

Peas at the palace

The recently re-created Royal Kitchen Garden at Hampton Court Palace allows visitors to see how produce for the royal court may have been grown during the 17th and 18th centuries

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Royal Kitchen Garden Keeper Vicki Cooke and Graham Dillamore, Gardens and Estates Operations Manager, Historic Royal Palaces.

Garden restoration projects frequently uncover fascinating glimpses into the past, but there can be few sites that were once the playground of kings where jousting tournaments were held, while later providing vegetables for the royal table.

At Hampton Court Palace in Surrey there is a newly re-created kitchen garden that exudes history and ambience at every turn. The plot, formerly part of the enormous tiltyard set out in the 16th century, was a legendary and popular place of entertainment for Henry VIII (1509–1547), the undisputed king of the joust. But when the passion for royal tournaments faded, the 2.5ha (6 acre) plot was dug up and put into cultivation, initially during the reign of joint monarchs William and Mary (1689–1702), and subsequently by Queen Anne (1702–1707). The meticulously grown produce that grew here fed the royal household at the Palace, as well as other royal residences across London.

A young fan-trained apricot 'Moorpark' has been planted to take advantage of the warmth provided by the old kitchen-garden walls.





HISTORIC ROYAL PALACES

Early June in the new Royal Kitchen Garden (above), with majestic Hampton Court Palace in the background. William and Mary, who also had the palace remodelled, had a garden created here in the late 17th century in place of the Tudor tiltyard.

While the original layout is unknown, this design is based on historical documents. It includes a central tree seat (left) and makes good use of the walls.

Crops are generally contemporary with the period, though pea cultivars (below) are mostly Victorian.



HISTORIC ROYAL PALACES



Re-creating the past

'In its day, during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the Hampton Court Palace garden was the premier fruit and vegetable supplier for the royal court,' says Graham Dillamore, Gardens and Estates Operations Manager for Historic Royal Palaces. 'This whole area's purpose was to produce fruit and vegetables. The size of the royal court at that time, with all the courtiers and various members of the households, meant there were quite a few hungry mouths to feed.' It was in production until around 1842 when it moved to the Frogmore Estate at Windsor, and the land once again was put to other uses. Some areas eventually became a rose garden, a café or part of the palace car park. 'We are constantly looking to improve and develop the gardens at Hampton Court Palace, so that they have a better relationship with the historic stories and background of the palace,' Graham says.

While authentic historical features from the period when the garden was used are included – such as hollow brick walls for growing apricots, a plunge tank for watering the crops and a fantastic potting shed and gardener's office – this is not a facsimile re-creation of the original kitchen garden. Detailed plans no longer exist, so the garden has been reinvented from detailed period research and surviving garden records.

'The most accurate plan that we have of this area is the John Roque plan of 1736,' says Graham. 'We took that and created a version of the garden which we think would be a close copy of what would have been there in 1736. We are lacking in detailed accounts of what vegetables were grown but there are lists available that tell us what was generally found in kitchen gardens during that period.'

'We had some historical research carried out from our own archive information and archaeology that, rolled in together, enabled our landscape architect and garden historian Todd Longstaffe-Gowan to produce the final plan.' As a result, the site has been redesigned with densely planted, productive beds, edged with flowering perennials, especially herbs, to create an ornamental kitchen garden feel, within the heat-holding, red-brick walls. A fine timber tree seat, planted with a young quince (*Cydonia oblonga*) marks the centre point.

Generous, wide paths of resin-bonded gravel (which allow wheelchair access) dissect the design allowing visitors to be close to the plants.

Heritage seed historian

Royal Kitchen Garden Keeper Vicki Cooke formerly worked for the Heritage Seed Library at Garden Organic. 'I spent six years growing the vegetables we used for seed production,' she says. 'We were working with such historical cultivars, all with great stories, so we naturally learned their history as we grew them.' She spent months of painstaking research choosing interesting and authentic selections to grow for this exciting new project.

'We are trying to create a picture of the late 1680s to 1840s period of the garden, but that pre-dates many >>>



After harvesting (above), some produce from the Royal Kitchen Garden is sold to staff and garden visitors.

Attractively coloured chard 'Vulcan' (right); red beet or chard is first mentioned in Gerard's Herball in 1597.

By July (below) many of the leaf crops are ready to harvest.



vegetables now available. That said, there are still a number of selections around from that time. While things such as potatoes, tomatoes and runner beans would have been novelties, they were grown; as a result, so much of what you see in the garden you will recognise, but we hope there are some things that are unfamiliar,' says Vicki.

Early peas

Peas are a good example. Vicki and her team have been growing attractive old climbing cultivars that reach up to 1.8m (6ft) and are increasingly hard to find as they are no longer grown for commercial pea production.

'Many old pea selections we are growing are Victorian, including a yellow mangetout called 'Golden Sweet' that may have been used by Mendel [19th-century scientist-monk regarded as the founder of genetic science] in his experiments. Also here via the Heritage Seed Library is 'Kent Blue' with attractive pinky blue flowers, which is appealing in bloom as well as a good edible crop.'

Peas were originally grown for drying as a winter protein source. Eating them fresh from the pod only became popular in the UK during the reign of William and Mary after a craze that had come from the French Court. It was seen as the height of decadence, as only the rich could afford to eat their winter protein in summer.

'There is a quote in a 1696 letter by Madame de Maintenon, presumed to be Louis XIV's second wife. She said it was a madness that had taken over the court; after the ladies had supped at the royal table, they would go to their rooms and fill themselves with fresh peas. That's when growers started selecting peas on how delicious and sweet they were to eat fresh, rather than if they were good as a drying pea for winter protein,' says Vicki.

There is no admission fee to visit the Royal Kitchen Garden, as the aim is to make it accessible to everyone, including local schools and societies. Visitors will get a real taste of the work involved in supplying the royal kitchen in times gone by. It also provides a chance to experience a huge range of lesser-known fruit, vegetables and herbs that would have been prepared for the delectation of the resident monarchs. This project is not just about creating a credible historical reconstruction, the Royal Kitchen Garden at Hampton Court Palace is designed to stimulate and engage visitors with real living history and with plants that they can see, smell, feel, touch and even eat. Produce fit for a king is on sale to visitors on an experimental basis, so you truly can feast like royalty. **o**

FURTHER INFORMATION

Hampton Court Palace, East Molesey, Surrey KT8 9AU; 0844 482 7777; www.hrp.org.uk/hamptoncourtpalace
Gardens open 7am-6pm (8pm Apr-Sept). Closed Dec 24-26. Informal gardens free (including Royal Kitchen Garden) but entry charge for formal gardens.

www.rhs.org.uk RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show 2015, 30 June-5 July. For information and booking visit www.rhs.org.uk/hamptoncourt or to order tickets by telephone call 0844 338 0338.