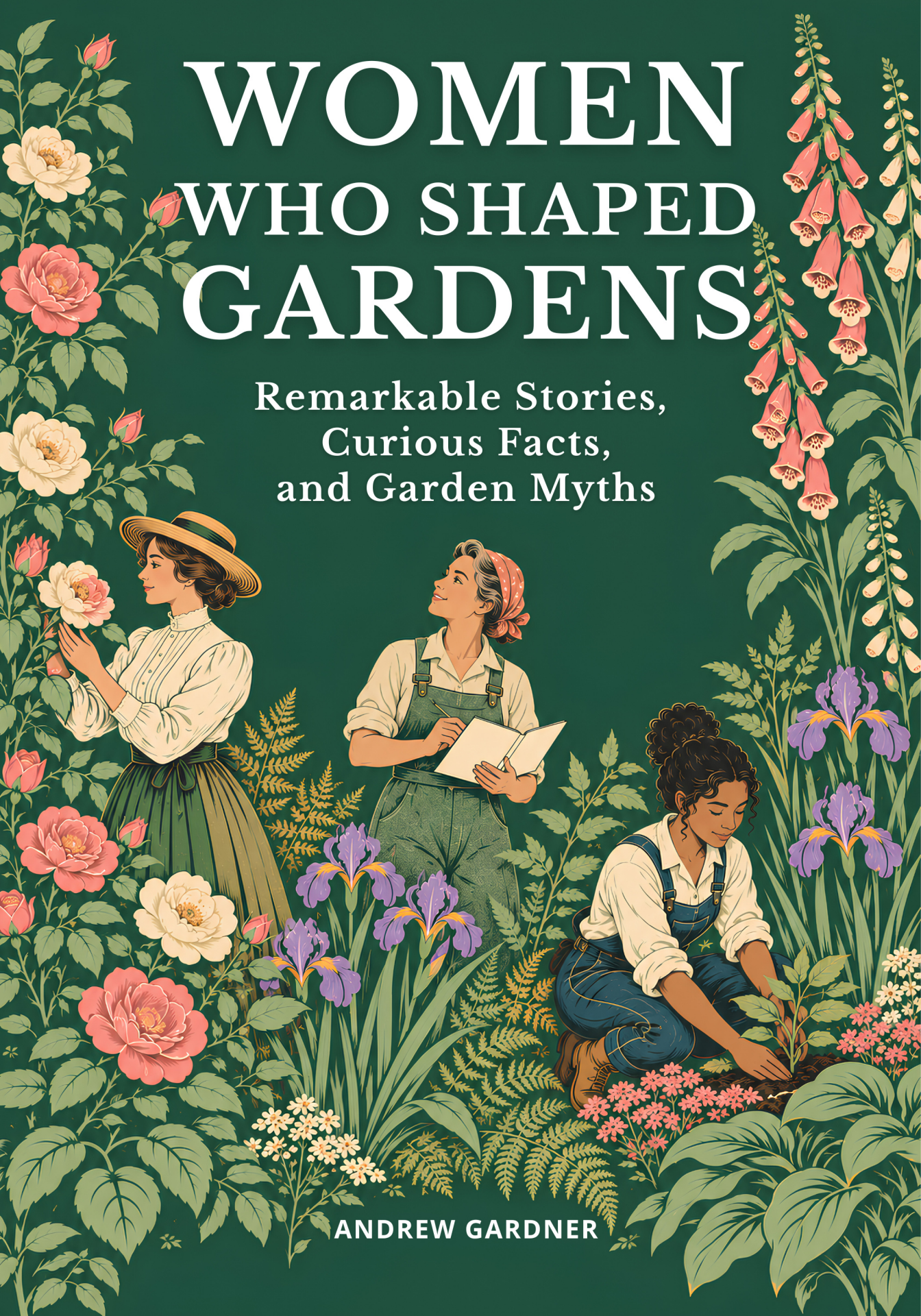
WOMEN WHO SHAPED GARDENS

Remarkable Stories, Curious Facts, and Garden Myths



ANDREW GARDNER

Women Who Shaped Gardens

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A Note from the Author

The women in this book lived in different centuries, countries, and circumstances. Some had the wealth to create extensive gardens. Others tended modest plots or earned a living from their knowledge of plants. I was drawn to their stories by something they all shared: a love of gardens and growing things.

