

Tudor gardens

For most people in Shakespeare's time, gardens were a place to grow extra food to supplement what they had to eat. They were also used to grow herbs used for cooking or medicinal purposes. It would only have been the wealthy who would also have sufficient space to grow decorative plants and shrubs to offer a pleasant space to walk in.

In those days the garden was often seen as an extension of a house, a bit like an extra 'room'. Life indoors was never truly 'private' as servants and family members shared bedchambers, and holes or chinks between rooms would mean that conversations could be easily overheard.

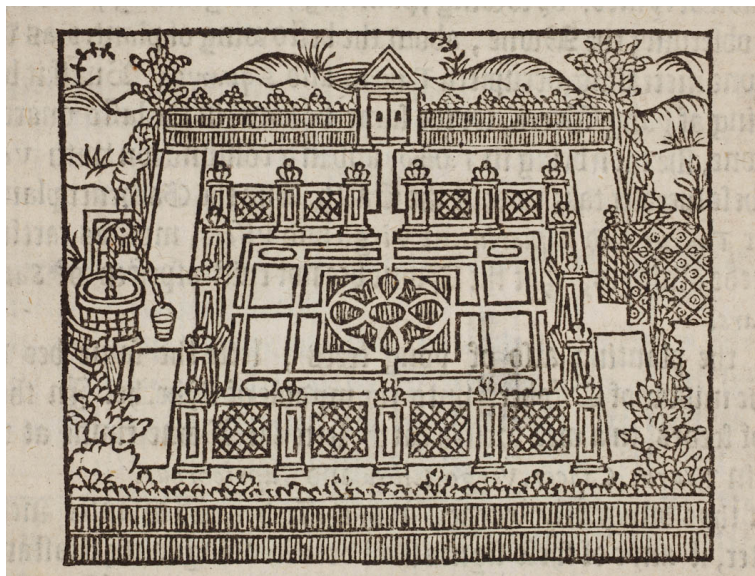
Gardens, with a mix of open and covered spaces, offered the perfect place to find peace and quiet, have private conversations or just be alone. Bowers (a shady place under trees or tall climbing plants) and covered walkways were a good place for this.



The Tudors loved knots and knot designs made attractive patterns which they used to decorate not only their homes, but also their gardens. These were known as 'knot gardens'.

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The knot designs in the garden were created from low hedges of hyssop and thyme that seemed to weave over and under each other. The gaps between the hedges created spaces that could be filled with coloured earths or sweet smelling flowers and herbs. The outer edge of the knot garden was a simple square shape. Inside the square was arked out into quarters, allowing the gardeners to create intricate geometric and symmetrical patterns, sometimes copied from embroidery. The hedges had to be carefully clipped to keep their shape, especially as knot gardens were designed to be viewed from above, either from an upstairs window or a special viewing point called a 'mount'.



An illustration of a knot garden from Thomas Hill's 'The Gardener's Labyrinth', 1577
Held in the Collections of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

Thomas Hill was the first Tudor gardener to publish patterns for knot gardens. His first gardening book published in 1558 offered only one design, but a later book from 1577 called 'The Gardener's Labyrinth' contained twelve new designs for knot gardens.

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There are still knot gardens to be found at various sites across the country, including at Shakespeare's New Place in Stratford-upon-Avon.



The knot garden at Shakespeare's New Place, Stratford-upon-Avon

Activity

In Shakespeare's play 'Twelfth Night', Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew and Maria hide themselves whilst they listen to Malvolio read the letter they sent him.

Design your own garden and remember to include some good hiding places. Draw Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew and Maria hiding in the garden and include some speech bubbles showing what they are saying to each other.