

# The Trees of Buckingham Palace Garden

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The garden at Buckingham Palace covers just over 39 acres (16 ha) surrounded by a wall. It is situated at the heart of an exciting metropolis and, with its proximity to the Royal Parks ( The Green Park, St James's Park, Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens) forms an important part of the central London green space. Sited on London clay over chalk, the landscape has been made up over the years as different designs have come and gone. Originally an area of swampy ground with osier beds and market gardens, it has been lifted through three or more designs to reach the present levels where it sits at about 7m above sea level.

The existing layout can be attributed to William Townsend Aiton who remodelled the garden slightly from Sir William Chambers' original, which in itself was an adaptation of a plan originally submitted by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. He enlarged the Lake and created the Mound as well as carrying out a great deal of additional planting. Historically, little is recorded about the trees, apart from the occasional reference, such as that by Queen Victoria in which she referred to enjoying 'the limes and their shade'. Another reference, in 1854, was to an old elm which was felled; The Lord Steward had, misguidedly, allowed an item of £4, the proceeds of the sale of the wood, to appear in his books. When this was discovered the Lords Commissioners of the Treasury, having sat in conference upon the matter, "thought it right to direct an inquiry into the subject", since the Office of Works had always intended to "reserve control over the timber" the proceeds from the sale of which were held to be "public funds". The matter could hardly have been taken more seriously - or caused more waste of time and money - had the Palace garden contained a positive forest of trees and the sum involved been a thousand times as great.

Many of Aiton's early plantings were quick to die, sometimes because of neglect and the ever-present levels of pollution, which pervaded the city right up to the Clean Air Acts of the 1950s. Nowadays, with less pollution and the 'London Effect', which basically lifts the average air temperature by about 1.5°C above the surrounding countryside, there is the chance to grow successfully a much wider and diverse selection of plants. In some of the more sheltered parts of the garden it is possible to see Zone 9 plants surviving quite happily and the keen botanist would find many a pleasant surprise!

There are some very fine views within the garden, be they of grand landscape or sheltered intimate pathways along winding paths. But arguably the best place to appreciate the fine view, with its mantle of trees, is from the top of the West Terrace steps. With the open aspect across the Main Lawn, where the Queen's Garden Parties take place, towards the Lake and off into the depths of the garden, one could almost imagine one was in the countryside. The tree-scape in this view is dominated by the London Plane (*Platanus x hispanica*), as,



Left: *Tetradium daniellii*, near the bridge by the lake at Buckingham Palace  
 Right: *Quercus marilandica*, which grows by the waterfall at Buckingham Palace

in fact, is the majority of the garden. There are just fewer than 100 mature plane trees on the estate, some of them up to 26m in height, and casting an unforgiving shadow over much of the lawns, wild flower areas and shrubberies. This domination would have been caused by a different species 40 years ago; the English Elm (*Ulmus procera*) held sway with many enormous specimens all of which succumbed to Dutch Elm Disease, with the last two trees being removed from the garden in 1980. Some of the trees began to re-grow from suckers but died out after about 12 years as the disease claimed them too. Once the elm effect was no more the London Planes had much less competition and came in to their own.

However, it is still possible to see many other fine mature specimens, with one of the finest, especially in the autumn, being a bottom - grafted yellow-stemmed ash (*Fraxinus excelsior* 'Jaspidea'). This old specimen is one of the glories of the garden with its bright yellow autumn foliage that shows up even more powerfully in the sunshine. Close by is another old, and in this case over-mature, specimen of the Japanese Pagoda Tree (*Sophora japonica*). With its white flowers and pea - pod fruits it was named the 'mystery tree' in the 1950s as no one who saw it could provide its true name. Unfortunately, as it was rotting away at the base it was considered prudent two years ago to prune the head of the tree to reduce the sail effect and hopefully allow it a few years' grace.

