

London's Garden Museum: Oasis Of Tranquillity In A Majestic Church Building

By: ITM London



An impressive archive



Lecture at the museum

Once it was a church. Today St Mary-at-Lambeth houses the Garden Museum, an oasis of tranquillity in a majestic building. It is the first museum in the world dedicated to the history of gardening. The museum's extensive collection is a tribute to the ingenuity and creativity of gardeners throughout the ages.

The rediscovery of the tomb of 17th century plant hunters, the John Tradescants, in the churchyard of St Mary-at-Lambeth led John and Rosemary Nicholson to save the church from demolition and set up the museum in 1977. The church building was beautiful

but not functional as a museum. Something had to be done to bring it into the 21st century.

So ten years after its establishment a competition was organised for a new design. The winners were Dow Jones, a London-based architecture practise. The

Autumn in the museum



Magical tulips





designers created a free standing timber structure and the name of the museum was changed from the Museum of Garden History to the Garden Museum. While doing the history of gardening proud the museum has an impressive programme or exhibitions,

symposia and other events. «It is as much about the last 30 or 40 years as about the last 400», the museum's website assures us. It does on to describe the museum's main gallery which is the main body of the church. The collection comprises three main

categories: tools, ephemera and a library. The tool collection includes items purchased at auction and donations from individuals and horticultural companies. The ephemera includes items such as prints, photographs, bills, catalogues and brochures, and gives an insight into the social history of gardening as well as the

practical aspects of the subject. The library of historical and contemporary books is accessible to anyone who pays the subscription to join the «friends of the museum». The museum covers the whole range of gardening, from royal gardens to allotments.

The objects on display range from

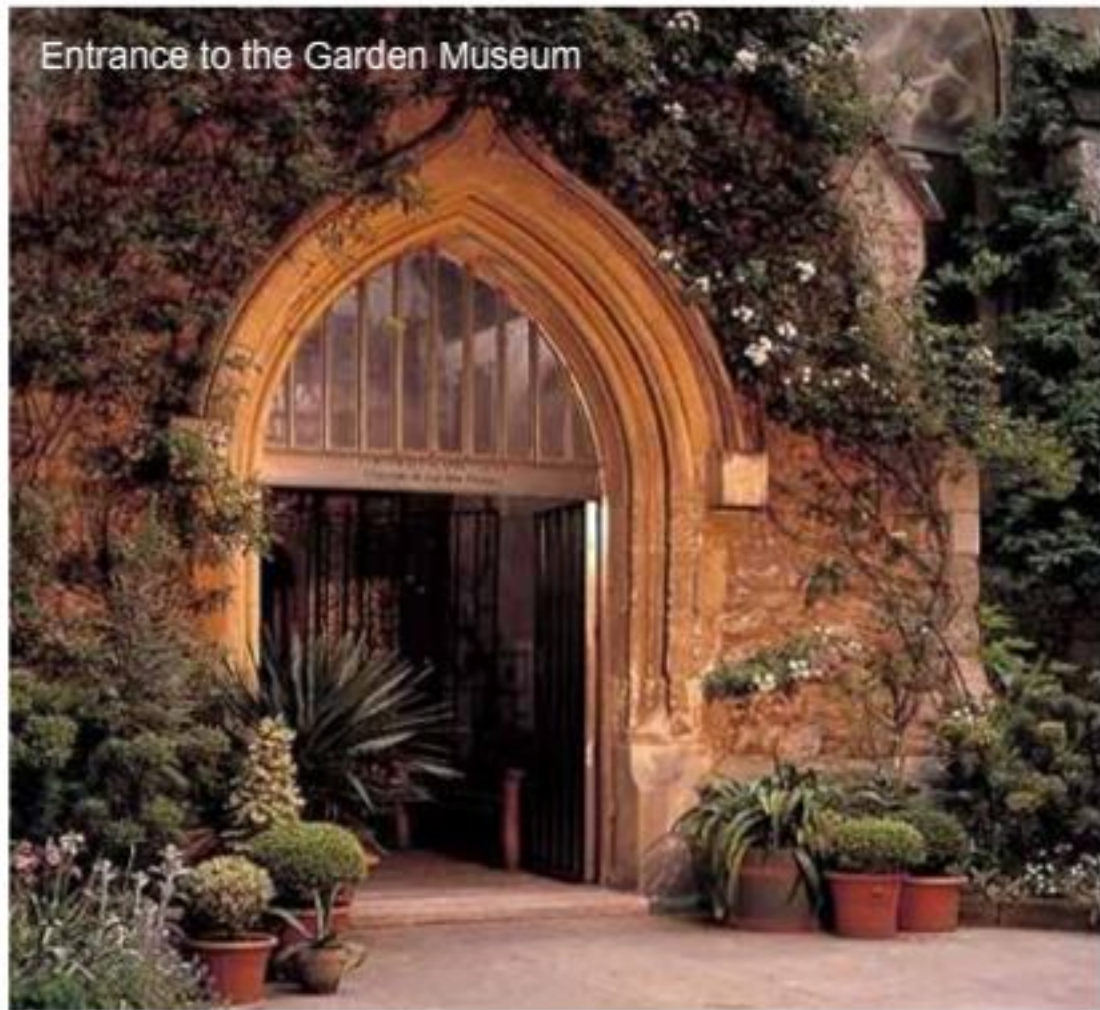


Enjoying the displays

Splendid flowers



Entrance to the Garden Museum



specialist equipment made for grand country estates to improvised tools put together by enthusiasts in their own back gardens. The earliest objects on display include ceramics that were made several hundred years ago. The Victorian and Edwardian periods are particularly well represented in the collection, while

there is also a good representation of gardening since 1950.

In the early 1980s, a 17th century style knot garden with authentic plants of the period was created in the churchyard

The Museum gardens provide a peaceful retreat for both visitors and wildlife alike, and are much appreciated by local office workers

who enjoy a welcome lunch-break in a beautiful environment. The traffic may still speed by, but inside the garden walls, the pace eases a little and visitors enjoy the garden at whatever level they choose, from knowledgeable plants men inspecting flowers in detail, to those who understand little of horticulture but still enjoy relaxing

in a garden environment.

Inner-city gardening can be a challenge, and this garden is perhaps more demanding than most, with thin, free-draining soil and poor air quality. In the knot garden plants are selected for historic interest, rather than on a 'right plant right place' basis, and they often become stressed,



Flowers in the garden museum

The museum's
garden



especially during hot summers.

However, the garden also benefits from a micro climate that means tender and borderline hardy plants can be grown with ease. Banana, oleander, and olive thrive, *Mirabilis jalapa*, usually grown as an annual, appears year after year and agapanthus flowers almost every month. *Iris germanica* has been

known to flower in March, nasturtium behaving as evergreen climbers and *Phlomis fruticosa* bloomed all last winter. The museum is particularly proud of an 8 year-old specimen of *Echium fastuosum* partnered by the structural *Geranium maderense* wrapping round the base of the west facing wall of the building.

The garden is currently home to the museum's artist in residence Charlotte Verity, who will be using the gardens as inspiration for an exhibition in 2011. Charlotte studied at the Slade under William Coldstream. Her most recent solo exhibition at Browse and Darby gallery in 2007, was entitled

London Garden.

The museum's curator Christopher Woodward wants the museum to become the busiest place in London for the debate about gardens. "Gardening gets you in the end. Napoleon became a keen gardener at the end of his life on St Helena".