That love could mean raising food, breeding flowers, studying plants, or finding a place for a tree. It could also mean painting or describing a garden so carefully that others began to see it differently.

I chose women whose work revealed these connections. Some names are familiar; others deserve wider recognition. Their stories show how many ways there are to contribute to a garden and how much knowledge grows from attention to plants.

Their lives often differed greatly from ours, but we still share familiar experiences: waiting for seeds, welcoming a favourite flower, wondering why a plant failed, and trying again. Across the centuries, gardens connect their lives with ours.

The curious facts, old beliefs, and myths in these pages reflect that connection too. People have long given flowers meanings, told stories about trees, and sought explanations for what happens in the soil. Some ideas withstand examination; others endure as memorable stories. Both reveal our lasting interest in growing things.

These women also worked with others. Families, gardeners, nursery workers, and local communities contributed labour and knowledge. Their part belongs in the story.

This is a selection of stories rather than a complete history. My hope is that it encourages you to look more closely, ask another question, or learn more about someone you first encounter here.

The next time you admire a garden, perhaps you will wonder who helped make it possible.

Andrew Gardner

Three stories to begin with

A selection from Women Who Shaped Gardens by Andrew Gardner.

This preview includes three complete chapters, their illustrations, and the full contents list.

HATSHEPSUT

Trees on Board

A royal expedition brings living trees home to Egypt.

MARIA SIBYLLA MERIAN

The Caterpillar Comes with the Plant

Close observation connects flowers, insects, art, and discovery.

BETH CHATTO

The Garden That Replaced a Car Park

A former parking area becomes a garden suited to its conditions.

Click a story above to start reading. The extracts retain their original book page numbers.

In the full contents list, chapters outside this preview link to information about the complete book.

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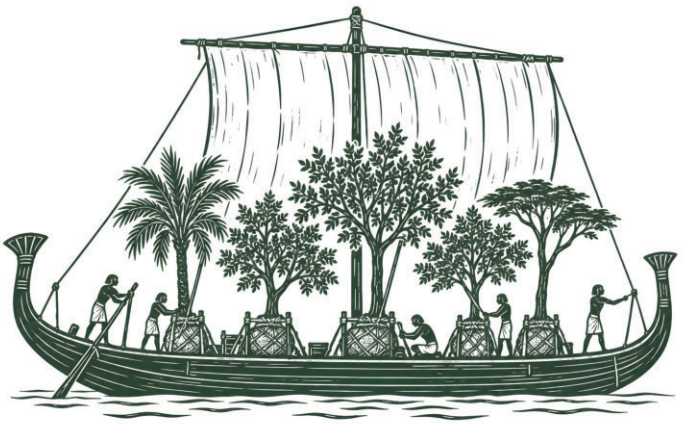
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Chapter 1

Hatshepsut: Trees on Board



Some royal treasures fit neatly into a chest. Hatshepsut's arrived with roots. On the walls of her temple at Deir el-Bahari, men carry small trees towards waiting ships. Other scenes show the cargo being loaded and the imported goods presented to the ruler. Among the riches brought from the land of Punt, living plants had earned their place in a royal monument.

Hatshepsut ruled Egypt in the fifteenth century BCE. Initially regent for the young Thutmose III, she later assumed the title and authority of pharaoh. Her expedition to Punt became one of the achievements celebrated on her temple walls.

The trees were valued for the aromatic resin they produced, used as incense in religious worship. Resin could be packed and shipped. A living tree offered something more: the possibility of producing it in Egypt.

It also made a more troublesome passenger. A chest of ivory did not need to survive the journey. A tree did. Getting the plants aboard was only the beginning; they still had to reach Egypt alive and take root in unfamiliar ground.



