History of Gardening

Medieval Gardens 600 AD –1500 AD   Lecture 4

Gardens played important role in the Middle Ages. Although plantations of the gardens have taken place much earlier, many sources suggest that garden culture in medieval period came firstly from monasteries. By its rural position, economic functions and architectural form, early monasteries were like heirs of ancient villa rustica (countryside villa from roman period), with characteristic peristyle yards linking economic, residential and sacral buildings into a unique micro urbanism ensemble. As it can be seen from the 9th century plan preserved in Abbey of Saint Gall in Switzerland, a visionary spot occupies gardens, orchards and vegetable gardens with all the accompanying commercial buildings and venues. Insisting on such content derives from the need for the monastery to be self-contained in the sense of nutrition and to ensure its basic economic survival. Gardens in Middle Ages were not limited only to monasteries, in fact, it spread rapidly on horticulture of the castles (Figure 12).
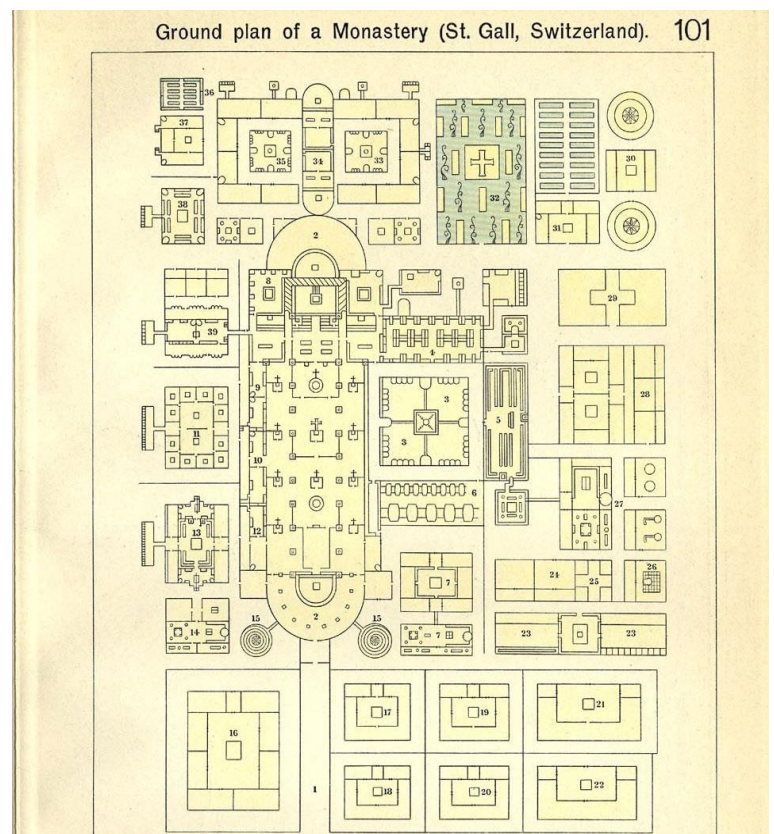

Figure 12: Ground Plan of a Monastery (St.Gall, Switzerland) is a reduced copy from the 9th century.

Early medieval gardens around the castle contained, among other things, turnip cabbage (kohlrabi), cucumber, garlic, celery, cabbage, chickpea, carrot, pea, also parsley, mustard, corn salad, horse bean (*Vicia faba*) and opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*) and there was also a varied horticultural orchard around the castle (Figure 13)

Figure 13: Example of the medieval garden.

Landsberg distinguishes the following monastic horticultural types:

1• Cemetery orchard: the St Gall cemetery orchard would have contained tombs and fruit trees—it symbolized paradise.

2• Infirmary garden: used to grow medicinal plants

• Green court: an area of grass and trees, used for grazing horses and for other incidental functions

3• Obedientiary gardens: obedientiaries might have their own private gardens

4• Cellarer's garden: for growing vegetables, culinary herbs and other utilitarian plants

(e.g. Covent Garden in London, which later became a vegetable market)

 5• Herber: a small enclosed garden containing a lawn and herbaceous plants

6• Vineyard:

7• Kitchen garden: used to grow both food and medicinal plants.

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Castle gardens

Use: Forts had been occupied only by soldiers. A castle was a place for a lord to live with his family, dependents and retainers. Castle gardens were sometimes within the fortifications and sometimes outside. In both cases they were primarily for the use of ladies, children, swains and troubadours. In times of siege, an army, or the whole population of the surrounding area, might occupy the space inside the outer fortifications and trample the garden to mud.

Form: A garden could be a small hexagonal, rectangular, or irregular enclosure, within or near the fortified area. No examples survive but a good idea of their appearance can be gained from the symbolic illustrations in medieval books, which show flowery lawns, trellis fencing, turf seats, tunnel-arbours and a profusion of sweet-scented flowers. Castles also had orchards, pleasure parks and hunting parks outside the fortified zone. There are many surviving castles where one can imagine castle gardens within the inner or outer bailey, and there are some sixteenth-century plans and records of castles with knot gardens.

