

GROWING OBSESSION

BY TIM WATERMAN



FOREGROUND / **PLANTS**

ABOVE
The Sackler Garden
by Dan Pearson Studio
viewed from the
Garden Café at
the Garden Museum.

Just upstream and across the River Thames from the long, neo-Gothic bulk of the Palace of Westminster, which contains the houses of Parliament and the tower that contains the bell Big Ben, are two venerable buildings that have been added to since the Middle Ages. One is Lambeth Palace, the official London residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The other is the old church of St Mary-at-Lambeth, now the home of the Garden Museum.

The Garden Museum's main focus is British gardens and gardening, including not just the most elaborate and vaunted ones, but also a more intimate history of smaller gardens.

Featured in particular are those of the middle classes, which have given Britain the sense of being a "nation of gardeners." For landscape architects with an interest in either stately or domestic gardens in Britain, the museum, which has been recently redeveloped and now includes a building addition, two newly designed gardens, a superb café, and an expanded collection, will be a delight. Rather than serving, as a botanical garden might, to narrate garden history through garden spaces, the Garden Museum's collection gives a more personal-scale view through tools and ephemera that help relate the space of the garden to the space of the imagination and desire. The museum fits compactly into the space of a historic neighborhood church and the tightly bounded urban churchyard.

THE COLONIAL PAST AND THE HORTICULTURAL PRESENT TAKE TEA AT LONDON'S GARDEN MUSEUM.

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GARDEN MUSEUM

The colonial past and the horticultural present take tea at London's Garden Museum.

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The Garden Museum opened in 1977, following the church's deconsecration, but it had come perilously close to demolition—its creepy, boarded-up dereliction made it suitable for use as a location for the supernatural horror film *The Omen*. It was saved by the efforts of garden enthusiasts Rosemary and John Nicholson, who were drawn to the place because of its association with the great 17th-century plant hunters and naturalists John [Tradescant](#) the Elder and his son (the Younger), who are both buried in the churchyard, alongside William Bligh, himself a plant hunter, and whose ship, the *Bounty*, uncomfortably crammed full of potted breadfruit plants, was the site of [a famous mutiny](#). The Tradescants' elaborate tomb, once in the churchyard of St Mary-at-Lambeth, what is now the site of the museum's new extension and its courtyard, is adorned with reliefs of exotic Mediterranean landscapes, and on one panel, a deeply carved many-headed hydra and a skull—a memento mori. The hydra would become a metaphor, in the 1700s, for the multiple insurgencies of piracy, mutiny, and slave rebellion faced by the British Empire in the early days of globalization.


The plantings by Christopher Bradley-Hole play nicely against a foil of yew. *Photo courtesy of the Garden Museum.*

The museum, in fact, is full of such reminders, and the English garden in modernity—since the 1600s—is itself a record, not just of a love of beauty, nature, and design, but of a violent history of conquest. Plant hunting is now a much more gentle quest, and the fruits of vigorous global botanizing, courtesy of Bleddyn and Sue Wynn-Jones of the celebrated Welsh nursery [Crŷg Farm](#), are visible in Dan Pearson's design for the new Sackler Garden. [Dan Pearson](#) is a celebrated British plant designer and horticulturist whose practice employs a number of landscape architects. Pearson's courtyard garden, barely 1,000 square feet, replaces the staid knot garden that once occupied the churchyard around the tombs, and it is framed by a light but confident bronze-clad addition by [Dow Jones Architects](#). The bronze cladding echoes the scaling bark of the vast London plane trees that ring the museum, and some of the apparent lightness of the structure may be attributed to the fact that it had to be built without foundations, due to the roughly 20,000 bodies that have been interred

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in the churchyard since before the Norman Conquest.

One wonders if the roots of the plantings mingle with bones. If so, it's heartening to think of the death below springing into life above. Some of the new addition around the courtyard of the Sackler Garden covers the old churchyard, but not the tombs of Vice Admiral Bligh and the Tradescants, which now visually anchor Pearson's design. Plantings have an Anglo-Dutch sensibility, arising from the continuing conversation between British designers such as Pearson and the powerful influence from the Netherlands, particularly [Piet Oudolf](#).

