

HERTFORDSHIRE GARDEN HISTORY

Volume II

Gardens pleasant,
groves delicious



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Planting the gardens: The nursery trade in Hertfordshire

Elizabeth Waugh



Much is written of the design of great gardens and the evolution of garden style, of garden designers and the ambitious owners who commissioned their work. Far less is recorded about the suppliers of planting materials – those who produced the quantities of trees, shrubs and flowers required to flesh out the design, who took the tender plants discovered in faraway places and developed the conditions they required to flourish, who experimented with the technology needed to preserve and exploit them, and who themselves came eventually to develop new varieties. Nurseries do not figure large in garden history, yet their contributions are a significant part of the whole. Though businessmen working in commercial enterprises, for the great nurserymen the profit motive seems subordinate to the excitement of discovery, the scholarship of plant lineage, the beauty of form and colour, the stimulating and satisfying of garden fashions.

Over time from beginnings such as ‘nursery’ areas fostering young and special plants within great gardens, nurseries developed into independent businesses, some of which were great commercial empires. Head gardeners with all their unique skills became directors of nursery firms separate from the gardens they were employed in. In Hertfordshire the history of notable nurseries and the great gardens they serviced can be followed over the centuries from the early period of the Tradescants to the present day. However, attempts to follow this connection are frustrated by a lack of business records either preserved by the nurseries or held with the accounts of households they serviced. Listings of plant materials and who grew them, who ordered them, their cost, how they were used in or influenced garden designs and so on are scarce, as from

year to year such papers were not considered interesting or essential enough to preserve, just as successive generations in the nurseries themselves faced with volumes of paper accounts found it best to dispose of them. However, it is possible, from the few catalogues and household accounts and the like that do survive, to try to sketch a larger picture of the general process.

A discussion of the planting of gardens in Hertfordshire offers insights for a view of the evolution of the nursery trade in England from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Although the British Isles, scraped by glaciers and cut off from larger land masses by sea, have relatively limited native flora, the temperate climate proved hospitable to many new introductions and skilled gardeners improved their status by being able to find methods of providing what was needed to keep tender introductions safe. A focus on a few individual gardeners and nurserymen of Hertfordshire from consecutive periods models the trends in what was available to be purchased to stock the show gardens and how and where such stocks were held.

As the world had opened out to British explorers, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century enthusiasm for collecting rare, new and exotic plants, and for bringing them home to adorn competing gardens and enhance prestige, was manifested by the Cecil family at Hatfield House as its famous gardens were established. John Tradescant the Elder came to Hatfield in 1610 to work as a head gardener but spent much of his time travelling, sent by his employer Lord Salisbury to follow up connections that must have been established earlier in his life. He collected new plants to fill the designs being developed by Lord Salisbury with the help of his gardeners and directed the culture and acclimatising of this new flora. Tradescant became a nurseryman – although not selling his plants and so not running a plant business – when he opened his own showground for the plants he had collected for himself and built on by exchanges with other gardeners at home and abroad, in London. That the grounds were in Lambeth rather than in the country areas where Tradescant had worked indicates the importance of London as the centre of cultivated taste and fashion in plants as in all things. London's dominance as the centre of the nursery trade continued until the late eighteenth century when nurseries began to appear in the provinces and gain prominence as transport became easier and London's once sparsely inhabited land areas gave way to housing.

Moses Cook in the later seventeenth century worked with three partners to open an early, very successful commercial nursery in Brompton Park, London, although he too had established his reputation and personal wealth in Hertfordshire, working for the Capel family as head gardener at Hadham Hall and later at Cassiobury. Like other nurserymen to follow, Cook wrote a book, well received in his time, which must have helped enable him to have the authority to commend plants and methods of planting to customers later on. He and his partners struggled with the identification and naming of plants, a necessity for nurserymen which continued to be problematic for the following generations.

William Malcolm – proprietor of a famous eighteenth-century London nursery, Malcolm’s of Kennington – traded in Hertfordshire, as references to buying Malcolm’s plants in some of the preserved accounts testify. Wealthy estate owners of the time in Hertfordshire continued to look to high-class London nurseries for a supply of the best plants, while relying on local suppliers for vegetable seeds and more ordinary garden needs. Since Hertfordshire estate owners had continuing London connections, such as houses or work in the city, it was not too distant to look there for bulky plant materials and the roads sufficed for their transportation. In a rare surviving plant catalogue, Malcolm leads the way in tying his plant names to the new Linnaean system, enabling firmer identification. The grandiose frontispiece to this catalogue depicts in allegorical form all that important nurseries of the time sought to offer: a wide range of plants and trees from around the known world, a scientific knowledge of plant requirements, skilled rare plant culture through engineering of special shelters and growing areas, and the tools and materials to carry out cultivation.

By the nineteenth century, at the heyday of the Hertfordshire nursery of Thomas Rivers and sons of Sawbridgeworth, many such commercial enterprises had opened in the provinces supplying locally and, if their reputation warranted, much further away too. The railway age had begun and efficient wide-ranging transport was easier. The local developing middle classes started to become customers and their needs were met not only by the supply of plants but through books, in Rivers’ case a continuing supply of texts to help in the cultivation of plants such as roses (much in demand at the time), fruit varieties for glasshouse orchards and more. By this time, although the collecting

of unusual species continued, if no longer at such a pace as for earlier nurserymen, plantsmen did not hesitate to experiment in order to develop new varieties – to pollinate for vigour, taste and timeliness of production of fruit, for example – despite the restrictions of established faith. Darwin was using these nurserymen's findings to support new theories of development. The established order of creation, which might be sought but not tampered with, was being questioned.

In the twentieth century, after the World Wars had brought about great social changes, many of the family-owned traditional nurseries declined and were closed. The loss of the great estates as customers, the increase in labour costs and the dispersal of the newly mobile local working population were factors in their decline. The spread of land required for growing on young plants disappeared under new housing. New kinds of nurseries grew up to supply the still voracious appetite for gardening; garden centres with their impersonal serve-yourself attitudes, stocked with plants grown elsewhere, became successful. Other models were council nurseries. Digswell Nursery in Welwyn Garden City is an interesting example of a nursery that was established to supply the needs of a new town. Central to the town design were ideas of planting, and a steady supply of plant materials of different kinds was required as well as the manpower to produce and set out what was grown. Digswell Nursery supplied that need through the period of the corporation and later as the council nursery.

What follows is a closer look at some notable nursery figures and their businesses and, as far as possible given the scarcity of good records, at the gardens they worked in.

John Tradescant at Hatfield House: Collector of exotic plants

John Tradescant the Elder is one of the great gardening names of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. His reputation was established at Hatfield House in Hertfordshire where his activities can be traced through household accounts still preserved.¹ His achievements are an early example of what came to be foundation skills for later commercial nurserymen. His early development of gardening expertise resulted in his becoming a head gardener working for a noble and influential patron, initially at Hatfield. In addition to his accomplishments within the grand garden in planting and design, he was sent travelling to discover and bring back exotics. Having been sought out to work in other notable