sup>

References to plants in gardens further afield confirm that Fitzherbert travelled quite widely. *Solanum jasminoides* flowers 'do not reach the size of some I came across at Arosa Bay, on the coast of Spain, which were larger than a shilling'. A vermilion variety of mesembryanthemum, which he had 'procured at the Cape', persistently refused to flower in Fitzherbert's damp and heavy soil but he was able to report success with cuttings elsewhere. An article on freesias referred to some he had seen in the Bermudas and 'when I was last in South Africa'. The white variety of *Iris stylosa* was first seen by Fitzherbert in Algeria. 'There are few more beautiful sights than a Banana garden in a quiet valley in some West Indian isle.' He first saw the Macartney rose at Funchal, Madeira in 1888.<sup>30</sup>

From February to early May 1897, Fitzherbert did not send reports from South Devon to *The Garden*. Instead he wrote about February in north-west Spain. The eastern sea-board was his next subject, including the flower market in Barcelona. This was followed by 'a fortnight's cruise in the Mediterranean', returning to experience mid-April at Gibraltar and a day in Majorca. This voyage was with 'the Channel Squadron', which then sailed on to Vigo and Fitzherbert described 'The break of May in north-west Spain'. He returned home in time to supply news of the plants in June from South Devon. In the following February there were flowers on *Narcissus cyclamineus* that he had brought back from Spain, as well as other Spanish narcissi from a trip four years before. He visited Tresco in 1902, when 'the Reserve Squadron ... included the Isles of Scilly in the programme of their spring cruise' and Fitzherbert was 'a guest on board one of the battleships'.<sup>31</sup>

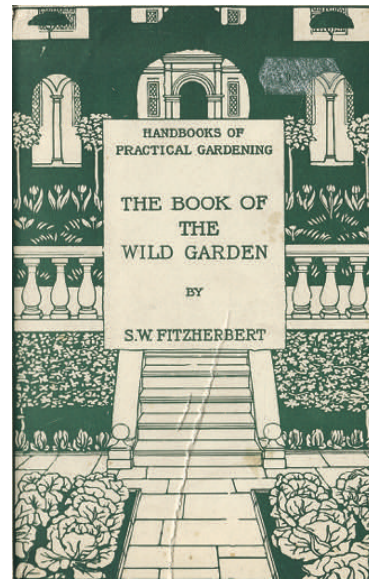
There was a significant change in the pattern of Fitzherbert's writing in 1900–1. *The Garden* published only four articles by him in those two years. This might have been due to the change of editor, as William Robinson had handed over to Gertrude Jekyll and E.T. Cook jointly, and Fitzherbert's monthly articles had become very repetitive. In 1900 Fitzherbert contributed an article to *The Century Book of Gardening* on 'Mixed Borders and Rock Gardens'.<sup>32</sup> The opening section echoed closely Miss Jekyll's ideas on the use of drifts and colour planning and continued with his own practical advice. There had also been a change in the circumstances of the Fitzherberts. The 1901 census recorded Samuel and Agnes back at Kingswear as boarders with a manager in the coal trade at 'The Chestnuts'. By

1902 they had their own home in Kingswear at 'Glendene' and continued to be recorded there in 1906 and 1910.<sup>33</sup> Fitzherbert acted as a judge at various flower shows and continued to travel, reporting six weeks absence from home in July 1906.<sup>34</sup>

Instead of *The Garden*, Fitzherbert turned to the *Gardeners' Chronicle* in 1900, which published some of his 'garden notes' and a series of descriptions of Cornish and Devon gardens.<sup>35</sup> When Cook became the sole editor of *The Garden* in 1902, Fitzherbert returned as a contributor with more articles on Cornish gardens, while continuing to write for the *Gardeners' Chronicle*. From August 1902 shorter pieces on specific plants or problems became the norm. His despair at attacks from woodlice finds sympathy from modern gardeners but not his remedies: arsenic with boiled potato or honey, phosphorus paste on bread and butter, or powdered borax were not effective!<sup>36</sup> A magnificent specimen of *Solanum jasminoides* at Blackpool, Devon, was illustrated and could be viewed 'on the coach drive from Dartmouth to Kingsbridge'.<sup>37</sup> A collection of thirty-six items, gathered from his open garden at Christmas in 1903, were sent to 'The Editor's Table' by Fitzherbert, including *Clianthus puniceus*. The red form of this had 'covered over a 100m square feet of wall' by 1905 and he grew the rarer white form with the red as 'a pretty contrast'.<sup>38</sup> The plant collection of Dr. Hamilton Ramsay at Torquay was quoted in a discussion on cordylines, which continued at intervals.<sup>39</sup>

