

The Romans' concept of 'garden' changed over their long history. I suppose there was always an underlying practical consideration to their concept, and that was that it was a fine thing if one could grow something useful in the garden space.

When the early Romans emerged out of their 'gathering nuts and berries' stage and began to farm in a settled location, little plots of the sort we might identify as a garden (as opposed to large or small fields of crops) began to appear near to the kitchen. These little kitchen gardens contained a variety of herbs and vegetables useful for cooking and medicinal purposes. Many of these plants are very familiar, or at least have modern descendants. Herbs such as mint, dill, marjoram, thyme, coriander and basil are widely grown in Canada. Varieties of onions, garlic, radishes, cabbages and a huge variety of green leafy vegetables (many not consumed here in Canada) were also grown. The garden also produced household utensils: gourds were dried and became buckets, ladles and cups. Flowers, which are the first thing coming to my mind if someone says 'garden', had little place in these early utilitarian gardens. Roses, an early and simpler variety than we know, were grown, but they also had useful qualities, some familiar today: tea from the hips. Many of the plants familiar later as 'Roman' were yet to be imported and cultivated in Italy, such as the 'Punic tree', i.e., the pomegranate, and the Libyan and Lydian fig. And the most Italian of all plants, the tomato, well-known to the pizza gourmet, was not grown in Italy or the Roman area of the Roman Empire for many hundreds of years after the Roman Empire ceased to exist: the tomato is a New World plant, like the potato, and these were found in Europe only after the great period of colonization of the New World.

What did these early gardens look like? A disorganized jumble, to our eyes. The early Roman housewife wanted things close to hand, near the cooking area. Certainly, her garden area would be contained by some sort of 'fence', made of thorny shrubs, branches or stones: wandering sheep, goats and other animals could make short work of her garden if they got into it. But that was likely the extent of anything we would recognize as 'order'. The maximum use would have been made of the space, and plants put in wherever and soon to appear to our eyes as a jungle-ish jumble. And there would have been a very different sort of scarecrow, formed perhaps from an old tree-trunk as advised by Roman writers on gardens, and appearing to wave some part of his anatomy other than, and considerably more rude than, his arms.

Foreign contact changed Romans in many ways. They expanded first into Italy, and then into the Mediterranean to the west during the Punic Wars (265-146 BC) and to the east during the Macedonian Wars (214-147 BC). The wars resulted in many prisoners-of-war, divided among the soldiers as booty, and the prisoners became slaves, to be sold or kept by the individual soldier. The wars also gave Romans exposure to more sophisticated styles of architectural design as well as new types of plants. The slaves were one reason the Roman soldier could return home to Italy and begin to expand his land holdings during this period. He could now think in terms of large plantations, looked after by slaves as field-hands. Many slaves were, before their unfortunate capture and enslavement, highly educated or skilled, and from cultures far more sophisticated than the Roman one. These skilled slaves were able to apply practically the ideas and theories the Romans had seen in their military travels.

The plantations, called *latifundia*, came to have villas built on them; with slaves to tend the garden as well as the fields, the garden expanded and became a show-piece for the aristocratic and wealthy owner. Areas in the garden could now be devoted to flowers, shrubs, pathways, seating, fountains and the like. To be sure, the lowly herbs of earlier days were still found, but planted in elegant patterns among flowers and shrubs, or neat rows still near to the kitchen. The jungle-ish jumble disappeared in these slave-tended gardens, although Romans especially in the Imperial period still showed a fondness for the 'disorder' of their early gardening days in the sculpture and paintings. Imperial Corinthian order columns become very baroque with vegetation and even animals, and architectural relief sculpture can be full of plants, birds and animals. Wall paintings and mosaics show much vegetation as a decorative motif, and pictures of the gardens and wilder landscapes are also popular as single or central compositions.

The idea of 'nature' in its uncontrolled, wilder state which we call wilderness and are madly trying to preserve, was not desirable to the Romans. Wilderness areas were often full of perils and dangers, such as wild animals and barbarians with weapons much better to be surrounded with the controlled nature of the garden, although sometimes an owner would try to be 'natural' and let an area grow to resemble a river or rocky woodland grotto. Occasionally an owner would add a particular plant to give an area a 'natural' feeling; this is thought to be the impetus behind the very sparse planting of trees in the relatively immense courtyard at Fishbourne in England.

What sort of gardens did the Romans see when they went overseas to fight? The very urban culture of the Greek east and also of Hellenized Punic North Africa had extremely precise, organized urban household gardens. Confined to small urban spaces, the individual homeowner would have a

courtyard surrounded by his house and its walls. Space in these courtyards was used for a variety of different living purposes, and plantings were arranged with as much care as we might arrange our house plants. After all, the courtyard in a Mediterranean house has always been a rec room, a kitchen, a living room, or some other familiar all-purpose family room. Built-in, raised planter boxes are found in these Greek and Hellenized urban homes, laid out within the courtyard in neat, geometric patterns. There would often be a well, or cistern with collected rainwater within the courtyard.

Container gardening was probably much more prevalent than we can now trace: pots get broken and scattered, whereas the solid raised beds remain. In the very poor homes broken pots were probably used from the outset, and placed perhaps on window ledges. In the elegant Roman villas and urban dwellings of the Imperial period container gardening may have been the 'in' thing: large peristyles are found with nothing other than pavement, no built-in beds, and very recent excavations in the Palatine by the French School at Rome and the Italian Archaeological Service have found gardens dating to about the third century with large flower pots in the peristyles. Perhaps these elegant pavement-only peristyles also had movable planters. Impossible to prove, albeit suggestive of planters in a courtyard are the many border motifs especially on late mosaics which are composed of large mixing kraters or some similar shape in the corners with grape vines or other vegetation growing out of them and along the sides of the mosaic border.

Geometrically organized beds were made with very low borders also; you can see a very good example of this at Pompeii in the House of the Vettii. Little paved paths in between little bordered beds, basins (which I'd label 'bird-baths' but may have been used for the family in some way), benches and statues make the peristyle seem like almost another room rather than the 'garden' outside which it really is. The lay-out of plants tended to be in geometric shapes as well. This we can often determine from an archaeological excavation in a branch of archaeology which is beginning to be called 'garden archaeology'. At Pompeii and the area destroyed by Vesuvius, the plants' roots were burnt, and over the years formed hollows in the surrounding ash and dirt covering them. Fillings of plaster at first, then later resins were put into these cavities and shapes of roots were able to be seen and identified. This is exactly the same technique as that used on the plaster casts of the human victims which have horrified us all when we have seen them. In other areas excavated not covered by volcanic ash, sometimes the simple pattern of colouration of the earth will indicate a pattern of planting in a garden. And of course analysis of pollen, seeds and also the discussion by the agricultural writers such as Cato, Columella and Palladius have helped immensely, as well as mention of gardens and their contents by less agricultural writers such as Ovid and Vergil.