In the centre of this area are three fine, upright growing Roble Beech, *Nothofagus obliqua*. Planted by the late Fred Nutbeam (Head Gardener 1954 - 1978), probably in the mid 1960s, they have become statuesque in their appearance and will in time dominate this area. Close to the bridge that spans the Lake to the larger of the two islands is a *Tetradium daniellii* (above) , but the most visually exciting tree in this area must be the Snake Bark Maple (*A. davidii* 'George Forrest'), a tree that retains its striations even as it becomes mature, it

is a bark you just want to stroke.

The great storm of 1987, and to a lesser degree the one in 1990, fortunately had no more than a slight effect on the garden. Six mature trees were lost in 1987 and a great many branches fell to the ground. Interestingly, the wind - tunnel effect of the surrounding buildings could be identified easily, as the wind cut a swathe through the branches of the tree - belt planted in Victorian times and earlier to screen the view of the gardens from the buildings in neighbouring Belgravia. A notable effect of the storms was to leave us with, arguably, one of the largest specimens of Chinese chestnut (*Castanea mollissima*) in the country after larger ones in other gardens were destroyed. The severe damage incurred by two mature horse chestnuts (*Aesculus hippocastanum*) meant that they had to be removed, opening up a good amount of space for replanting. Apart from the herbaceous border and the Rose Garden there had been little of interest in the garden for the Queen's guests at garden parties. The loss of these two trees gave us the opportunity to remedy this and increase the species number in the garden. This area now contains shrubberies all planted up with shrubs, trees and woodland plants that originated from northeast America. Considered by some to be under - used in British gardens these were sourced from all over Great Britain and include now thriving specimens of the American lime (*Tilia americana*), American rowan (*Sorbus americana*), *Betula alleghaniensis*, *Oxydendrum arboreum*, *Magnolia tripetala*, *Crataegus macracantha* and *Quercus rubra*. Recent additions have included northern pin oak (*Quercus ellipsoidalis*), *Quercus arkansana*, three pecans (*Carya illinoensis*) and the strangely-named dwarf chinkapin oak (*Quercus prinoides*).

Across the main path is an area called Clock Tree Corner, named by the gardeners many years ago when none of them had wristwatches so one of them would shin up a tree to see the time showing on the spire of St. Peter's Church! Here are two fine specimens of the Chinese evergreen magnolia, *Magnolia delavayi* (see p.63). These impressive trees, which flower throughout the summer and early autumn, are sited in a bed protected from the winds by two very large *Cupressocyparis leylandii*. A young *Tilia heterophylla* has replaced a recently lost London Plane. Across the bridge and on the larger of the two islands can be found a top-grafted *Fraxinus angustifolia* var. *lentiscifolia*.

Other noteworthy trees found around the garden include two *Catalpa bignonioides* 'Aurea', a small - leaved beech (*Fagus sylvatica* 'Rotundifolia'), an Arizona Ash (*Fraxinus velutina*) and *Sorbus folgneri* near to Hyde Park Corner; *Acer platanoides* 'Schwedleri' on the Round Bed; *Magnolia acuminata* and *Liquidambar formosana* near the Rose Garden; *Nothofagus dombeyi* and *N.fusca*, *Arbutus x andrachnoides* and *Arbutus unedo* 'Quercifolia', *Quercus pyrenaica*, *Q. alba* and the American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) on the Mound. In the Tea House Bed is a deciduous *Photinia* (*P. beauverdiana* var. *notabilis*); *Liquidambar orientalis* near Clock Tree Corner; a date plum, *Diospyros lotus*, American persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*), the common olive (*Olea europaea*) and three Kentucky Coffee Trees (*Gymnocladus dioica*) in the shrubbery near the Gardener's Yard; a California Black Oak (*Quercus kelloggii*) near the Boathouse; Black Jack Oak

(*Quercus marilandica*, see p. 65), *Alangium chinense* (see p. 63), *Acer velutinum* var. *vanvolxemii*, *Cladrastis kentukea* 'Perkin's Pink', California Live Oak (*Quercus agrifolia*) and *Betula nigra* near the waterfall.

