

# Shakespeare and gardens

There are twenty-nine scenes set in gardens in Shakespeare's plays, including romantic scenes, comic scenes and scenes where politics or issues of national importance are discussed.



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

Sometimes in Shakespeare's comedies, characters conceal themselves from each other in gardens and woods at key moments.

In 'Twelfth Night', Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Maria all hide in a box tree in Lady Olivia's garden so they can spy on Malvolio as he reads the letter he believes to be from Lady Olivia.

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In Shakespeare's time, people recognised that flowers and plants had special meaning and importance. They often used them as medicines to treat different ailments. At the same time there were also superstitions around some plants. Shakespeare would have been aware of all this when he mentions different flowers and plants in his plays.

Disease was thought to spread through bad smelling air. To protect themselves, people would wear sweet smelling herbs and flowers. These small and sweet-smelling bunches were known as "tussie mussies".

Shakespeare mentions roses over seventy times throughout his plays, more than any other flower. In 'Twelfth Night' both Orsino and Lady Olivia make reference to roses. Olivia does so when she declares her love for Cesario.

*Cesario, by the roses of the spring,  
By maidhood, honour, truth and every thing,  
I love thee so,  
[Twelfth Night Act 3 Scene 1]*

Roses have been associated with love, beauty and sweetness for centuries, but Shakespeare also used the rose to convey the painful side of love and the passing of time.

The world Shakespeare lived in was filled with roses. Elizabeth I used the white eglantine rose as her emblem. People not only admired roses for their beauty but also their medicinal uses.

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Other flowers mentioned by Shakespeare in his plays include primroses which were used in salads, soups and butter, various parts of the hawthorn bush, the flower of which symbolised love, and the carnation (or gillyflower) which could be made into a cordial to benefit the heart, reduce fevers and drive out poison. Rosemary symbolised remembrance, and it was used as a medicine to improve the memory.



Images of roses and red lillies from  
John Gerard's book 'The Herball or General History of Plantes' held in our collections  
CC-BY-NC-ND Image Courtesy of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

In his book 'The Herball or General History of Plantes' (first published in 1597), John Gerard lists the medicinal properties of many plants including roses, which were thought to be good for pain relief and to encourage sleep. Another plant, the red lily could be used to treat serpent stings or boiled in wine to get rid of corns on the feet, and even to remove wrinkles!