

HAMPTON COURT PALACE GARDEN

STORY AND PICS: SANDHYA SUNIL MAILDM

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The consultancy offers services in landscape design and horticultural resolutions, focussing on the vernacular. Sandhya also does freelance garden writing.



On a recent visit to the UK with time to spare, I had to choose between Stratford Upon Avon and Hampton Court Palace. The lure of seeing the work of Sir Christopher Wren and Lancelot Brown at Hampton Court Palace decided it - Wren, a visionary of the times, was commissioned to rebuild the palace in 1689, and which student of landscape hasn't heard of Capability Brown!

Hampton Court Palace in the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames was the summer residence of the royal family. Through 500 years of various kings, queens and princes it was influenced by Tudor, Baroque and Victorian styles. It is one of the only two remaining palaces of Henry VIII (the other being St James's Palace) who built the most palaces of any British monarch. It is also the venue for the RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show →

ABOVE
The Pond Garden with the Banqueting House at the back.

that follows Henry VIII's principle of it being a 'pleasure palace', and I believe the show is twice the size of the RHS Chelsea Flower Show.

The gardens at Hampton Court Palace, the formal part covering 24 hectares plus parkland of around 300 hectares, have been in cultivation since the medieval period. They have been altered and expanded almost continuously since their inception, making them 'a textbook of English royal gardening styles'.

While traversing through the palace and the gardens, what amazed me was that despite the wars of succession, beheadings, executions, imprisonment and banishment, the royals invested so much time, energy and resources into building up the gardens. Each successive ruler improved and expanded on the previous. What started as Henry VIII's private (privy) garden in 1529 as a foil to his personal apartments, was added to, enlarged and embellished by the successive monarchs. The Privy Garden as seen today is a faithful restoration of William III's version as there were accurate recordings of what existed at that time.

Touring the palace, my mind boggled to keep

track of the six wives of Henry VIII and the fate that befell each of them. But more excitedly, I was keen to see the works of Daniel Marot, Capability Brown, Christopher Wren, and William Kent, and hear of the failed attempts to get the celebrated royal gardener Andre Le Notre to work on the gardens.

The principal aspects of the garden as I noted them were:

1. The Privy Garden

This garden is to the south of the palace with the River Thames forming its edge. The king would arrive by royal barge on the river, and the Privy Garden was the first place to sight the palace from. This invested the garden with a lot of importance and all the rulers used it to proclaim their power. Many statues and sculptures were placed here, all showcasing the might of the sovereign. Today, most of the statues are housed in the Orangery. I noticed others still in the garden had been wrapped up to protect them from the winter frost.

Henry VIII had the garden arranged with a central path and ten sections on either side,

BELOW
The Courtyard with chimneys.





planted with roses, carnations, sweet William, and primroses to name a few. The sections were edged by rails in Tudor colours. Each section also had a sundial.

Elizabeth I's French gardener remodelled the sections into knot gardens with topiaries. Under William III and Mary II, the Privy Garden took on a baroque expression. A water gallery was preventing the natural progression of the garden to the river, and so William III ordered the entire garden to be lowered!

Jean Tijou, a reputed French blacksmith, created wonderful gates, screens, and railings in wrought iron. These screens have been restored beautifully and form part of the fencing between the garden and the river.

2. The Great Fountain Garden

This was created by William III and Mary II to complement their new baroque-style palace. Their gardener, Daniel Marot, created a garden containing 13 fountains, of which only one remains today, and planted two radiating avenues of yew trees (*Taxus baccata*) in the fashionable form of a goose foot. Initially, the yew trees were kept neatly pruned. Subsequently in the mid-18th century, Capability Brown, who was



TOP TO BOTTOM
Toadstool-shaped yew trees; Map of the current gardens at Hampton Court Palace.

head gardener, allowed them to grow to their current height.

This area is by far the most astonishing spectre of the gardens. Seen from the upper level windows of the palace, the yew trees look like giant bulbous mushrooms. Standing under the trees is a surreal experience, like being under a dense umbrella where nothing penetrates. They have been shaped back to their 'pre-Capability Brown form', but where the →



original topiaries were a manageable 2.5 metres tall, they now stand at nearly 12 metres tall!

3. The Pond Gardens

Mary II was a keen plant collector and she assembled plants from all over the world, many of them brought by the merchants of the Dutch East India Company. She converted the sunken ponds, created by Henry VIII who kept fish in them to feed the Court, into beds to grow her exotic collection. As observed by a traveller in the 17th century, amongst the collection were aloes, myrtles and oranges. She also had primulas, tulips, anemones and ranunculas. The beautiful blue and white Delft vases she used to display the tulips can be seen in the palace. It

TOP TO BOTTOM

The Privy Garden was lowered to view River Thames. It was also a setting for placing statuary; The Tjouw-designed wrought iron screen.

OPPOSITE TOP TO BOTTOM

Looking back at the palace apartments; The Hampton Court Maze of yew and hornbeam.

being winter at the time of my visit, the garden beds didn't have much of the flower colour.

4. The Maze

Then there's the famous maze designed by royal gardeners, George London and Henry Wise, and built during William III's reign. Trapezoid in shape, it is planted with yew and hornbeam and is reportedly UK's oldest surviving hedge. We adults needed the help of my 9-year-old nephew to find our way safely out of the maze!

5. The Great Vine


This is massive. It is a grape vine that Capability Brown planted as a cutting in 1768. At the time he was unable to bring his ideas to Hampton Court Palace as he was paid only for the upkeep of the gardens and to manage the kitchen garden, which supplied fresh fruit to King George III. Even so, 'Capability' wrought his magic to the vine he planted and it flourished in the sheltered southern part of the garden. By 1800 it was producing over 2000 bunches of grapes and by 1840 the vine covered over 204 square metres. Today it produces about 300 kg of dessert grapes a year.

6. The Royal Kitchen Garden

The previously scattered produce areas were consolidated into six walled gardens. William III's head gardener, George London, introduced

ideas from Louis XVI's kitchen garden at Versailles. The emphasis was on growing seasonal herbs and vegetables. It is reported that the harvest of 1838 yielded pineapples, apples, melons, pears, raspberries and strawberries. Old salad varieties, many of which are not at all familiar to us, included hartshorn, buckshorn and red sorrel.

A recent addition (in the 1950s) is the Laburnum Walk in the Wilderness. At the time of my visit in winter the laburnum had been pruned back ready for the new growth of spring.

Returning from my visit, I felt a strong sense of the continuity in the garden from the time of its inception over 500 years ago. To see the execution of the works of famous gardeners and landscape designers, and of multiple generations, and to evidence the living history, be it in the form of the great grape vine, the yew trees or the maze, was really deeply stirring. What would it be like to see the collection of the exotics (re-created) of Mary II in spring and summer, and to see the blaze of the laburnum! 



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