

From Gentlewoman Amateur to Garden Writer

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This article is based on a longer paper delivered as part of the Devon Gardens Trust Conference on *Women in the Garden* at the University of Exeter on 30 October 2010.

Diaries and letters tell us that women wrote about their gardens long before any male publisher thought that they had a contribution to make. An early nineteenth century example of garden writing by a woman in Britain is contained in the five volumes of sketches of village life by Miss Mitford, which were published between 1824 and 1832. She also wrote plays, novels and poetry as she struggled to make a living for herself and her father. He had wasted two fortunes but she never publicly criticised him.¹ Jane Webb caught the attention of her much older future husband when he reviewed her futuristic novel, *The Mummy*, in 1830. Injuries to both arms meant that John Claudius Loudon had difficulty writing down his books and articles, so she became his amanuensis. Her interest in plants and gardens was developed through this collaboration and after his death she published a series of gardening books for 'Ladies' as Mrs. Loudon; the first names of women authors were rarely used in the nineteenth century and even later.² (figure 1) Her last volume was *My Own Garden* (1855) for children and she edited a magazine called *The Ladies' Companion at Home and Abroad*. This title indicates a major market which publishers were keen to exploit, namely the wives of colonial officers and soldiers trying to direct their servants to create English style gardens in alien climates. In contrast, Louisa Johnson wrote *Every Lady her own Flower Gardener* (1839) for 'the industrious and economical'. Her *Family Cookery* addressed the same readers; a combination of 'suitable' topics for a woman writer which persisted.

An early book by a woman on a single garden topic was written by Elizabeth Kent, sister-in-law of the poet Leigh Hunt. Published anonymously in 1823 and entitled *Flora*



Figure 2. *Ferny Combes* plate VII – 1. *Polypodium Dryopteris* 2. *P. Phegopteris* (Courtesy of Devon and Exeter Institution)

Domestica, it was 'a manual on potted plants for the smaller garden: a portable garden in pots'; in other words, late Georgian container gardening. Indoor potted plants were the theme of several books by Miss E. A. Maling in the 1860s and her *Flowers for Ornament and Decoration* seems to be the earliest book by a woman on flower arranging. Charles Kingsley recommended fern growing for young ladies as 'preferable to Berlin wool-work' and his sister, Charlotte Chanter, published *Ferny Combes* in 1856. Its sub-title, *A Ramble after Ferns in the glens and valleys of Devonshire*, is a reminder of how the Devon lanes were stripped of unusual forms of ferns. (figure 2) The last chapter described how to display them enclosed in cases indoors. By the 1870s a few women were contributing to gardening journals. Frances Jane Hope's articles were collected into a posthumous volume in 1881, *Notes and Thoughts on Gardens and Woodlands*. Again, the sub-title is revealing: 'written chiefly for the amateur'.

Edith Chamberlain's book, *The Gentlewoman's Book of Gardening* (1892), was part of a series. Women could write for each other and for amateurs but were not to presume to the expertise of male professionals.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, significant social changes included a growing confidence among the middle classes in their ability to design and manage their own gardens with only unskilled labour. These gardens were smaller than those of the estates controlled by head gardeners and could be used to express the owner's personality and artistic skills. Women welcomed this outlet for their talents and wrote



Figure 1. Frontispiece and title page of *The Ladies Companion to the Flower Garden* (Courtesy of Devon and Exeter Institution)

to encourage others; examples include *A Garden in the Suburbs*, *The Small Town Garden* and *The Small Garden* by otherwise unknown women.³ Catherine Buckton based *Town and Window Gardening* (1879) on her lectures in Leeds to persuade school-teachers and their pupils to ‘brighten the homes of the poor ... and inspire little children with a love of flowers’.⁴

In 1882 *The Garden* published Gertrude Jekyll’s first article on her favourite theme of colour schemes. As her eyesight deteriorated, her artistic training and skills were increasingly focused on plants and garden design. Describing herself as ‘a working amateur’ did not do justice to her discipline and energy, running a garden design business and a nursery from her home at Munstead Wood, alongside writing over 1100 articles and twelve major books. These continue to be quoted and reprinted, because (to quote one of her biographers) ‘a happy combination of critical observation and a direct prose style elevated her writings from the commonplace to the realm of garden literature’.⁵ In 1897 the first RHS Victoria Medals of Honour were awarded. The only women to be thus honoured were Gertrude Jekyll and Ellen Ann Wilmott. The late Audrey le Lièvre, a member of DGT, described how Wilmott spent lavishly on three gardens and publishing *The Genus Rosa* (1910–14), the first study by a woman of a single genus.⁶ She died in 1934 as ‘the penniless mistress of a derelict wilderness with just two long-suffering gardeners’. Whereas there were said to be over a hundred gardeners before World War I when she produced a deluxe volume of forty photographs entitled *Warley Garden in Spring and Summer* (1909).⁷ Wilmott’s horticultural skills included hybridization and nurturing new plants sent to her from the plant-hunting expeditions that she sponsored. Her special interest in narcissi was reflected in her being the first woman to take an active role on an RHS committee.⁸

