

## A Dated Garden Part 2

### The horticultural re-creation of a Victorian garden

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*wanted a garden with plants true to the period of her house. This is the story of her research and the creation of the garden*

I've been thinking - if I'm only planting one rose that leaves me with space for a second climber. Or should that be a wall shrub, or a shrub that's crown lifted? And I need some evergreen interest for winter ... I have **privet** in mind.



*Ligustrum japonicum* (Wikipedia)

Now, seeing as I can't wait to evict my current privet hedge, why on earth am I contemplating a new one? It's that scent thing again. I'm one of those who love, not hate, the scent of privet in bloom come July. And there are species of it that deserve a place as specimen shrubs.

My copy of Hillier's manual comes out again, this time to discover two evergreen privets introduced before the 1890s. But will they prune appropriately? Do their blossoms live up to my expectations in the scent department? Who stocks them any

more? More research is needed seeing as I'm only closely acquainted with the bog-standard variety. I'm hoping I can grow my new one as a crown-lifted shrub, and the foliage needs to be more elegant than the one I'm digging out, that's for sure. There's a warning signal in the back of my mind, though: the privets at Eltham Palace, in London, have grown into gigantic trees since being planted in the 1930s! Will I be saved from making a mistake by nothing being available? It'll be hard to stop my heart ruling my head.

Now where on earth do I find a mature example of **Ligustrum japonicum** or **L. lucidum** in flower, or, if I'm not insistent on totally evergreen qualities, a specimen of **L. sinensis**, or **L. quihoui**? Should I just take a chance and resign myself to digging it out if it's not working. No, that would create havoc in a small space. I must be certain before I go ahead.

It turns out that specimen ligustrums are out of favour, but Great Dixter grows and stocks **L. quihoui**; introduced about 1862. And I've even found Rory Duso's pruning instructions, which saves me having to observe for myself whether it flowers on the same year's wood, or last year's, etc. What more can I ask for. And if it's good enough for them it's good enough for me. Dixter's catalogue warns it may not have time to flower in the far north, but they must mean Scotland. I hope so; but I suppose I'd better check.

When I chat with my neighbour two doors further round the Crescent about the planned removal of my hedge - she's worried it'll mean losing her privacy and the illusion of leafy retreat - it turns out the view from her veranda seat will be little affected by the hedge's disappearance as, in actuality, it's my cotoneaster screening her from the drive's entrance. The strident yellow of the privet had attracted more attention than was warranted by its function. So, as the cotoneaster is to go too, and obviously needs a replacement, I now have the perfect excuse for planting a specimen privet. I'll use a few annual climbers on temporary supports as stand-ins while it gets going.



So, both the privet and the rose are to be planted away from the porch wall, which leaves that space still demanding a climber. **Wisteria** immediately springs to mind. Who wouldn't want one of those? And the mauve-white shades of the blossom? Now, they would belong with the paintwork. My veranda guttering and roof slates would object to its rampant growth, though, and I'm not good up ladders, so with limited wall space it'll have to be pruned as a tall standard. No problem. I'm missing the grape vines I used to grow and they're pruned in a similar way, so it's sounding like a done deal.

Fortunately I find **Wisteria floribunda** was introduced in 1830.

It received an RHS Award of Merit in 1894, so a keen gardener of that time would, presumably, have been interested in planting one. Was the first occupant of my house a keen gardener? Maybe they were merely status hungry and left it all to a jobbing gardener. **W. sinensis** was introduced in 1816, but the form 'Alba' arrived in 1892, so perhaps this was the must-have of the time. A few generations on I'm blasé about this form and doubt it would look good against white stucco. **W. frutescens** was also available, which goes back as far as 1724 and is also, conveniently, less vigorous. A variety of it is on offer these days called 'Amethyst Falls' but is that cheating, because I suspect, back in the 1890s, there wasn't yet such a selection; just the basic species. And does it match the other two for scent? *Wisteria x formosa* I have to disregard as it came on the scene in 1905, too late for my purposes; and such a feature plant, needing time to establish, would, in all likelihood, have been planted first thing.

As I intend a new - recycled actually - trellis to replace my privet hedge there'll be space for yet another climber, or a plant that needs support, and Jeykll's concern for utility is making me think cane fruit – any excuse! I'm pleased to see in the index of a Country Life gardening book from the very early 1900s a then new hybrid called the **loganberry**.



In my opinion the loganberry's underrated: picked fully ripe it can give the raspberry a run for its money and it's easier to manage in a small garden, I think. Ok, it came on the scene a little too late, but plants get added to a garden and the circumstances of the First World War meant people turned to growing their own food. I have to insist it's thornless, though, even if that is a modern development. But do you know? I find the thornless loganberry appeared here in the UK in 1929, so it's not so modern after all. Not that that excuses flouting my rules, but I doubt the little boy next door will be worrying about such niceties when he's helping himself to the fruits over on his side. But have I set myself on a slippery slope here? Discipline is required. I must place myself back on the straight and narrow.

As fruit's a favourite subject of mine, it's lead me to the **gooseberry**. Yes, I know I said I hated thorns, but, for sun-ripe dessert gooseberries I make an exception, especially when, to my mind, the few thornless varieties now on offer don't match up to the best of the old varieties in the flavour and texture stakes. So, I'm prepared in this instance to suffer for my art - and pay penance for out-dating that loganberry? I know prize gooseberries have been part of the Yorkshire scene from way back, but what'll I find?

