

Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh

The botanic gardens in and around Edinburgh form part of the network of royal gardens throughout the UK and is not managed by the University of Edinburgh. The origin of the gardens, however, is due to two physicians, also among the founders of the College of Physicians, and thereby the origin of the gardens is linked to academic pursuits in Edinburgh. The following article is copied from the Sibbald Library web site: <http://www.rcpe.ac.uk/library/read/college/physic-garden/physic-garden.php>. The article on the Royal Botanic Gardens is from their web site: <http://www.rbge.org.uk/about-us/home>

The Sibbald Physic Garden

by Dr M A Eastwood

Two physicians, Robert Sibbald (1641-1722), seen to the right, and Andrew Balfour (1630-1694), altered the way in which medicine was practiced in Edinburgh. They, with others, established the College of Physicians; each was a founding Fellow and later became President.



They had both travelled extensively in Europe during their studies of medicine. It is known that Sibbald met and stayed with the great Scottish gardener Morrison in Blois at the garden of the Duke of Orleans.

Sibbald described this in his autobiography:

"I had from my settlement here in Edinburgh a designe to informe myself of the natural history this country could afford, for I had learned at Paris that the simplest method of Physic was the best, and these that the country afforded came nearest to our temper, and agreed best with us. So I resolved to make it part of my study to know those animals, vegetables, mineralls, metals and substances cast up by the sea, were found in this country, that might be of use in medicine, or other artes usefull to human lyfe."

Sibbald and Balfour were friendly with Patrick Morray, Laird of Levingstone (now Livingston). Morray was a keen gardener, who with other gardeners throughout Europe, exchanged seeds and information (Patrick Morray died of a fever in Avignon (1671) during a long tour of Europe (1668-71) on his way to Italy). Sibbald and Balfour visited Levingstone to admire his collection of nearly a thousand plants. This gave rise to the plan to establish a medicine garden in Edinburgh.

In 1671, "Doctor Balfour and I first resolved upon it, and obtained of John Brown, gardener of the North Yards in the Holyrood Abby, an inclosure of some 400 foot of measure every way. By what we procured from Levingstone and other gardens, we made a collection of eight or nyne hundred plants ther'."

The purpose of the garden was to supply fresh plants for medical prescriptions and to teach medical botany to students. The garden was looked after by James Sutherland (1639-1719) who later became the Professor of Botany in the Town's College. Balfour and Sibbald were appointed Visitors to the Garden. In 1676, it was obvious that the garden was too small so Balfour leased from the Town Council a second garden which belonged to the Trinity Hospital. The site of this garden can be found by platform 11 in Edinburgh Waverley Station, where there is a commemorative plaque. In

1763 the garden moved to an expanded site near Gayfield Square to the west of Leith Walk and then in the early 1820s it moved to the present site in Inverleith Row. The garden is the second oldest surviving in Britain after Oxford (1632) and ranks in importance with Chelsea Physick Garden (1673) and Kew (1759).

The Principles of the Physic Gardens



The constraints of the site at the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh made it impossible to construct a full scale Physic Garden. Therefore designs were drawn up to put in place a modern interpretation, which would reflect the importance of plants to mankind throughout the ages.

Plants were initially selected from the writings of four different eras. The garden was laid out in four beds accordingly, The Early Herbalists, The 16th & 17th Century, The 18th & 19th Century (including the influence of the American herbalists) and finally, The 20th & 21st Century. As the new garden had to function primarily as an ornamental feature, the plants selected were then evaluated for seasonal interest, horticultural merit and anecdotal value.

The Beds in the Physic Garden

The layout of four beds with integrated seating around a bust of Sibbald allows space for contemplation and good circulation for small outdoor gatherings. The plants are arranged within the beds to provide good architectural and design value.

Bed One The Early Herbalists, features plants included in the writings of the Roman and Greek herbalists Pliny, Theophrastus and Dioscorides. Other plants were selected from the writings of the Emperor Charlemagne who decreed that medicinal plants should be cultivated throughout the land to aid his troops.

Bed Two The 16th & 17th Century, focuses on the rise of herbalism in Great Britain from the late 15th to the 17th Century with the work of the well-known herbalist and botanist William Turner, who is considered to be the father of English botany after the publication of his book *A New Herball* between 1551-1561. Well known contemporaries of his included John Gerard, John Parkinson as well as Nicholas Culpeper who published *The English Physician* in 1652.

Bed Three The 18th & 19th Century, which follows the railings, celebrates the contribution made during the 18th and 19th centuries by Philip Miller and Elizabeth Blackwell as well as the discoveries of new plant treatments from the Americas.

Bed Four The 20th & 21st Century, celebrates the use of plants in medicine today, and looks into the future with research into the use of new plant compounds.

(for a full description of the plants in the four beds, please see the full article on the web site)



Royal Botanic Gardens

The history of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE) dates back to 1670 when it began as Scotland's first physic garden on a modest patch of ground at Holyrood Park no bigger than a tennis court.

In a turbulent age when Scotland was impoverished by centuries of civil war and both Cromwell and bubonic plague had left their mark on the capital city, Edinburgh still managed to produce the skills, resources and determination to create one of Britain's first botanic gardens.

Two adventurous doctors, Robert Sibbald and Andrew Balfour, who met in France after travelling widely in Europe, leased their first plot near Holyrood Abbey with the help of local physicians prepared to pay for the cost of the "culture and importation of foreign plants".

The collection of plants expanded with the British Empire. From a site at the head of the Nor' Loch, now the site of Waverley Station, the Garden relocated out of the city centre in 1763 to a 'green field' site on the ancient high road to Leith.



Original site of the Garden near Holyrood Abbey



The final move to Inverleith in 1820 took three years and a lot of ingenuity to deliver the entire collection of plants and mature trees using transplanting machines invented by the Curator, William McNab.

As the Garden grew, gaining the grounds of Inverleith House for the arboretum and the former territory of the Caledonian Horticultural Society for the Rock Garden, so did the wealth of plants collected by Scottish plant hunters in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

In a partnership between botanist and gardener, the plant hunter George Forrest introduced more than 10,000 specimens between 1905 and 1932 with the support of the then Regius Keepers Isaac Bayley Balfour and William Wright Smith.

RBGE grew across Scotland during the 20th century, exploring Scotland's variable growing conditions at Benmore in Argyll, Dawyck near Peebles and Logan in Galloway.

Web site: <http://www.rbge.org.uk/>