

Growing History at the 1620s House



Photo: Zoltan Hamori

We love coming to the 1620s house at Donington Le Heath, Leicestershire for our 2 fairs in May and August. You can almost feel the history well up out of the ground and in 2017 more history was growing in the new 1620s vegetable garden.

The garden was dug out in the winter of 2016-17 and planted in four beds to allow “rotation” of crops with vegetable types and varieties you could have seen growing at the house in the 1620s.

The onion bed includes garlic and leeks as well as traditional round onions.

The pea and bean bed is a little different from today’s. There are no runner beans: these did not arrive until in Britain until the 1700s. Instead Broad Beans were grown widely and eaten both fresh and dried. Field peas rather than the sweet, juicy garden peas of today were grown to dry and store through winter. The pot marigolds interplanted with the onions deter pests and the flowers would be have been used to create a soothing ointment.

The third bed is for the brassicas (cabbage family). This would have included Kale, Collards (like spring greens) and even Brussels sprouts which arrived in the UK in 16th Century.

The fourth bed is for root crops. There are no Potatoes: these had arrived in England from the Americas but were rumoured to be poisonous being part of the nightshade family. Another nightshade, Tomatoes, were also something of a curiosity at this time and grown as ornamental plants.

Skirret, a member of the Parsley family, was fashionable, although now largely consigned to the history books. The mass of slender roots must have been a bind to clean for cooking. Carrots and Parsnips, which would replace Skirret in the nation’s stock pots, were already grown. Carrots at this time came in white, yellow or purple forms—orange came a lot later! Parsnips were valued for their large roots and sweet taste.

The root bed includes a leaf crop called Good King Henry (probably named after Henry V of France). This is known as Poor Man’s Asparagus, Perennial Goosefoot and Lincolnshire Spinach—take your pick!



“The vegetable garden has crops that could have been found growing in the 1620s”

Photo: Plant Hunters’ Fairs



“The onion bed includes leeks and garlic”

Photo: Plant Hunters’ Fairs

In the main garden you will find Royal Medlar which is said to have a better flavour than the common-or-garden one. It is known as “cul de chien” in France: “Dog’s Backside” - if look at the top of the fruit you can see why!

The fruits are hard and acidic, but become edible after being softened, 'bled', by frost, or naturally in storage given sufficient time. Once softening begins, the skin rapidly takes on a wrinkled texture and turns dark brown, and the inside reduces to the consistency and flavour reminiscent of apple sauce. This process can confuse those new to medlars, as a softened fruit looks as if it has spoiled.

Once bled, the fruit can be eaten raw and is often eaten as a dessert or used to make medlar jelly. They are used in "Medlar cheese", which is similar to lemon curd, being made with the fruit pulp, eggs, and butter.

Thanks to the Friends of the Garden for their useful signs that contributed greatly to this article

We have our usual two plant fairs here in 2018:

(because of the way calendar falls this year our May event is on the Saturday of the Early May Bank Holiday weekend)

Saturday 5th May 2018

Sunday 5th August 2018

Times 10am - 4pm

Fair, gardens and grounds £1.00 House open (additional charge if you decide to visit the house)

Free parking Dog’s on leads welcome in the fair and garden Cafe open throughout.

1620's House and Garden, Donington Le Heath, Coalville, Leics LE67 2FW

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“Medlar is known as ‘cul de chien’ in France: ‘Dog’s Backside’”



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