I'm in luck; two varieties of gooseberry introduced in the 1820s are still supplied by R V Rogers, so I can plant either '**Gunner**' or '**Lancashire Lad**'; although a true Yorkshire man might have had something to say about the latter



Above: gooseberry 'Gunner'



Right: gooseberry 'Lancashire Lad'

Photographs courtesy  
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I actually find it's probably not the one to grow as it requires good conditions and with my soil needing some long-term tlc I doubt it'll get those. That leaves me with Gunner and I'll cross my fingers it isn't a martyr to mildew, but seeing it's been going all that time it can't be bad. I'll keep the bush very open to help avoid it – and avoid getting my fingers stabbed, too. And I've got my '**Red Victoria**' **rhubarb** suffering silently in a large pot. That could go in, too. With a name like that it has to be old enough, especially as it's descended from plants growing on an allotment, which, at a point shortly after the Second World War, was being tended by a very elderly gentleman.

And I've had another thought: **strawberries**, for a potager-style edging. The fresh green of their leaves and scarlet fruit in and around the pale grey tortured hollows of the edging stones would look good. But are there any varieties available today that old, surely not? It turns out the breeders were giving strawberries a great deal of attention in the mid to late 1800s, and all well documented. And they were being sold at English markets as early as 1831. Looking at the names of these old varieties one jumps out at me – '**Royal Sovereign**', bred in the UK in 1892. I'll have no problem sourcing that, and having lasted that long it must have something going for it, but as I've always grown perpetual fruiting strawberries it's not one I'm familiar with. Strawberry breeding seems to have lost the plot these days as far as the gardener's concerned so it won't hurt to turn the clock back to the days when a strawberry was given the respect it deserved and was expected to taste of something rather than travel well and sit around. If it turns out to succumb to virus or mildew too readily I can always try searching for a supply of another very old variety, '**Little Scarlet**', which is closer in type to the wild strawberry. It seems this was around until relatively recently, even though predating the aforementioned hybridising activity, and was highly regarded for both eating and jam.

A quick search reveals it as currently being the gourmet ingredient of a Tiptree jam - fantastic; I can see it growing in my garden already - but, hold on, the plant's trademarked! Short of theft I don't stand a chance. What is the world coming to? My fall back can be the native alpine variety, of course, but the Agroforestry Research Trust offers an interesting hybrid: **Fragaria x biflora**. This was lost to cultivation around 1850 and is described as having greenish-pink fruit with an aromatic, sweet, musky pineapple-cinnamon flavour. I'm intrigued, so shall I wave my wand and 'discover' it for the 1890s? It had to lurk somewhere over all that time, or have they just recreated the cross?



*'Royal Sovereign' © Stephen Shirley - courtesy Victoriana Nursery Gardens*

So, having bordered my potager, what will be in it? Salad leaves for sure; to pick a few at whim is luxury, and an obvious one is **lettuce**. Heirloom vegetable varieties are fighting their corner these days, so it shouldn't be hard sourcing seed. I find Chiltern Seeds lists six lettuce varieties predating 1900, Garden Organic has four, and Thomas Etty Esq. lists twenty! And, judging from the dates of introduction, they loved their lettuce in the 1800s, so, it's a must have, winter and summer. Roger Phillips' 'Vegetables' book shows them in all their glory – red, green, butterhead, crisphead, cos ... and here we are thinking it's today's salads that are innovative. The list even includes the darling of the supermarkets '**Little Gem**'. But what chance that when there's '**Drunken Woman**' and '**Fat Lazy blonde**' to choose from? And I wonder what they all taste like? I can see I'll be busy for years. Those last two names, if you're wondering, are translated. Presumably the original Italian and German were suitably obscure for straitlaced Victorians; or maybe their gardeners were a racy lot?

Talking of salad, I wonder how the tomato was doing in the 1890s? Interestingly the extant varieties are predominately yellow; but no; let's not go there - given an interesting seed catalogue I'm inclined to wildly over-estimate my planting possibilities! But, it's interesting to note in The BBC's book 'The Victorian Kitchen' that **Chinese artichokes** were introduced to the UK in 1897. Shaped like sets of beads their little roots are fiddly to lift and prepare but I've grown these and rather like them. They're neat plants, shooting early, and they conveniently prefer light soil – easier to clean than, too, I imagine; plus, a bit of shade doesn't bother them, so they sound ideal. And having faded into obscurity since the 1890s they'll impress my dinner guests, just as they did then - another little luxury.



Above: *Stachys affinis* - Chinese artichokes - courtesy Leyland.com seed shop



Right: foliage and flower

None of these will feed me unless I feed them, though, so I've installed a temporary compost bin to take everything of plant origin I can find, including the corrugated cardboard packaging from my household fixtures. With no grass clippings to provide the nitrogen cardboard needs to decompose efficiently, I'm utilising another source of nitrogen: 'liquid gold'. That's urine to you and me - wonderful stuff; to hand whenever required and free. I just won't mention it to the neighbours when I'm picking them that lettuce! Meantime, I'll keep filling the bin – the level keeps dropping in a most satisfactory manner - and investigate some rather tougher plants, because compost, no matter how large the quantity, always seems to go nowhere. Now, I wonder what I'll turn up?

With thanks to:



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