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Montargis 1560 Louis XII of France (1462–1515) invaded Italy and arranged for his daughter, following d'Este's death in 1560, Renée returned to France and lived in the hilltop castle of Montargis. As a Protestant princess, she had been unhappy in Italy, but despite this had come to love Italian gardens. The hilltop castle to which she returned had a donjon (keep), protected by a turreted outer wall (Figure 14).
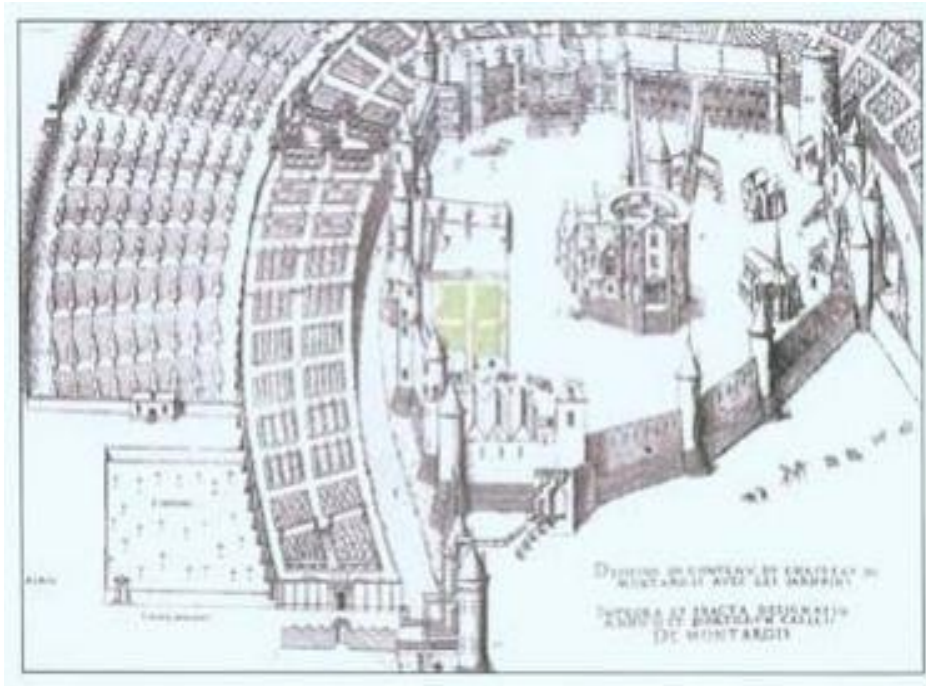

Figure 14: Montargis City

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Town Gardens

Medieval town garden

Use: Lack of evidence besets the study of every aspect of medieval gardens but it seems fair to surmise that the gardens of wealthy burghers near town centers were used like castle gardens while the poor used what land they had for culinary and medicinal plants, some of them decorative. The gardens of the middle classes must have ranged between those of the rich and the poor, with much depending on the availability of space within the walls of a particular town at a particular time.

Form: Evidence from archaeology and from Renaissance maps of medieval towns shows that many gardens were irregular in shape, with boundaries made by buildings, walls, fences, hedges and ditches. Beaten-earth and gravel paths were used to demarcate planting beds. Such gardens are unlikely to have had lawns, as these would have wasted space, fostered weeds and required laborious care.

Bruges 1500

Bruges became the largest trading city in North Europe. Its walls enclosed 3 hectares in the ninth century, 86 hectares in the eleventh century and 400 hectares in the fourteenth century. It was partly planted with trees and flanked by a navigable canal. Wealthy burghers also owned orchards and vineyards in the suburbs, as did their Ancient Greek predecessors (Figure 15).

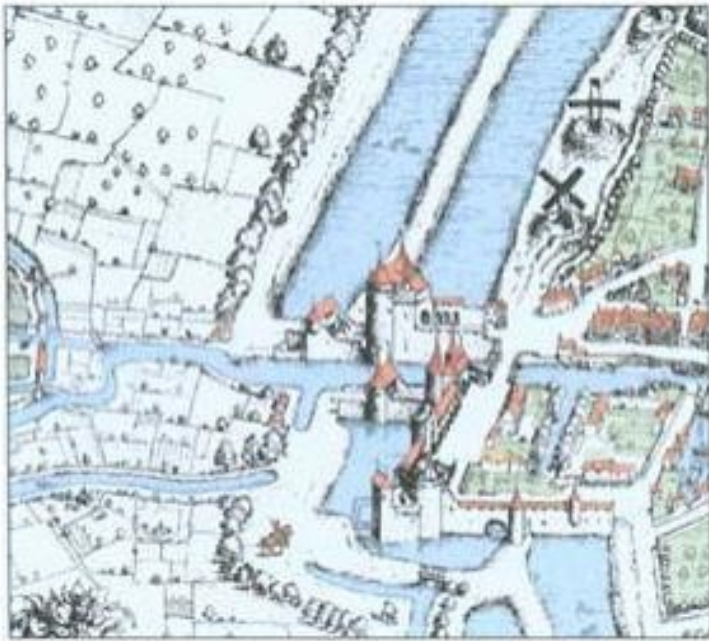

Figure 15: Town gardens inside the gates of Bruges (from the 1562 plan by Marcus Gerards.)

There was a different way that towns were made. People who owned homes were usually freemen, like merchants, craftsmen, and professionals, who needed the town walls to protect them since they didn't have a lord.

Burghers made features resembling those in castle gardens:

• Covered walks: pergolas were used to create shady walks. Vines and roses were the favoured plants

• Arbours: semicircular arbours were used to shelter seating areas

• Seats: these were often covered in turf, herbs, stone or timber, and usually lacked a back support

• Plant beds: these might be raised or sunken

• Turf and flowery meads: both pure grass and flowery lawns were valued

• Boundaries and fences: hedges were used to keep out cattle and other animals. Walls and fences made from wattle and boards were also used

• Fountains: many medieval illustrations show fountains, which are often set in pools

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• Moats, rivers and pools: used for fish and as boundaries

• Fishponds: fishponds were popular and useful features of the

medieval garden

• Dovecots: ornamental, as well as an important source of food.