

# An introduction to cottage gardening *Clive Lane*

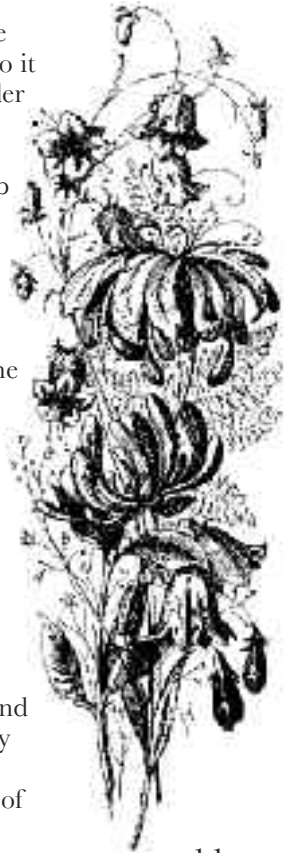
*For all our new members, and older ones who may like a refresher! Clive has kindly written about cottage garden style for this issue.*

The cottage garden style has been evolving and changing for at least the past six hundred years. Primarily it provided food - flowers were an optional extra and then only if they had a practical use; as medicine, for seasoning food or to strew on floors to discourage bugs. Over the years, as cheap labour-free food came within the reach of almost everyone, the cottage garden was no longer necessary for providing vegetables, fruit and honey, and became more for growing flowers and flowering shrubs.

So what are the characteristic features of the cottage garden style? The chief hallmark, without doubt, is its artless informality. Borders crammed with herbs and flowers, paths lined with scented pinks and primroses, lavender and rosemary bushes placed where they can be brushed against, to release their aromatic scent on a warm summer evening. Roses and clematis planted around the cottage door - the cottage garden style is irresistible. A place to potter, wander and to contemplate, a haven from the stresses of everyday life.

## Creating a cottage garden

The first rule of thumb in planning a garden in the cottage style is *not to hurry*. An advantage of this style of gardening is that traditionally vegetables and ornamentals were grown together, so it is perfectly in order to squeeze a row of lettuces or a clump of rhubarb into a mixed border without having to endure comments or raised eyebrows from visitors to the garden. Brick paths edged with box (*Buxus sempervirens*) are frequently to be seen in cottage gardens, as are arches and arbours closely planted with a variety of roses and climbers, carefully chosen to give a continuous show of



scented colour from early spring until late autumn. Stone troughs and sinks planted up with auriculas, pinks, and thyme will add a touch of authenticity to the scene. Seating areas are the ideal place for grouping scented plants that can be enjoyed whilst relaxing with a glass of wine after a busy day in the office, home or garden.

## Cottage garden design

When planning, think of plant shapes as well as colours. Tall pointed spires (foxgloves, verbascums, hollyhocks, delphiniums, etc.) are invaluable amongst rounded clump-forming plants such as aster, phlox and geraniums. Flowers that make a haze of colour, such as *Verbena bonariensis*, are indispensable amongst the big single blooms of oriental poppies, hemerocallis and leucanthemum daisies. The overall effect of a cottage garden should be an abundance of colour and scent, dancing flowers and butterflies, the drone of bees and music of birdsong. This is not hard to achieve, even in the middle of a town. Indeed, the cottage garden style can be adapted to suit many types of gardens; a small front garden in a city terrace filled with lavender and framed with honeysuckle, a border crammed with aquilegias, old-fashioned peonies, and clove-scented pinks in the suburbs, pots brimming with herbs and roses in a small back garden - any of these features can make us feel we are in the heart of the country.

The informality of a cottage garden can easily develop into something of a jungle without constant division of stronger growing plants that quite quickly become 'thugs' if they are left to their own devices.

Trimming and pruning lavender and rosemary bushes will prevent them from billowing too far over the paths.

However, a number of cottage garden plants and 'curiosities' such as hose-in-hose primroses, double hesperis, double primroses and rare pinks need to be constantly propagated and fussed over if they are to survive. A good reference book will provide many of the answers needed to planning and creating a modern cottage garden.

Traditionally, cottage gardens were planted with old favourites in gentle colour schemes in cool or pastel colours, using plants which have been grown for hundreds of years - hollyhocks, roses, hellebores, columbines, honeysuckle, lavender, geraniums, primroses and many more. Modern cultivars, however, may include hot colours such as red, orange, and bright yellows. It would be sad to limit your choice too severely in the pursuit of 'authenticity'.

The modern cottage garden, though very different from its predecessors is their direct descendant, and a hundred years from now will not be the same as today.

## Cottage gardens to inspire

East Lambrook Manor garden in Somerset is internationally recognised as the home of English cottage garden style. Packed with rare and unusual plants, it was designed in the 1950s by the visionary Margery Fish who was responsible for revolutionising gardening in the 20th century, breaking with the tradition of formal design, to create a natural cottage garden which is a delight and an inspiration. The cottage garden at Sissinghurst, the home of the late Vita Sackville-West, is another garden internationally known and much visited by budding cottage gardeners.

Many smaller and quite delightful privately owned cottage gardens are to be found in the 'Yellow Book' which features gardens open to public each year, and don't forget our own 'Gardens to Visit' booklet included with this issue for some lovely gardens belonging to CGS members.

Well-known designers have created cottage garden projects in their gardens. The late Rosemary Verey always maintained that the garden she created at Barnsley was in fact a cottage garden around a manor house. Anne Scott-James wrote

enthusiastically about cottage gardens, and Christopher Lloyd also wrote a universally acclaimed book on cottage gardening.

The cottage garden style is essentially our gift to gardening and emigrants have taken it around the world, especially to America, Australia and New Zealand. The popularity of this style of gardening in Europe has been quite dramatic in the past decade, with a strong demand for cottage garden plants and books on the subject. A notable interest has also been shown by gardeners in Japan, where English cottage gardening is seen as something of a status symbol.

I adore the cottage garden style of gardening. The natural informality of a garden crammed with old-fashioned flowers and shrubs, the curiosities, the strong scents of the 'old timers' and the wildlife which is attracted to this haven of tranquility, all combine to create a paradise on earth.

*Clive Lane, founding member and administrator of The Cottage Garden Society, is author of several books, including The Cottage Gardeners Companion, Cottage Garden Annuals and Cottage Garden Favourites. The Cottage Gardeners Companion is still available directly from Clive at just £10 including p&p - see the inside cover for details.*