The Hon. Eleanor Vere Boyle had grown up on her father’s estate, married the youngest son of the Earl of Cork and shared his life as the parish rector of Marston Bigot, Somerset. When they retired in 1871 to Huntercombe Manor, Buckinghamshire, she created a beautiful garden, divided into ‘rooms’ by yew hedges and predating more famous examples. Her illustrated garden books were simply attributed to ‘E. V. B.’, hiding her title and identity; the first was published when she was 59.⁹ An anthology entitled *Garden Colour* was published in 1905; this book was a significant milestone. (figure 3) Boyle contributed the chapter on ‘Summer’ as a widow of 80. The ‘Spring’ chapter was by Mrs. C. W. Earle, whose four chatty ‘pot-pourri’ books included astute gardening advice and comment. Her style appealed to the colonial market; ‘my kind unknown friends who are far away, bearing the white woman’s burden, and who have written to me saying that they enjoyed the little breath of home my books have brought them’. Earle’s *Times* obituary stressed that ‘she had nothing of the professional woman about her’.¹⁰ Her husband offered her £100 not to publish the first book. Fortunately she ignored him and he was delighted by it – but died in a bicycle accident the day after publication! Rose Kingsley, daughter of Charles, was the author of the chapter on ‘Autumn’. One of her other books on *Eversley Gardens and Others* (1907) is a good example of a popular and persistent form of garden writing, namely an informative description of the author’s personal gardening experiences. The final ‘Winter’ chapter came from the Hon. Vicary Gibbs of Aldenham House, Herts, who was from an

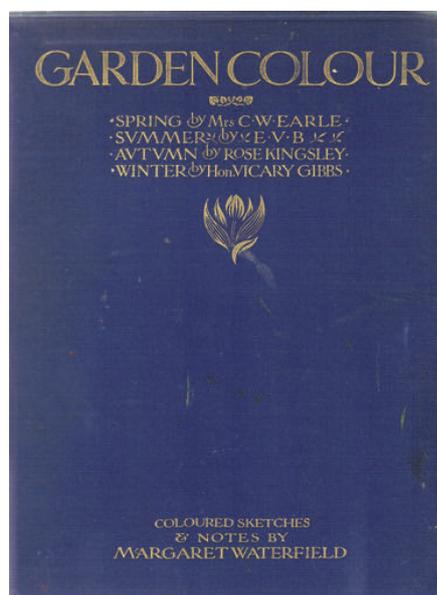


Figure 3. Cover of *Garden Colour* (author)

old Devon family. Two other men added minor sections, so that the women dominated a gardening volume of mixed authorship. Indeed the largest contribution came from Margaret Helen Waterfield, whose numerous impressionistic watercolours and chapters on each non-winter month were only acknowledged as ‘notes and watercolour sketches’.

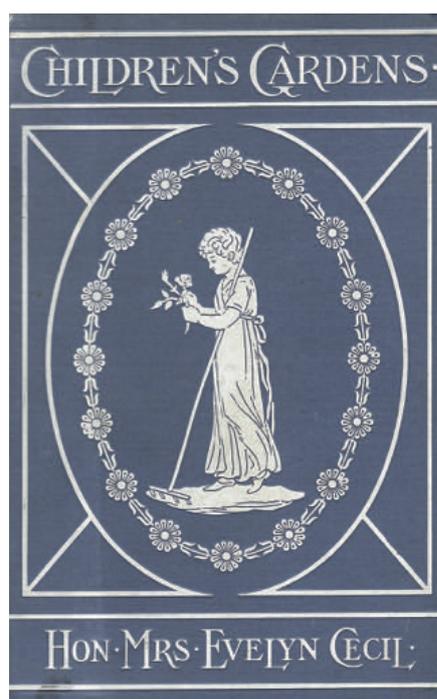


Figure 4. Cover of *Children's Gardens* by Hon. Mrs. Evelyn Cecil (author)

