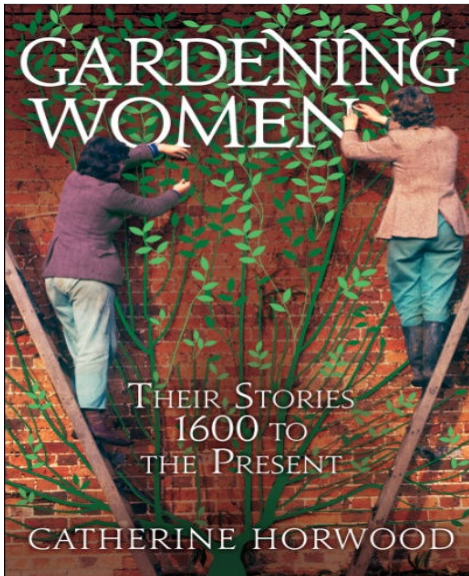


BOOK REVIEWS JULY-AUGUST 2010



Gardening Women: Their Stories from 1600 to the Present

by Catherine Horwood

Virago Press £17.99 (Amazon £11.14)

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The title, and probably the orientation of one's mind, expects this book to be chronological, but while it is so in the various chapters, it is actually arranged in thematic chapters. So, reading it straight off, it is quite a jolt to go from the 17th century to the 21st and then back again. I advise therefore that it is read in chapters - which means that the discovery of the women lasts much longer!

Discoveries there are aplenty. Stories of Duchesses with crowds of gardeners, of anonymous weeder women, middle-class women gardening, writing or painting for pleasure or to earn a living; intrepid women travelling the world; deserted women, divorced women and widows - sometimes more than once. I can sense the sheer joy of researching all of these women and finding them day after day. Some of course, like Jekyll and Sackville-West, are generally known among gardeners, but as Horwood points out 'for centuries gardens have been important to women and women have been important to gardens'.

Women in the upper classes often disappeared into garden for hours on end, possibly to assuage the loneliness of their rural residences. They became interested - nay, often obsessed - with the plants themselves and could spend much of their households resources on plants. Sometimes there is not much to find about particular women and in the first chapter women zip by; names and incidents and contributions. Jane Loudon wrote to support her family after her husband died, so we can still read what she thought and did. Rosmary Verey, Beth Chatto and of course Sackville-West and Jekyll. Their gardening ideas are very much with us. I like also the tiny stories: as when students visited Miss Jekyll and were asked to pick any plants they liked. They did so, and brought them to her. She was blind, but she identified every plan by the scent and texture. I liked the story of Nancy Lindsay daughter of Norah Lindsey, garden designer, who on an expedition to Persia where 'she was delayed too long in a silken tent'. On the other hand, Eleanor Omerod, awarded a Fellowship of the RHS in 1878, and was an examiner for Edinburgh University, but was refused a Chair because of her gender.

The later part of the book is about women's struggle to be recognised in the 20th century. Now women are, mostly, considered equal in the horticultural world (although one can hear the odd comment at interviews from gardeners like 'are you strong enough for this job?') In the magazines and on television, women are very visible.

Catherine Horwood has done women a service - her pages of index show how many she has found. This is a book that can be re-visited with pleasure, but is also a source of valuable information on the status of women, their persistence and their courage. The author has succeeded in her task of reclaiming the contribution of women. The book is an inspiration.

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