Commemorative trees play an important role in that they record the occasion for which they were planted and the dates. Because no planting records exist before 1954 the older commemorative trees provide a special link with previous times. Trees have been planted to mark accessions, birthdays, anniversaries, jubilees and special visits. There is a fine specimen of *Quercus x libanerris* 'Rotterdam' growing near the sundial, which records the visit of the IDS Council to the garden on 23 October 1987 and was planted by Queen Elizabeth II on 11 November 1989. It has rocketed from a small tree in a 25cm pot to over 8m in 2004. The Metropolitan Public Gardens Association presented a *Davidia involucrata* var. *vilmoriniana* and a double - flowered wild cherry (*Prunus avium* 'Plena') for Prince Charles and Princess Anne in 1957. On his 21st birthday the Prince of Wales planted a fern-leaved beech (*Fagus sylvatica* 'Aspleniifolia') near the Boathouse. A hybrid *Acer campestre* 'Queen Elizabeth' was given to the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh by Queen Beatrix of The Netherlands to mark their Golden Wedding in 1997. All commemorative trees have substantial metal plaques at the base of their trunks and their appearance provides a palpable sense of history.

The garden is not without a good representation of native trees. An old specimen of the common alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) coppiced every few years, grows from a fissured and hollow base now full of character. Many old silver birch (*Betula pendula*) litter the landscape both by the lake and in the shrubberies, their upper roots running along the surface of the ground before finally diving in. Equally, old examples of hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) and a few cultivars, can be found scattered singly or in irregular groups throughout the garden, providing useful habitats for rare beetles. In a wildlife survey carried out in the mid 1990s two nationally notable beetles were found in the same bole of a very old hawthorn on the main island. Both the common beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) and the common ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) are represented by specimens old and new. Many of the English oaks (*Quercus robur*) were planted in the garden as commemorative trees by members of the present Royal Family, usually from acorns germinated in the year they were born. A number of young true service trees (*Sorbus domestica*) thrive on the mound and by the lake, as does the wild service tree (*Sorbus torminalis*) and *Sorbus deoniensis* from the west country. An old specimen of the black poplar (*Populus nigra* subsp. *betulifolia*) grows with its distinctive knobbly trunk, slight lean and long sweeping branches close to the lake near the bridge to the island. A recent planting of Aspen (*Populus tremula*) is growing fast and upright near the waterfall at the far end of the lake. These complement an existing selection of poplars including *Populus serotina* 'Aurea', *P. x canadensis*, *P. trichocarpa*, the Lombardy poplar (*Populus nigra* 'Italica') and the recently planted female *Populus nigra* given to the garden by Roger Jeffcoate who has made a worthy crusade to reintroduce this tree to the British landscape. Other recent plantings include common osier



Recent plantings in the gardens of Buckingham Palace include *Sassafraz tzumi* (left) and *Lithocarpus densiflorus* (right).

(*Salix viminalis*), bay willow (*Salix pentandra*) and almond willow (*Salix triandra*).

Leading from the large conservatory and into the garden is a fine avenue of Indian Chestnut (*Aesculus indica*) planted in the early 1960s to provide a shaded walk between the building and the more mature trees in the garden. In June every year there is a spectacular display of flowers supplemented by two much larger commemorative plantings of the same species planted in the beds nearby. There were originally 37 trees in the avenue but these were thinned as they got older and larger to leave 19 in the early 1980s. Recently two have been lost to Honey Fungus (*Armillaria mellea*) and root barriers have been installed now to stop the spread from carrying on down the line.