A History of Gardening in England (1895) was probably only published because Alicia Amherst was supposedly completing a study begun by a man, despite her academic skills which included fluent Latin and the ability to read fourteenth century hand-writing. Publications during her long and busy life included *Children's Gardens* (1902) when she had become the Hon. Mrs. Evelyn Cecil. (figure 4) Travel abroad with her husband and on behalf of the Women’s Emigration Society gave her a direct link with some of her readers and led to a book on *Wild Flowers of the Great Dominions of the British Empire* (1935). As Lady Rockley, her last book was *Historic Gardens of England* (1938) at the age of 73.¹¹ (figure 5) Alicia Amherst was particularly interested in early herbals; herb growing was an acceptable topic for



Figure 5. Portrait of Alicia Amherst by her daughter, Maud (Sue Minter from a private collection with permission)

women writers. Frances Anne Bardswell, who had close links with the Amherst family, published *The Herb Garden* in 1911 and it was reprinted in 1930 and 1986.¹² Lady Rosalind Lucy Northcote (from the Devon family) had published *The Book of Herbs* in 1908. *Gardens Past and Present* (1908) by Mrs. K. L. Davison included unusual old-fashioned vegetables as well as herbs. Perhaps the link with cookery enabled Cecilia Pears to publish *The Kitchen Garden and the Cook* in 1913. Despite plenty of evidence of women's ability to grow vegetables, this was considered to be a male topic, as was fruit-growing.

Frances Garnet Wolseley, a Viscountess in her own right, was a pioneer in horticultural education with her Glynde College for women, so *Gardening for Women* (1908) and *In a College Garden* (1916) were important innovations. Her own talents were shown in *Gardens: their form and design* (1919). Like Catherine Buckton, she was involved in introducing some of the poorer city dwellers to gardening, especially children. Madeleine Agar trained in America and lectured on garden design at Swanley, another horticultural college for women. While teaching at Wycombe Abbey School, she published an early textbook, *A Primer of School Gardening* (1909), but sadly this field was soon dominated by men. Her *Garden Design in Theory and Practice* (1911) was also a pioneering work and considered to be the first by a woman on this subject.¹³

My mother's friends were almost all unmarried, part of that generation whose potential husbands had not returned from World War I. They usually had full-time clerical jobs or ran a family business but a few had the means to stay at home like their married friends. Almost all cared for elderly parents and channelled their creative and nurturing skills into voluntary work and their gardens. Books about other people's gardens were exchanged between them or borrowed from circulating libraries, which can be identified by their labels. (figure 6) There were few changes in the subject matter of gardening

books published by women in the 1920s and 1930s but both the circumstances of the authors and the market for which they wrote had altered dramatically.

Flora Klickmann represented a new type of author, the professional journalist. She edited *The Girls' Own Paper and Women's Magazine* and published over 100 books on a wide range of domestic and craft subjects. However the most popular were in her long 'Flower Patch' series, based on her country home at Brockweir in the Wye Valley and published from 1916. Marion Cran was also a journalist and the first person to broadcast gardening talks on the wireless, published as *Garden Talks* (1925).¹⁴ She married her third husband twenty years after being separated from him by World War I and in her later books he appeared as 'my lord'. How to refer to their husbands was a recurring problem for married garden writers. Flora Klickmann settled for 'the Head of Affairs'. Irish Muriel Marston's GP husband was 'himself' in her three books about gardening on the banks of the Warwickshire Avon.¹⁵ Elizabeth von Arnim had named her dominating German Count 'The Man of Wrath' in her whimsical and popular first book, *Elizabeth and her German Garden* (1898). He is said to have 'believed that