Among the plants, *Ficus carica* 'Ice Crystal' is one of the stars here—it is literally starry—its striking palmate snowflake-starburst leaves spangling away in one corner. Everywhere plant forms are celebrated. There is no distracting variegation, so one is given the luxury, for example, to contemplate just what a softly unearthly hue of green is *Melianthus major*, or just how starkly alert the stems of *Equisetum* are. Plantings are in succinct drifts—just large enough for an appreciation of the massing, but not so much as to become a monoculture. Plant forms are accentuated by these tight groupings. Plant heights are seemingly random, but the courtyard is small enough that low spots frame vistas punched through. From the new Garden Café inside the new extension, those views are to an educational kitchen and a classroom—the [Clore Learning Space](#)—where city kids can get their hands on plants, soil, earthworms, and food, though not all at once. “Many children in this neighborhood haven't seen a worm or touched a plant,” says the museum's director, Christopher Woodward. All these rooms have clean, elegant glazed walls facing the courtyard. The café has glazing on two sides, and Pearson's plantings continue in a narrow strip before the street. One dines amid the plants.

At the main entry to the museum, the old church door, is another garden created by the minimalist designer [Christopher Bradley-Hole](#). When I visited in August, the garden was incomplete, with gravel where there will soon be Croatian limestone. The space is formed by two elongated lozenges, edged round with waist-high clipped yew hedges. The outline of the space is traced out with bright LED strips at the base of the hedge. The use of such lighting has already lapsed into cliché owing to overuse, and here, as in so many other applications, any sense of mystery or shadow is sacrificed. Though the space is generous and its expanse of reflective stone will light up the heavy shade under the plane trees, it is both bland and static, and small areas of perennial planting near the door lack the verve of Pearson's choices.

Planting plan. *Image courtesy of Dan Pearson Studio.*

There is continuity, at least, from the lighted outline of the garden to the museum interior, where strip lights continue up the stairs and along the balconies. Visitors' faces are uplifted as they gaze at the exhibits. As in the courtyard, where the building must not intrude upon the historic remains, the museum is a freestanding installation within the old church structure that must not touch the walls. As a result, the structure, of blond wood, twines and floats through the arches and recesses. The

collection housed in the museum was originally composed of vintage tools, which over the years expanded to include garden ephemera. There is now an archive (which includes the records of the British garden designers [John Brookes](#), [Beth Chatto](#), and [Penelope Hobhouse](#)) and a growing selection of books, artworks, plans, and drawings. Highlights include [Humphry Repton's 1793 Red Book for Sundridge Park](#) in Kent and [Dominic Cole's general layout plan for the Eden Project](#). The design drawing display is limited, but there is much else to delight garden enthusiasts.

At the end of the church is a gallery for temporary exhibitions (this autumn there will be one dedicated to Repton), and opposite, where the altar once stood, is now a small room with an idiosyncratic miscellany on display called the Ark Gallery. It is a reference to the Tradescants' private museum by that same name, once one of London's wonders and a classic cabinet of curiosities. Some of the items are on loan from the [Ashmolean Museum](#) in Oxford, and include such items as a Native American ball club, elk skulls, a statue of Saint Fiacre, the patron saint of gardeners, and, most bizarre, a hoax object called a "vegetable lamb." This was purported to have been a plant that fruited sheep. The "lamb" is, in fact, pieced together from nascent, fuzzy fern fronds. The miscellany might seem random, but it helps to see how the garden was viewed as a collection, or a naturalist study by the Tradescants rather than primarily as a designed or aesthetic space.

Standing in the Ark next to a portrait of Tradescant the Elder with some of his collection of exotic seashells, I ask Woodward whether the museum will have international appeal. "The thing about plants," he replies, "is they're as local as the flower in your eye or as distant as a breadfruit." The Tradescants believed that all the dispersed plants of Eden could someday be collected in a botanic garden. What better place to contemplate the cosmopolitan nature of the garden, and the darker side of conquest, than a museum at the heart of a former empire.

Tim Waterman lives in London and teaches at the [University of Greenwich](#) and the [Bartlett School of Architecture](#). You can follow him on Twitter [@tim_waterman](#).

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