Transporting incense trees, as depicted in a relief at Hatshepsut's temple, Deir el-Bahari. Photograph: Olaf Tausch, CC BY 3.0; detail digitally processed by Ismoon, CC BY-SA 4.0. Via Wikimedia Commons.

The temple inscriptions connect this precious cargo with a garden. In the royal account, the god Amun speaks of the imported trees being planted around his temple. Bringing plants from a distant land was presented as both a royal achievement and a gift to a god.

This was not the beginning of Egyptian gardening. A wooden model made roughly five centuries earlier shows a pool surrounded by sycamore fig trees, complete with little red fruits. Gardens already had a long history when Hatshepsut's ships set out.

Her place in this story rests on royal patronage: an expedition that brought home plants as well as products. The reliefs celebrate the undertaking, but they are no record of daily gardening. They cannot establish whether she personally planted a tree, or how many of the imports flourished.
What remains is a remarkable choice of cargo. Alongside valuable goods came trees that required care and offered the prospect of future harvests.

Few deliveries from a plant supplier have earned a place on a temple wall.

Chapter 14

Maria Sibylla Merian: The Caterpillar Comes with the Plant



On 21 April, the caterpillar became a pupa. On 10 May, a moth emerged. Between those two dates lay a wait that no amount of skill with a paintbrush could shorten.

Maria Sibylla Merian recorded these changes in the account accompanying her illustration of a banana plant. She had found the caterpillar on the plant and fed it with its leaves. Beside the fruit and flower, her picture showed the insect at different stages of its life. The beautiful page had a feeding routine and a calendar behind it.

For a gardener, a caterpillar on a leaf might be something to remove. For Merian, it was something to keep alive.
Born in Frankfurt in 1647, she grew up in a family of artists and publishers. Her stepfather, the flower painter Jacob Marrel, taught her artistic skills. By thirteen, she was already keeping silkworms and watching their transformations.

Flowers also offered a way to earn a living. In Nuremberg, Merian taught painting and embroidery, and published flower designs that others could use in their own work. A carefully drawn bloom could become a pattern for stitching. The insects, however, required more than a convincing likeness. They needed food, repeated observation, and time.



Tulip and insects, plate 2 from Maria Sibylla Merian's Der Raupen wunderbare Verwandelung und sonderbare Blumennahrung, volume 1, Nuremberg, 1679. Hand-coloured engraving. University Library Erlangen-Nürnberg, via Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.

Her first caterpillar book appeared in 1679, followed by a second volume in 1683. Plants and insects shared the illustrations. A leaf was no longer simply an attractive shape: it helped explain how another creature lived.
A caterpillar, a pupa, and a winged adult could appear together, although their appearances belonged to different moments. Merian assembled those moments on the page. Her readers could follow a transformation without having to spend weeks looking after its participants.

Sometimes, however, the expected moth or butterfly failed to appear.

Instead, flies or tiny wasps emerged from the caterpillar or its pupa. Merian recorded these puzzling events as "false transformations". A creature she had been feeding seemed to have produced an entirely different kind of insect. The explanation involved another life hidden within the one she was watching. Certain insects lay their eggs in or on a host. Their young develop at its expense and eventually kill it. These are now called parasitoids. The caterpillar had not changed into a wasp: it had been carrying the wasp's developing offspring.

Merian documented such cases repeatedly. Her observations were stronger than her first explanation, and she continued investigating. By the third caterpillar book, published in 1717, the relationship was correctly explained. The unexpected result had become part of the research.

There was also a practical business behind the pictures. In 1691, Merian and her daughters, Johanna Helena and Dorothea Maria, settled in Amsterdam. Together they established a studio, producing images of plants, birds, and insects for buyers.

Both daughters learned the family's artistic skills, and Johanna Helena developed her own career as a flower painter. Merian's work belonged to a household in which more than one woman could draw, paint, and earn money from close attention to nature. The daughters would also help carry her observations beyond her lifetime.

In 1699, aged fifty-two, Merian travelled to Suriname with Dorothea Maria. There she investigated tropical insects and the plants on which they lived. Illness brought the journey to an end in 1701.