Fitzherbert was among others to whom grateful thanks were tendered by Cook in his '*Trees and Shrubs for English Gardens*'. He had supplied a separate section for 'the sea-coast in the west of England and other mild districts'. Many of his favoured sites and plants were included, such as a *Diospyros kaki* (persimmon) which ripened fruit in 1890 at Bishopsteignton, Devon.<sup>40</sup> Cook was again 'much indebted' to Fitzherbert for the chapter on 'Winter in the Garden' in his *Gardens of England*, which also referred frequently to what could be grown in Devon and Cornwall.<sup>41</sup> *A Concise Handbook of Climbers, Twiners and Wall Shrubs* by H. P. Fitzgerald contained a contribution by Fitzherbert on Cornwall and Devonshire.<sup>42</sup>

Certain subjects roused Fitzherbert's competitive spirit. He had admired *Iris tingitana* (the Tangier iris) in flower in a Penzance garden, planted in a sheltered site where the soil had been enriched. Encouraged by E. H. Jenkins, Fitzherbert was able to flower the ones he had been given from Penzance in 1903, growing in a sheltered spot 'only about 50 feet above the salt water at the mouth of the Dart'. Archer-Hind had also found it a difficult subject and Mr. Elwes 'expressed the opinion that in this country they [rare foreign plants] required rich soil to make up for the change in temperature'. In 1910 Fitzherbert triumphantly published an illustration of his 'colony growing just above salt water at the mouth of the River Dart, far distant from any wall. There are thirty-five flower heads ... probably a record for England and immeasurably superior to the Cornish one illustrated seven years ago'.<sup>43</sup> Since Fitzherbert was living at 'Glendene' during this period, the description may give an indication of the site of this garden and it also fits with Phillpotts' comment in 1934. There was a mention of 'a garden I have, higher up the hill', which had been frosted.<sup>44</sup> *Myosotidium nobile* (the New Zealand Forget-me-not) provoked a similar competitive



Cover of Fitzherbert's book 1923 edition

response.<sup>45</sup> Mr. T. B. Field was 'apparently entirely ignorant of the climatic conditions which prevail in South Devon and Cornwall, which render the culture in the open air of South African bulbs... possible and satisfactory in those localities'.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand Fitzherbert had to apologize that he had not extended his consideration of sites for sub-tropical planting to include Irish ones. This was reinforced by an editorial in the *Gardeners' Chronicle*, which pointed out that 'parts of Devonshire and Cornwall

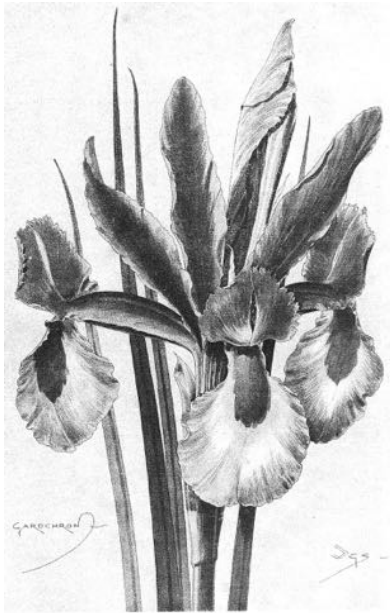
are as bleak and unfavourable for garden experiments as any places further north', before leading into one of Fitzherbert's pieces in praise of 'Summer Flowers in the South-west'.<sup>47</sup>

