



THE CONSERVATORY AT WADDESDON MANOR

## FRONDS WITH BENEFITS

*Indoor plants may have found new popularity in the Instagram age, but fashionable foliage has been used as diverting decoration in British homes since the reign of Queen Anne.*

*By Catherine Horwood*

## INTERIORS

Millennials may believe that they have invented the fashion for massing greenery in their homes, but the trend could arguably be said to have started with Queen Anne. In 1704, she began using her 'greenhouse' at Kensington Palace, created for storing orange-trees in the winter, for summer parties, where guests could take advantage of the citrus plants' bosky foliage and heady scent. Royalty were of course the influencers of their day, and Anne's example was swiftly followed by the aristocracy, at venues such as Longleat, where Jeffry Wyattville designed an orangery for the 2nd Marquess of Bath, and the curved neo-Mughal conservatory at Sezincote in Gloucestershire.

By the end of the 18th century, the fashion for partying with plants meant that a thriving industry had sprung up renting out greenery for balls. Pots were painted, chalked or covered in coloured paper; plants were displayed in recesses, on side tables and in front of mirrors to reflect them. As Humphry Repton put it in his 1816 work *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*:

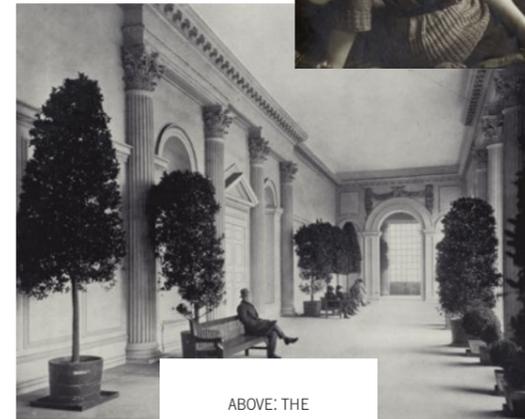
*No more the cedar parlour's formal gloom  
With dullness chills, 'tis now the living room,  
[...] Here, midst exotic plants, the curious maid  
Of Greek and Latin seems no more afraid.*

Soon, no self-respecting windowsill or conservatory was without its scented or brightly coloured pelargoniums. 'Zonal' varieties, with flowers in pinks, purples and scarlets, first introduced as an indoor accessory by the Duchess of Beaufort in 1704, were popular. Meanwhile, fruit-trees were brought in for dinner parties from which, according to the 1825 volume *The Green-house Companion*, 'during the dessert, the fruit is gathered by the company. Sometimes a row of orange trees, or standard peach trees, or cherries, or all of them, in fruit, surround the table of the guests.'

This was also the era in which camellias, still thought of as 'exoticks' because they needed a frost-free environment, peaked in popularity. 'The number of Camellias raised every year both in England and on the Continent almost exceeds belief; and in America they are so highly prized as ornaments for the hair, &c., that a dollar is the common price for a single flower,' reported *The Ladies' Magazine*



LEFT: THE DUCHESS OF BEAUFORT IN THE 1920S. BOTTOM RIGHT: THE DUKE AND DUCHESS OF CAMBRIDGE'S WEDDING IN 2011



ABOVE: THE ORANGERY AT KENSINGTON PALACE IN 1704. BELOW: THE ORANGERY AT LONGLEAT

*of Gardening* in 1842. The Duke of Devonshire commissioned Joseph Paxton, the horticultural architect of the Crystal Palace, to build conservatories at both Chatsworth and Chiswick House just to store his collections of the treasured blooms. While the former was demolished in 1920, the camellia house at Chiswick still stands, and visitors flock there every spring.

In domestic settings, the practice today is less for flowering houseplants than for abundant greenery. Plants prosper when grouped together, and no more so than as part of a wall of

mosses, trailing spider plants and clinging ivies. The interior designer Rose Uniacke has filled her courtyard with vines and trees of differing heights and leaf shapes; while the florist Shane Connolly, renowned for his use of potted trees in Westminster Abbey for the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, favours the rarely seen *Sparmannia Africana*, the African Hemp, which lends drama to any room. 'If grown properly, it is beautifully architectural without being harsh or hard-edged,' he says.

Among all this foliage, there is still a place for flowers. Connolly often uses outdoor perennials and bulbs for indoor displays, and indeed, bulbs are a mainstay of my own approach. While many choose hyacinths for Christmas tables, my favourites are paperwhite narcissi (a bowlful of the 'Ziva' variety, often grown on pebbles in water, will provide weeks of scent). Amaryllis, correctly known as *Hippeastrum*, lie dormant until potted up and are easily kept from year to year. Start your bulbs in a warm corner to give them a boost until the bud shows, and look out for subtle varieties such as 'Green Magic' or 'Lemon Lime'. With a collection of these two bulbs in your home, the winter flowering season can be extended over weeks, heralding life, hope and the advent of spring. □

*'Potted History: How Houseplants Took Over our Homes'* by Catherine Horwood (£9.99, Pimpernel Press) is out now.



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