This work took place in a Dutch colony sustained by slavery. Merian relied on the knowledge and assistance of enslaved people, and her writing recorded some of their suffering. The information behind her pictures came partly from people whose lives were very different from those of the European collectors who would buy them.

Her Suriname book appeared in 1705 with sixty plates. The banana illustration was among them.

Turning observations into a book required another series of transformations. Designs became engravings on copper plates, from which impressions could be printed. Colour was added by hand. Merian also offered a more expensive version using counterproofs, impressions transferred from freshly printed sheets, whose softer outlines could give the finished image something of the appearance of a watercolour.

The work therefore existed in several forms: a living subject, an artist's study, an engraved plate, and a coloured sheet. Each stage required different skills. A reader turning a page encountered the result of both natural history and skilled production.

The earlier European illustrations offer a useful comparison with the tropical plates. In the tulip illustration from her first caterpillar book, a garden flower shares the sheet with insects. The blossom remains conspicuous, but it does not occupy the page alone. Long before the voyage to Suriname, Merian was already making room for the smaller lives around familiar plants.

The banana plate rewards the same attention. Its fruit may attract the eye first, but the accompanying account follows an individual caterpillar through feeding, pupation, and emergence. The dates turn an ornamental-looking composition into a record of patient work.

After Merian's death in 1717, Dorothea brought further observations into print. The family's work continued beyond the life of its best-known member.

Merian's interpretations were not always correct, but her pictures asked readers to notice relationships as well as beautiful forms. The flower, the leaf, and the creature eating it belonged in the same account.
For the picture to be completed, the caterpillar needed its share.



Banana plant and stages of an insect's life, plate XII from Maria Sibylla Merian's Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium. Engraved by Pieter Sluyter. Image via Wikimedia Commons; public domain.

Chapter 81

Beth Chatto: The Garden That Replaced a Car Park



Cars once stood where Beth Chatto's drought-tolerant planting would become famous. When a larger parking area became available at her Essex garden, the old one acquired a different purpose. Beth and her team would test whether carefully chosen plants could make a garden sustained by rainfall.

This was a particular site, not a promise for every patch of ground. The former car park lay over deep, free-draining sand and gravel in one of England's driest regions. Those conditions offered an opportunity for plants adapted to dry places, while ruling out many others.

Work began in autumn 1991. Compacted ground was broken up, and organic matter was incorporated. In early 1992, Beth laid out the beds with hosepipes, adjusting their curves on the ground. A hose could contribute to a dry garden without supplying a drop.

Planting began that spring. Root balls were thoroughly soaked beforehand, and the plants were watered in. The celebrated absence of irrigation describes the garden thereafter, not a refusal to give newly planted roots an initial drink. Rainfall would provide the continuing water supply.

Behind the experiment stood decades of observation. Andrew Chatto's study of plant habitats had helped shape Beth's understanding of what different plants needed. Her own experience of arranging flowers informed the composition: suitability was essential, but so were the relationships between shapes, textures, and colours.



Poppies at Beth Chatto Gardens, Essex, 21 June 2024. Photograph: Mark, "Beth Chatto Gardens - Essex", via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0.

The result was not simply a collection of survivors scattered over stones. Curving beds and paths evoked a dry riverbed. Trees and shrubs gave height and shelter, while bulbs, perennials, grasses, and self-seeding plants contributed changing layers. The planting could look spontaneous while remaining a considered composition.

Nor did withholding irrigation remove the need for gardeners. Beth kept notes on what thrived and what needed moving. Plants that failed were removed, and pruning could reduce stress during hot spells. The experiment depended on attention as well as restraint.

The Gravel Garden made adaptation visible. Its lesson was to understand the place, select accordingly, and keep observing. A former car park became a garden because someone read its conditions closely, then continued to work with them.

There is more to discover

Women Who Shaped Gardens

Remarkable Stories, Curious Facts, and Garden Myths

Explore all 89 chapters: women whose work changed gardens, the stories behind familiar plants, and old beliefs examined with curiosity.

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Thank you for reading.

Andrew Gardner