

**THATCHING AND GARDENING: THE TRADITIONAL
BRITISH CRAFT**

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Thatching

Thatching is the use of straw or grasses as a building material. Using thatch for roofing goes back as far as the Bronze Age in Britain. At Shearplace Hall in Dorset there are remains of a round hut that shows signs of thatching.

Thatched cottages and farm buildings were the norm in rural Britain for a millennium or more. Why the attraction to thatch?

First of all, the building practices of bygone Britain ran to lightweight, irregular materials, such as wattle and daub walls. These walls were simply not made to take much weight, and thatch was by far the lightest weight material available. The study of materials used in thatch buildings can get pretty obscure. But basically, people used whatever was available locally.

This meant materials as diverse as broom, sedge, sallow, flax, grass, and straw.

Most common is wheat straw in the south of England, and reeds in East Anglia. Norfolk reed is especially prized by thatchers, although in northern England and Scotland heather was frequently used.

Although thatch was primarily used by the poor, occasionally great houses used this most common of materials. In 1300 the great Norman castle at Pevensey (Sussex) bought up 6 acres of rushes to roof the hall and chambers.

Much later, in the late 18th century thatched cottages became an extremely popular theme with the "picturesque" painters, who tried to portray an idealized version of nature.

Churches also used thatch frequently. In one humorous episode the parish church at Reyden, near Southwold, was roofed in 1880 with thatch on the side of the church hidden from the road, and with tiles on the side facing the road. Presumably the tiles looked more elegant than the more commonplace thatch. So how does one thatch a cottage? First the thatch is tied in bundles, then laid in an underlayer on the roof beams and pegged in place with rods made of hazel or withy.

Then an upper layer is laid over the first, and a final reinforcing layer added along the ridgeline.

It is at the ridgeline that the individual thatcher leaves his personal "signature"

Thatching is a part of traditional British architecture!

It is the sight of a beautiful whitewashed cottage, a blooming rose bush climbing a trellis beneath a roof of weathered thatch. Long live the thatcher!

English Gardens

The earliest English gardens that we know of were planted by the Roman conquerors of Britain in the 1st century AD.

It is a carefully symmetrical formal planting of low box hedges split by graveled walks.

The hedges are punctuated by small niches which probably held ornaments like statues, urns, or garden seats.

There is also a small kitchen garden which is planted with fruits and vegetables common in Roman Britain.

We know very little about the gardens of Anglo-Saxon England, which is another way of saying that the warlike Anglo-Saxons did not hold gardening to be important.

It was not until the Middle Ages that gardens once more became important in British life. Monasteries had both kitchen gardens and herb gardens to provide the practicalities of food and medicine.

The monastery cloister provided an open green space surrounded by covered walks, generally with a well, or fountain at the centre.

Castles sometimes made room for small courtyard gardens, with paths through raised flower beds. Other common features of medieval castle gardens include turf seats and mounts, which provided a view over the castle walls.

Garden styles at a glance

Roman Britain: formal, low hedges
Medieval: small enclosed, with turf seats and mounds
Tudor: knot gardens, enclosed in hedges or walls
Stuart: formal Italianate and French styles
Victorian: bedding plants, colourful, public gardens
20th C: mixed styles, herbaceous borders

The next stage of the English garden came after the Reformation. Many landowners enclosed common land to create parks for keeping deer or cattle.

The most prominent contribution of the Tudors to gardening was the knot garden. Knots were intricate patterns of lawn hedges intended to be viewed from the mount, or raised walks. The spaces between the hedges were often filled with flowers, shrubs, or herbs.

The Stuarts were slaves to the French fashion for formal gardens. The chief feature of this French style are a broad avenue sweeping away from the house, flanked by rectangular parterres made of rigidly formal low hedges.

In the Victorian era the pendulum swung again, to massed beds of flowers, exotic colours, and intricate designs.

The Victorian period also saw a profusion of public gardens and green spaces aimed at bringing culture to the masses.

Gertrude Jekyll is arguably the most influential gardener of 20th century England. She popularized the herbaceous border and planning a garden based on colour schemes. Gardening has always been a matter of personal taste.

It is hard to find unaltered examples of historical gardens in England.

Yet, throughout Britain there are gardens great and small, formal and informal, private and public, that illustrate the British passion for creating green, growing spaces of their own. All are different, and all, like their owners and creators, have a distinct personality.