

England's Green and Pleasant Land

By Dónal Thompson



Among the many things which the English do well, such as play rugby, join wars and play rock and roll, there is one activity that shines out like the North Star. The English do gardens better than anyone else.

Daffodils, heart's ease, flox, meadowsweet, lily stalks, gentain, lupine, tall hollihocks, roses, foxgloves, snowdrops and forget-me-nots are some of the myriad flowers that English gardeners rejoice in cultivating.

The Romans (who else?) brought the art of gardening to England and the great monasteries of the Middle Ages had both herbal and vegetable gardens to cater for the medicinal and alimentary demands of the day. They were often surrounded by a pavement and many had a fountain in them.

When castles gave way to large houses, many landowners created enclosures for their deer or cattle. The garden included a large area of trimmed grass where the aristocrats could play bowls or tennis.

England's greatest gardener was a man called Lancelot Brown. When he was asked to look at some land to make into a garden he would always tell the patron that their garden had "great capabilities". To this day he is known as 'Capability Brown'.

His speciality was to create a faux landscape in the garden. The English "landscape garden" under Capability Brown was a place of wide green undulating lawns with sinuous bands and clumps of trees, planted with the utmost care to give the impression of a romantic natural scene.

He was responsible for 170 of the most prestigious gardens in England. It is difficult to find a 'stately home' which does not have evidence of his work.

But it is not just in the big country houses where England's green fingers have flourished. In the small towns and villages where an Englishman's home is his castle, there is a centuries old tradition of gardening. It is no random occurrence that a beautiful English woman is called an English rose. Elton John's funeral tribute to Princess Diana was called "Goodbye England's Rose".

Simon and Garfunkel brought to a world audience the classic English folk song "Scarborough Fair" with its musical listing of herbs "Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme". The English and their gardens are like the French with their cheese or the North Americans with their cars. It was that great English writer Rudyard Kipling who memorably enjoined the English race's love of the garden with their characteristic pragmatism.

"Our England is a garden, and such gardens are not made By singing: -"Oh, how beautiful!" and sitting in the shade."

Gardening is hard work but tremendously rewarding and there is a trick to it. An old gardener told me years ago that the secret to a successful garden is to design it for the nose not the eyes. If the smells of the plants are well balanced, the colours and textures will be too.