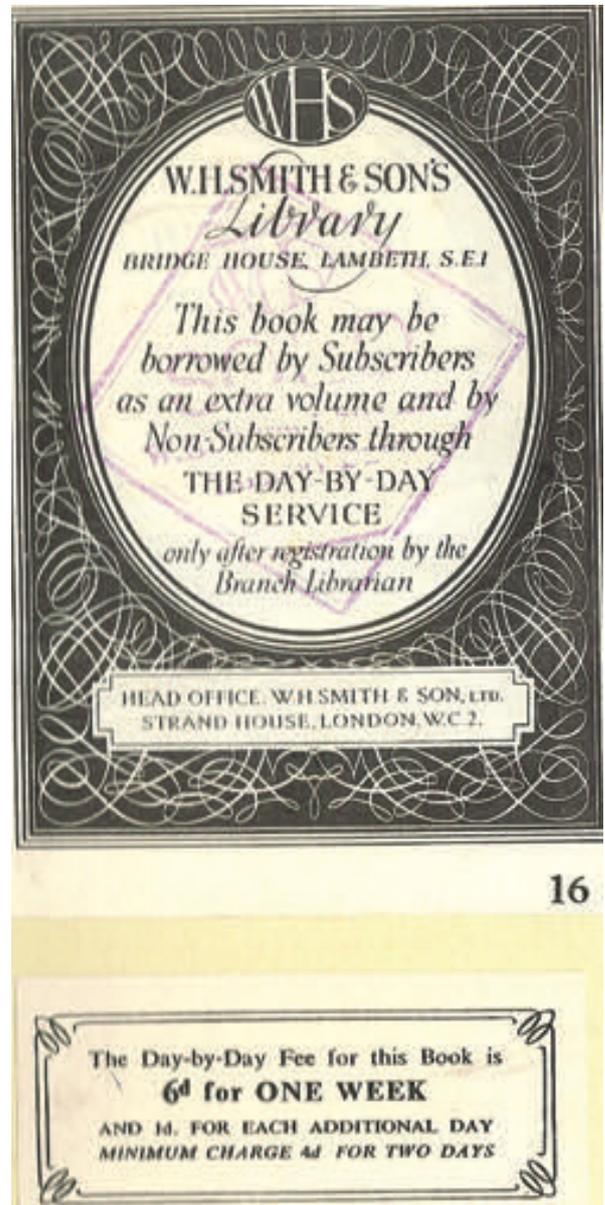


Figure 6. Book Club label (author)

it would bring disgrace to his family to be associated with a female writing for money ... (and) ordered her to remain anonymous'.¹⁶

A number of visually attractive volumes by women were printed between the wars. Clare Leighton was primarily an artist and an outstanding wood-engraver. In 1931 she moved to Monks Risborough on the Chilterns and lived there for eight years with Noel Brailsford, a journalist who was 25 years older. Her writing in *Four Hedges* (1935) is as lyrically descriptive as her engravings of the garden they made together. The poet Muriel Stuart described making a garden with her small son around a new house on the outskirts of London in *Fool's Garden* (1936). Evelyn Dunbar collaborated with her former tutor at the Royal College of Art, Cyril Mahoney, on *Gardeners' Choice* (1937) before becoming the only salaried woman war artist. Engravings by John Farleigh illustrated *A Country Garden* (1936) by Ethel Armitage and her *Garden and Hedgerow* (1939) was published in two editions, one being leather bound with plates by Lucy Burton. They make an interesting comparison in presentation and content with *Flower and Leaf* (1946), her diary for 1945 and produced to 'war economy standard'.

The Flower Garden and How to Work in it (1917) was written by Maud Evelyn Stebbing to help women who had been left to cope on their own, or at least with far fewer gardeners, during World War I. *Hardy Flower Gardening* (1931) also tackled a specific challenge, as it was 'especially applicable to Scotland and Northern England'. Her favourite topic was the use of colour, applying Jekyll's principles with clear and precise planting details, illustrated by numerous coloured plates but still with the proviso 'for amateurs'.¹⁷ Stebbing's *Gardening for Children and Beginners* (1937) helped another specific group, as did Marguerite James in *The Family Garden* (1937). James was 'a well-known gardening correspondent' but there was a preface by Lady Eveleen Seton, the author of *My Town Garden* (1927), presumably to encourage sales. *Over to Flowers* (1947) was intended by James to encourage a post-war return to decorative gardening, especially for children. A title still seemed to help a woman to publish: Lady Martineau was the author of *The Herbaceous Garden* (1934). A significant advance was made by Grace Zambra, who published *Violets for Garden and Market* (1938) while a working professional nurserywoman. She had started the Windward Violet Nursery at Holcombe, Dawlish, Devon, in 1922 with her husband, George. (figure 7)

Eleanor Sinclair Rohde was a pioneer in a different sphere. Her study of history led to a post at St Hilda's Hall, Oxford, and her academic research into manuscripts on early medieval gardens and herbs supported a long and varied series of publications. She became the President of the Society of Women Journalists and ran a nursery at her family home. Rohde wrote about vegetable growing during World War II; one of many attempts to enhance a diet that was monotonous and rationed.¹⁸ In 1919 Rohde had created the first herb garden at the Chelsea Flower Show with Maud Grieve, who later published *A Modern Herbal* (1931). Grieve had set up a herb farm in 1914 to meet the urgent need for medicinal plants and established a training school, initially for women.¹⁹ Lady Eve Balfour was one of her friends and a pioneer of organic farming and gardening. She published *The Living Soil* in 1943 and founded The Soil Association in 1946,

