

Exploring townhouse gardens in the ancient Roman world

Our aims: to reconstruct as far as we are able the appearance - the layout, the plantings and the ornamentation - of household gardens in this world; and to try to assess the importance which a garden assumed to the householder.

Our sources: until recent times our only sources of information on what a Roman garden looked like were Pliny's descriptions of his gardens at his villas at Laurentum and Tifernum (*Letters* 2.17 and 5.6); hundreds of wall paintings preserved at Pompeii after the eruption of Vesuvius; and scattered observations of the 450 or so houses in Pompeii which had gardens. In the last 40 years the work of Wilhemina Jashemski has allowed us for the most part to confirm, and to supplement, the conclusions which have been drawn from these other sources. (And her methodology will be of some interest to us.)

The tradition of the productive garden; the decorative garden

The hortus (the productive garden). The window-box of Roman apartments (Martial, *Epigrams* 11.18). The adoption of the Hellenistic peristyle (a colonnaded courtyard at the rear of the house). The Romans' development of the peristyle.

What did the peristyle garden look like? A combination of statuary, foliage and, by C1AD, water. Plantings might be formal: this is suggested by Pliny in his letters 2.17 and 5.6 about his villa gardens (but see below). Certainly ivy was used (Cicero, *Letters to his brother Quintus* 3.1.5).

Statuary is supplied by Athenian stonemasons (in white, or more rarely, coloured marble). Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 1.6.2; 1.8.2; 1.9.2; 1.10.3. The market for reproductions. Bronzework.

The building of the aqueduct to Pompeii (C1 AD) ensures a reliable supply of water. This brings two kinds of changes to garden design in the city: the water 'feature' (fountains, pools, etc) and the planting of the low shrubs which can survive only with regular watering.

Plantings: in the main the householders preferred greenery to floral display. Ancient sources mention plane trees, myrtle, box, cypress, acanthus, rosemary (but actual remains are rarely found). Garden paintings show viburnum, oleander, laurel (bay) and flowering plants (roses, poppies, lilies, violets, marigolds).

Jashemski's excavations: in gardens which have been relatively untouched (notably in the garden at the House of Polybius, and at 7 others). Analyses of pollen; of carbonized plant material; study of root systems (by means of casts). Through the latter Jashemski has been able to plot the planting in a garden (or an orchard or a vineyard) - and tentatively to identify the trees and shrubs which were growing there in 79 AD. She concludes that peristyle gardens included formal and informal elements.

The importance of the garden to the householder.

References

Ancient sources

Cicero, *Letters to his brother Quintus*, *Letters to Atticus* (Loeb Classical Library)

Martial, *Epigrams* (Loeb Classical Library)

Pliny the Younger, *Letters* (Loeb Classical Library; Penguin Classics): see 2.17 and 5.6

Modern sources

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Martial, *Epigram* 11.18

Lupus, you have given me a country property close to Rome, *but I have a bigger property in my window*. Can you speak of this as a property, call this a property? In it a rue plant makes a grove of Diana, the wing of a shrill cricket covers it, an ant eats it up in a single day, for it the petal of a rosebud is a garland. Grass is not found therein any more than Cosmus' leaf or green pepper. A cucumber cannot lie straight in it and a snake cannot live in it at full length. The garden hardly feeds a single caterpillar, and a gnat dies when it has consumed the willow, and the mole is my ditcher and plowman. A mushroom can't gape, figs can't split, violets can't open. A mouse ravages the borders and the farmer fears him like the Caledonian boar. The crop is in a swallow's nest, lifted up by flying Procne's claw. And there isn't room for half a Priapus, though he stand without sickle and cock. The harvest when completed hardly fills a snail-shell and we lay down the must in a tarred nut. You made a mistake, Lupus, but only of one letter. When you gave me land (*praedium*), I'd rather you had given me lunch (*prandium*).

Pliny the Younger, *Letter* 5.6 (extract) (Betty Radice's translation)

. . . Between the grass lawns here there are box shrubs cut into innumerable shapes, some being letters which spell out the gardener's name or his master's; small obelisks of box alternate with fruit trees, and then suddenly in the midst of this ornamental scene is what looks like a piece of rural country planted there. The open space in the middle is set off by low plane trees planted on either side; farther off are acanthuses with their flexible glossy leaves, then more box and names.

At the upper end . . . is a curved dining seat of white marble, shaded by a vine trained over four slender pillars of Carystian marble. Water gushes out through pipes from under the seat as if pressed out by the weight of people sitting there, is caught in a stone cistern then held in a polished marble basin which is regulated by a hidden device so as to remain full without overflowing. The preliminaries and main dishes for dinner are placed on the edge of the basin, while the lighter ones float about in vessels shaped like birds or little boats. A fountain opposite plays and catches its water, throwing it high in the air so that it falls back into the basin, where it is played again at once through a jet connected with the inlet.

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