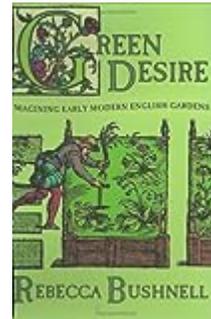




**Rebecca Bushnell.** *Green Desire: Imagining Early Modern English Gardens.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003. 198 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4143-1.



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This is not a book about early modern gardens, or gardeners. It is, in fact, an exhaustive exploration of early modern English gardening manuals. Then, as now, the relation of theoretic and how-to books to what actually went on in gardens was tangential at best. Much of the achievement of this study lies in pointing up that discrepancy. Aspiration and desire, fashion and snobbery, availability and technical advances of various kinds were reflected both in books and in gardens, but not in the same ways.

The enterprise of this book is a worthy and fascinating one: to see what can be reconstructed of the culture of gardening in early modern England from the evidence offered by those contemporary manuals of gardening and garden plants, written and published in England. Perhaps the chief finding of the book is the demonstration that it is not really possible to make any such reconstruction, indeed that there was no gardening community in a real sense, nor a community of readers, defined by these manuals and herbals. But, in the very discovery of this absence, this study materially advances our knowledge of early modern gardening and the sources from which it can be recovered.

All too rarely is proper credit given to the scholar who accomplishes what Rebecca Bushnell does here: namely to succeed in producing a sense of the extraordinary, in-

coherent complexity of an aspect of the past, rather than producing a slick answer to a cunningly slanted question about that past. What Bushnell demonstrates in her scrupulous and thorough study of English-language manuals is that manuals and reality are far removed from each other, and that English is not the only (nor, it could actually be argued, the primary) language in which garden knowledge is disseminated in early modern England. When the study reaches the late-seventeenth century, and the figures of John Ray and John Evelyn, it is made abundantly clear that gardening knowledge and gardening ideas have changed absolutely, and that the English garden writers of the early part of the century are being repudiated, while the later writers themselves are evasive about the foreign masters (Salomon de Caus, Giovanni Battista Ferrari, Carolus Clusius) who have presided over the transformation of their ideas.

The other great strength of this contribution to early modern garden knowledge is that it makes absolutely clear what a minefield awaits the twenty-first-century reader who attempts to decode early modern books without bearing in mind the vast complexity of significations (typography, format, size, frequency, and medium of illustration) with which the early modern book trade codified their productions. Providing a preliminary classification of garden manuals into types is not the least ser-

vice that this study does the modern reader. The market which would have been targeted by a modest pamphlet on quotidian farmhouse gardening is highly unlikely to intersect in any way with the market for the rich folio of John Parkinson's *Paradisus in Sole* (1629) far less, one might add, for the esoteric and finely-engraved *Hortus Palatinus* of Salomon de Caus (1620).

*Green Desire* succeeds admirably in clarifying our notion of past gardening. In twenty-first-century Europe or North America, it might indeed make sense to categorize all gardeners as belonging loosely to a single community of interest—it is made very clear that this was far from the case in early modern England. The preoccupations of the pamphlets on the farmhouse garden are not those of the folio herbals. (The interesting possibility also implied by this study is that many of the humbler pamphlet manuals may simply fail to survive: there is, after all, hardly any category of the early modern book more likely to have been used and read to tatters than the humbler type of instructional pamphlet, so the survivors into our century may not in fact offer us anything like the complete spectrum of what was once available.) Bearing these disjunctions in mind, the real difficulty of the task which this book has set itself becomes apparent. We see clearly that there is no community of interest between the farmer's wife, with a kitchen garden which is an extension of the husbandry of the farm; Shakespeare's Perdita, with her catalog of semi-wild flowers; and the Queen Henrietta Maria, with her complex gardens in the continental manner, fraught with recondite symbolism and a *wunderkammer* of vegetable rarities.

Gardens were at the center of so many diverse early modern preoccupations (social, symbolic, practical, artistic) and were so stratified by class and knowledge (as garden knowledge itself was automatically stratified in the early modern period by linguistic knowledge) that it is very difficult to conceive of a community of readers or gardeners at all. We know in some ways comparatively little about early modern gardens, but we do know that the gardens of the *À la mode* were informed by readings of Gian Battista Ferrari and Rembertus Dodonaeus on practical as well as symbolic matters. What emerges from *Green Desire* is the degree to which these English-language manuals place their focus away from the symbolic and emblematic aspects of the garden which would have centrally preoccupied the early modern European *À la mode*. So, in a sense, the book may offer the perception implicitly that these manuals addressed, at their higher end, not the very top of society but the upper end of "the middling sort."

Bushnell also discovers a real area of self-contradiction in the wholly inchoate debate in these manuals concerning the natural and the artificial. How much is flower-breeding an impious tampering with the order of things? How much is it a right use of God-given ingenuity? Why are so many "approved secrets" of early modern manuals such obvious nonsense? Why does Francis Bacon deny the undeniable influences on his botanical thinking? It is a strength of this study that we see that there are no easy answers to these questions. (I would suggest also that Andrew Marvell is playing trick upon trick on his reader in "The Garden" with its apparent condemnation of artifice and its demonstrable reference to the most hermetic continental gardening books.) Why indeed do English writers not avert to the fact that, in the 1630s, an obsession with flower breeding became such a national obsession in the United Provinces of the Netherlands that it seriously threatened the stability of the economy? It is excellent to have these questions brought to our notice.

One fascinating aspect of this study is the thoroughness with which it focuses on the unease of the Elizabethans and their inheritors with the notion of indebtedness to the classical past or to foreign models. Frankly, early modern England is peripheral to the development of the early modern garden, with stylistic and horticultural innovation coming consistently from Italy and the Netherlands throughout the period under discussion. Yet the authors of the English garden manuals are often dismissive of foreigners and equivocal in their relation to the classical past. Also, Bushnell portrays the English-garden writers as consistently, patriotically evasive with regards to their degree of indebtedness to these sources. Something like a clear pattern is allowed to emerge from the section on this subject; despite their repudiation of Classical models, few early-modern writers were in fact able to function except in the medium of the remembered ancients, however much they may have protested to the contrary.

It would be easy to point out many other questions of importance raised by *Green Desire*, but one must stand for many. It is fascinating to see how little of the early modern garden is in fact represented by these manuals. We are forced to ask how important plants were to the early modern garden (the answer has to be a deep ambiguity—a wholly successful early-modern garden could contain as few as three types of plants as long as these were box, yew, and grass; yet even in Italy there were gardens, like those of the Palazzo Barberini in Rome, which defied stereotype by being as full of diverse flowers as

any merchant's garden in Haarlem or Amsterdam). In a sense, plants are central and peripheral to the early modern garden at the same time, which represents one of the many enigmas that this book brings into focus. It is also interesting to have this fresh focus on the English printed word alone and to realize how much of our knowledge of the early modern garden in practice is, in

fact, in manuscripts like those of Sir Thomas Tresham and Evelyn, or in the visual representations of contemporary (often exiled Dutch) painters and engravers.

For all these reasons, *Green Desire* is a timely focus on one aspect of early modern gardening in England and a study which suggests rich further areas for investigation.

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