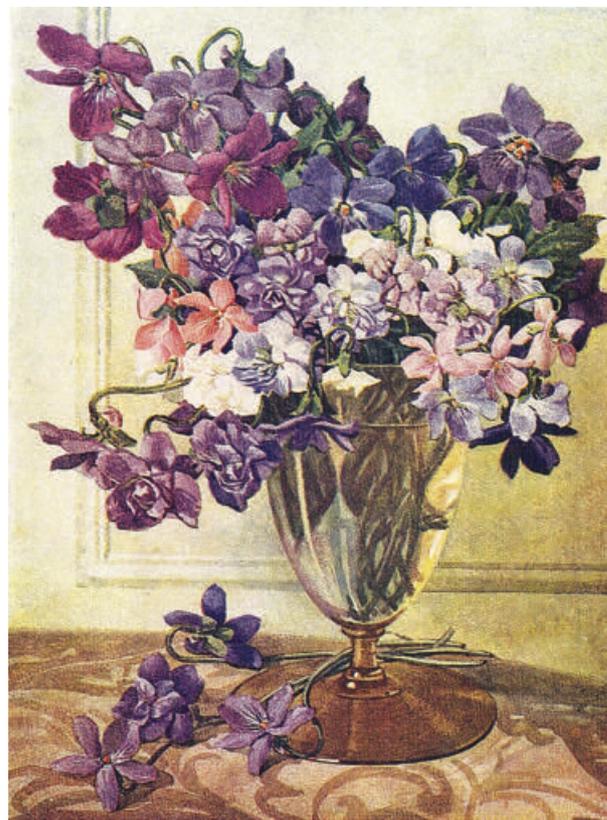


Figure 7. Sweet Violets of every hue by Dora Ratman, frontispiece of *Violets for Garden and Market* by Grace Zambra (DGT Library)

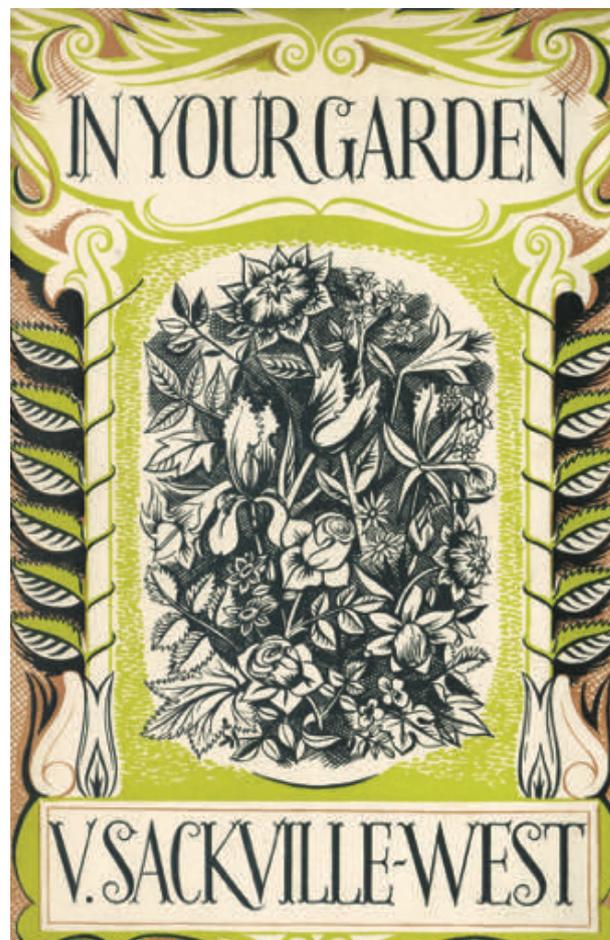


Figure 8. Cover of *In Your Garden* by V. Sackville-West (author)

based on her philosophy of 'living in harmony not only with our own species but with all others'.²⁰

The Hon. Victoria Mary Sackville-West, known as Vita, published novels, poetry, biography and travel books. As she worked with her husband, Harold Nicholson, in the gardens of 'Long Barn' and then 'Sissinghurst' in Kent, she developed the knowledge and practical skills that underpinned her gardening articles for *The Observer* over fourteen years (1947–61). She had published *Some Flowers* in 1937 but the four anthologies of her articles appeared in the 1950s. (figure 8) Her poetry included accurate gardening descriptions, such as thinning out and stopping wallflowers in *The Garden* (1946). Sackville-West's successor at *The Observer* also had a publishing career that spanned World War II. Frances Perry's *Water Gardening* came out in 1938 with a foreword by E. A. Bowles, who considered Frances Everett to have been 'one of my boys' at Myddelton House, Enfield, Middlesex. After Swanley Horticultural College she married Gerald Perry and became involved in his family nursery business. However she also acted as a Middlesex County Council horticultural adviser and later a college principal. The RHS awarded her the Victoria Medal of Honour in 1964 and she was their first woman Council member and then their first woman Vice-President. As a professional horticulturalist, her informative books, articles and broadcasts ranged over many gardening topics; the last was on *Scent in the Garden* (1989) when she was 82.