The temporary reduction in Fitzherbert's journal contributions might have been due to concentrating on his only published book. *The Book of the Wild Garden* appeared in 1903 and was illustrated with his own photographs. The book was reprinted in 1923 for the series 'Handbooks of Practical Gardening'. Most chapters opened with general comments on a type or size of plant but this was always followed by paragraphs on specific species, arranged alphabetically as in his articles. According to the review in the *Gardeners' Chronicle*, the wild garden 'means one in which plants are permitted to adapt themselves to their surroundings in the best manner possible'.<sup>48</sup> *The Garden* was more effusive about this book by 'a valued contributor' and quoted from his advice on wall gardens.<sup>49</sup> There are similarities to William Robinson's 1870 volume on the same subject but with many specific references to the south-west. Fitzherbert stuck firmly to the title but could not resist a nod to his main interest:

In this list only the names of practically hardy subjects have been given, numbers of charming flowering shrubs and trees that can be successfully naturalized in Cornwall and South Devon, but are too tender for more northern districts, have been intentionally omitted.<sup>50</sup>

The wild garden was also the subject for his articles in the *Gardeners' Magazine* during 1908 but there was another reduction in their number during 1907 and 1908. Margaret Waterfield was an artist specializing in impressionistic but accurate watercolours of gardens and groupings of hardy plants. One of her beautiful illustrated books published in 1907 contained an article by Fitzherbert.

Cornish gardens have a character of their own ... to the majority they are a sealed book ... Many interested in gardening read with delight accounts of sub-tropical plants growing in their native lands ... quite ignorant of the fact that by taking a six hours journey from Paddington they might inspect the same in Cornwall.



*Iris tingitana*,  
13 February 1915  
Courtesy of Biodiversity  
Heritage Library

Waterfield had taken his advice, as she included illustrations from Carclew and Killew.<sup>51</sup>

By 1910 Fitzherbert's number of journal publications had built up again but nearly all were for the *Gardeners' Chronicle* and had reverted to his earlier style of reports from

the south-west. From then on there were fewer articles each year. By 1914 the couple were living at 'Norbury', Kingswear, and this move might have cut him off from his established garden of rarities.<sup>52</sup> He was still boasting about *Iris tingitana* and *The Garden* did publish one final piece on 'Some Beautiful Chilian (sic) Plants' after his death.<sup>53</sup>

Sale catalogues for properties in Kingswear emphasised the effects of the mild climate. One for 'Butt's Hill' in 1910 boasted of a verandah with 'a rare specimen of the Indian rose, *Rosa lavigata*' (sic). A cutting of this rose from Greenway had covered 'a large portion of a house at the mouth of the River Dart', according to Fitzherbert, and so might well have referred to 'Butt's Hill'.<sup>54</sup> Terraces and a second pleasure garden sloped to the edge of the Dart and had 'a splendid collection of flowering trees and shrubs, many of which are of a quite subtropical nature and have been collected from South Africa, China, and Japan.'<sup>55</sup> 'Brookhill' was the next property to the south-east, where 'the olive tree and the orange tree thrive out of doors, as standard trees, unprotected through the winter'.<sup>56</sup> In 1922 'The Grange' was advertised with 'a series of seven terraces planted with rare and semi-tropical trees, shrubs and plants (which flourish without winter protection) and provide a succession of blossom throughout the year'.<sup>57</sup>

Clearly there was local competition for Fitzherbert in the culture of tender plants. However, his prolific writings ensured that he reached a wide audience with his own achievements, as well as his comments on those of others. He was an effective advocate for the advantages of the climate in South Devon, which allowed adventurous planting of subtropical species at the limits of their survival.<sup>58</sup>

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56. Internet article on Brookhill by Michael Stevens, September 2010, quoting the *Dartmouth Chronicle* in 1871.
57. DHC 547B/2172, 2108.
58. These included at least 200 contributions to *The Garden*, the *Gardeners' Chronicle*, the *Gardeners' Magazine* and *Gardening Illustrated*. He had entries in the *Kew Bulletin* (HMSO) e.g. '*Colchicum speciosum maximum*' (1903), p. 83 and *Flora and Sylva* e.g. 'Magnolias and choice shrubs for the house', (1903), p. 267.