The backgrounds and experiences of women garden writers were becoming more varied and an increasing number were professional horticulturalists. The subject matter became more diverse. Vera Higgins edited *The Journal of the RHS* and wrote numerous books on cacti and succulents. Anne Ashberry approached the largely male preserve of alpines through books such as *Miniature Gardens* (1951), using troughs, sinks and window-boxes. Christine Kelway shared her knowledge in *Seaside Gardening* (1962) and two further volumes. Ethelind Fearon was gardener to H. G. Wells and published a wide range of books on mainly non-fiction subjects, including pig-keeping, cookery and running a tea-house. *Most Happy Husbandman* (1946) was a first person fictional account of contemporary farming in Essex, confusingly but perhaps tellingly attributed to a Mr. Fearon. She employed humour and the delightful drawings of Alex Jardine to enliven some of her gardening publications.²¹ Older themes recurred, but when Margaret Brownlow wrote *Herbs and the Fragrant Garden* (1957), it was based on her own Seal Herb Farm in Kent.

Sylvia Crowe and Brenda Colvin rose to the top of their profession as landscape architects, marking a turning point in the attitudes of both male professional designers and publishers. Colvin set up her own design practice in 1922 and was a co-founder of the Institute of Landscape Architects in 1929. Both Colvin (1951) and Crowe (1957–9) were presidents of ILA when Crowe was sharing Colvin's London office. Crowe was made a DBE in 1973; amongst their publications, her *Garden Design* (1958) has been reprinted twice, while Colvin's *Land and Landscape* (1947) was revised in 1970. Both women were equally at home with the detailed design of a small garden or a project involving hundreds of acres but always sensitive to the local character and context. Industrial landscaping by Colvin included several power stations and



Figure 9. Cover of 'The new small garden' by Lady Allen and Susan Jellicoe (author)

the rebuilding of Aldershot military town. Forests, the margins of reservoirs and new towns were amongst Crowe's commissions. Susan Jellicoe insisted that Brenda Colvin had taught her all she knew and Jellicoe only published in association with others, despite providing many of the planting plans for designs by her husband, Geoffrey Jellicoe. Marjory Allen was best known for advocating adventure playgrounds but her collaboration with Susan Jellicoe in *The New Small Garden* was also innovative in 1956. (figure 9) This concern for the owners of small city gardens was shared by Madge Garland, who published *The Small Garden in the City* (1973). She came to garden design through her interest in fashion, working for *Vogue* magazine. Anne Scott-James also wrote for *Vogue* but moved on to garden writing, declaring, 'I don't want to paint garden pictures ... a jumbly garden is the only kind which provides interest every day in the year'.²²

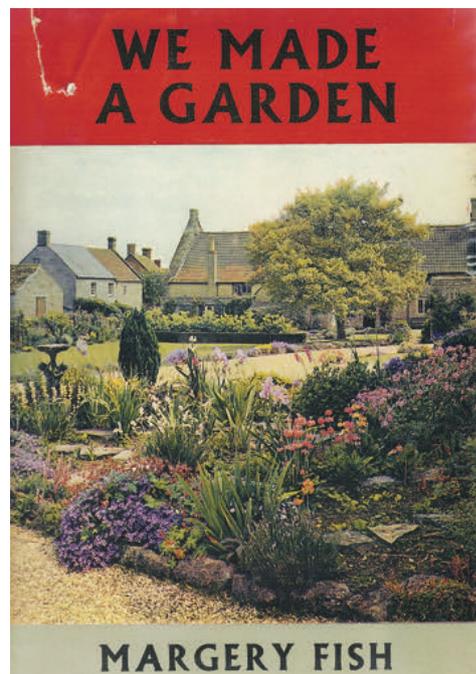


Figure 10. Cover of *We Made a Garden* by Margery Fish (author)

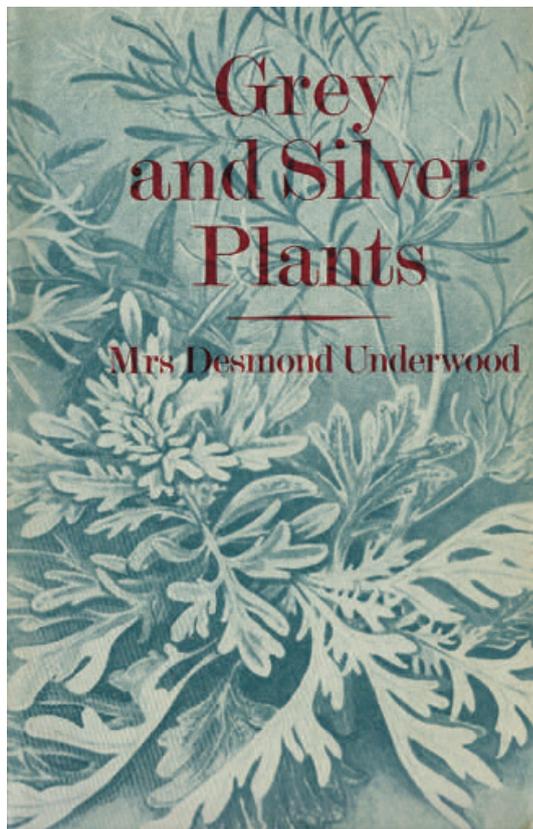


Figure 11. Cover of *Grey and Silver Plants* by Mrs Demond Underwood (author)

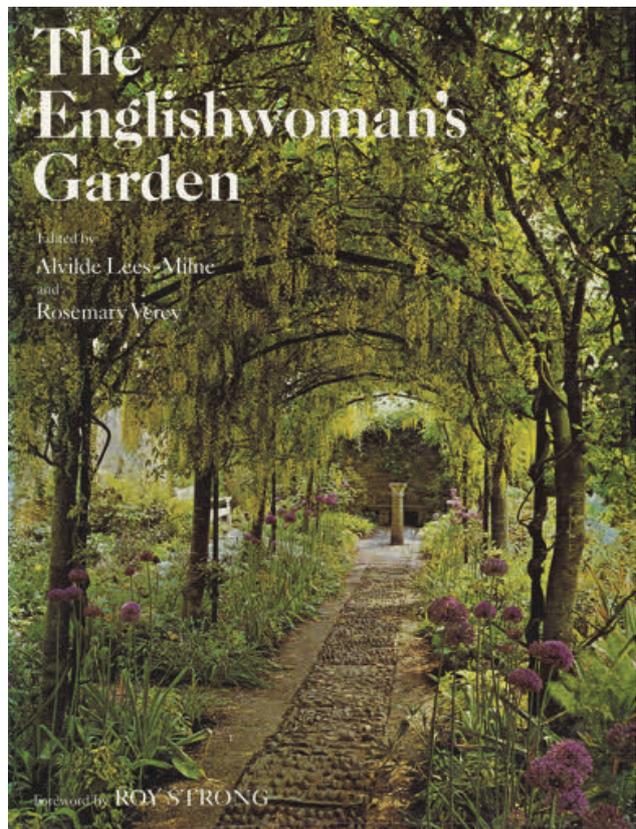


Figure 12. Cover of *The Englishwoman's Garden* by Alvilde Lees-Milne and Rosemary Verey (author)

Her more unusual books included reviving an old literary device with *Gardening Letters to my Daughter* (to Clare Hastings in 1990) and an amusing but accurate overview of British gardening history, *The Pleasure Garden* (1977), illustrated by her second husband, Osbert Lancaster.

Margery Fish was a journalist on the *Daily Mail* and retired with her older editor husband to East Lambrook Manor, Somerset. After Walter's death she wrote a series of books about her cottage-style garden, beginning with *We Made a Garden* (1956). (figure 10) These exerted a significant influence on a generation of gardeners, advocating planting a wide range of species in the conditions that enabled them to flourish without constant attention. In order to share her knowledge and love of plants, she also ran a small nursery, including her own Lambrook selections. Alice Margaret Coats contributed to the awareness that plants have a history as well as gardens, through *Flowers and their Histories* (1956). When Dorothy Stroud published on eighteenth century garden history, she was an early contributor to this fledgling field of study. Her monographs

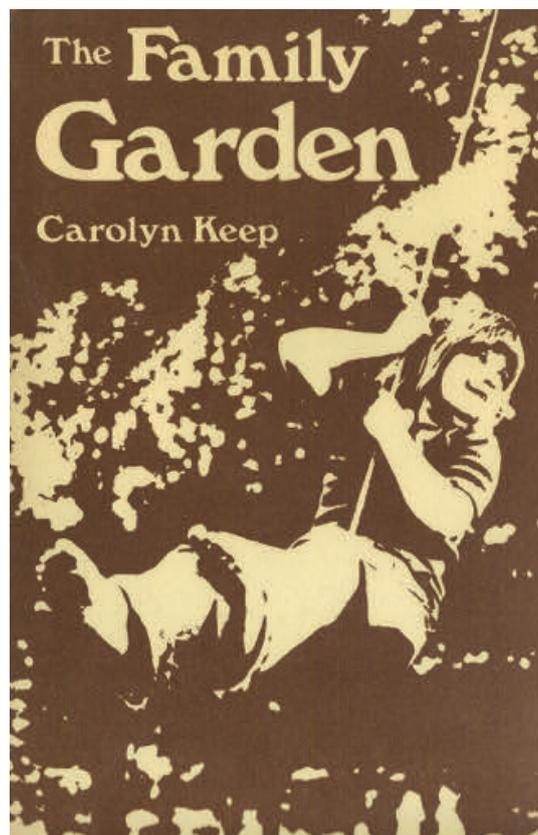


Figure 13. Cover of *The Family Garden* by Carolyn Keep (author)

on *Capability Brown* (1950) and *Humphry Repton* (1962) continue to be quoted. As the first secretary of the Garden History Society, Kay Sanecki wrote about herbs as well as garden history. Mavis Batey took on that role in 1972 and published mainly on the eighteenth century.

Animal books for children were the main output of Judith Berrisford but she also published on a variety of garden topics from her home in Carmarthenshire. Joan and Harold Bawden wrote about their garden experiences in Sussex and made their last garden at Offwell, near Honiton, Devon. Gwladys Tonge formed a Women's Horticultural Society in Coventry and published four gardening books but was described as 'a keen amateur'. Her specialist nursery led to Pamela Underwood's book on *Grey and Silver Plants* (1971) but she was named as Mrs. Desmond Underwood. (figure 11) Books by Elizabeth Coxhead included a biography of Constance Spry and one on her suburban

garden. She was still suggesting that women gardeners have interests and design styles which differ from men.

Is there such a thing as a woman's garden? I believe there is, and that one can tell from the look of it whether the directing mind behind a garden is a woman's or a man's... A woman's garden is less a work of art than a man's, and more an imitation, and improvement upon, Nature.²³

Such ideas were firmly refuted by Rosemary Verey and her friend, Alvide Lees-Milne, through their series of books on specific gardens and their owners. It was no accident that the first was entitled *The Englishwoman's Garden* (1980) with a selection at least equal in range and quality to those in the sequel, *The Englishman's Garden* (1982). (figure 12) As with women's education, it was necessary to establish their equality in achievement as a preliminary to truly equal treatment. Collecting and studying early gardening texts lay behind Verey's much imitated 'potager' at Barnsley House and her numerous books. Another step towards equality was taken by Joy Larkom with her book *Vegetables from Small Gardens* (1976). Her BSc in horticulture, combined with an experimental market garden in Suffolk and a year long vegetable tour with her family in a caravan, led to many such publications. An emphasis on unusual and foreign vegetables gave her a back door into a largely male preserve.

Penelope Hobhouse started her writing career conventionally with *The Country Gardener* (1976), based on her Somerset garden at Hadspen. My own book, *The Family Garden*, was published in the same year and both books mark the end of a publishing era. (figure 13) The simple dustjacket enclosed a dense text with occasional blocks of black and white photographs taken from catalogues or by friends. Hobhouse initially apologised for writing as an 'amateur gardener with no professional horticultural or botanical training'; her Cambridge degree was in economics. However she has continued to publish with increasing authority 'as an acclaimed garden designer and plantswoman', whose 'numerous books have provided inspiration to gardeners around the world'.²⁴ Her wide range of subjects is now supported by sumptuous colour illustrations by professional photographers. The text is in several fonts and sizes, broken into sections and with varied backgrounds to create variety, often including plans or drawings. The changes to create such a rich experience started in the 1980s and the number of attractive and informative gardening books expanded rapidly. Women writers now cover all gardening subjects but there is still the challenge of finding a publisher. Radio or television exposure seems to enhance the chances of being published for both men and women. A colloquium in 2004 to look at the 'Glass Ceiling' to careers for women found that a contributory factor was to be found in the informal networking by men outside work.²⁵ In the same year, Lady Mary Keen (whose title does not appear on her books) commented that getting published often depended 'on who you know, not what you know'.²⁶

Now women have moved into digital publishing and writing gardening blogs on equal terms with men. The wide variety of modern garden publishing encompasses coffee table art books, DIY instructions, scientific and therapeutic approaches and even guerrilla gardening, as well as the more traditional themes already mentioned. Women authors are represented in all these genres and seem to have finally achieved a level playing field – but is that in itself a male figure of speech?

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