Conifers are represented in the garden by the following taxa: Alice Holt cypress (*xCupressocyparis notabilis*), which was given to the garden by the late Alan Mitchell and is doing well in a sheltered part of the mound. Also on the mound are examples of California Redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*), Bosnian Pine (*Pinus heldreichii*), Bhutan Pine (*Pinus wallichiana*), Bishop Pine (*Pinus muricata*), Nootka Cypress (*Chamaecyparis nootkatensis* 'Gracilis') and Incense Cedar (*Calocedrus decurrens*). Other conifers around the garden include Giant Sequoia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) on the island, Japanese Black Pine (*Pinus thunbergii*) in the kennels, two *Cedrus deodara* by the lake and the latest planting is the Monterey Pine (*Pinus radiata*) in the tree line along Constitution Hill. In the kennels is a healthy and well-furbished specimen of the Monkey Puzzle (*Araucaria araucana*) - in fact the first tree that I planted when I began working here in 1979. *xCupressocyparis leylandii* is used occasionally around the garden to act as a windbreak in slightly more exposed sections. Deciduous conifers are represented in the garden by *Larix decidua*, Dawn Redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*), a young *Taxodium ascendens* 'Nutans' and Swamp Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*). The garden's largest and finest example of this last tree,



Left: *Ehretia acuminata* var. *obovata*  
 Right: *Liquidambar styraciflua* 'Variegata'

at around 20m tall, was struck by lightning on 3 August 2004 and destroyed. Wood shards and strips of bark were spread in a 5-metre radius from what remained of the trunk.

More recent plantings have included *Poliiothisis sinensis*, *Sassafras albidum* and *S. tsumi* (see page 68), *Nyssa aquatica* and *N. sinensis*, *Populus balsamifera*, Japanese Horse Chestnut (*Aesculus turbinata*), Tanbark Oak (*Lithocarpus densiflorus*, see page 68), Ladder-leaf Rowan (*Sorbus scalaris*), Kodo Wood (*Ehretia acuminata* var. *obovata*) and *Ehretia dicksonii*. We have also added *Azara microphylla*, *Melia azadarach*, *Maytenus boaria*, *Broussonetia papyrifera*, the Varnish Tree (*Rhus verniciflua*) and Chinese Varnish Tree (*Rhus potaninii*), *Tilia chinensis*, *T. kiusiana*, *T. chingiana* and *Tilia chemoui*, *Eucalyptus viminalis* and *E. dalrympleana*, *Crataegus wattiana*, *C. pinnatifida* var. *major*, *C. tanacetifolia*, *C. phaenopyrum* and the exotic flowering foxglove tree, *Paulownia tomentosa*, which is visible to everyone walking along the road from Victoria train station. Tender trees (Zone 9) include *Pseudopanax lessonii* 'Sabre', *Noltia africana*, *Michelia compressa* and *M. doltsopa*, *Cinnamomum camphora* and *Phoebe formosana*.

The present planting programme continues with policies dating back to the garden's creation, and even then it was important to maintain a 'green belt' around the inside of the wall. This policy has the benefits of screening the view from nearby buildings as well as reducing the sound from motor vehicles, and providing a protected and worthwhile habitat for the wealth of wildlife that inhabits the garden. But it is also of paramount importance that a rolling programme of tree replacement is carried out with a long-term view. With the reliance on London Planes as great as it is at present it is considered prudent to introduce a wider range of trees in to the garden, and over the last twelve years the tree collection has grown considerably, taking advantage of a much wider selection of plant material from specialist nurseries. Some accessions have come to us from wild-collected sources and greater emphasis has

been given to pushing the bounds of what can be grown in central London, not just with trees but with shrubs and herbaceous plants. There is closer connection with other gardens and plant collectors, which has given us the opportunity to trial plants and to monitor their rate of growth as well as being some of the first in the country to grow them.

There has also been a conscious decision to build up collections of specific genera and to focus particularly on *Quercus*, *Crataegus* and *Morus*; there are now 74 different oaks and 39 thorns growing happily in the garden. James I had a mulberry garden planted on four acres of land in the area where the north facade of the building sits now, so it seemed appropriate that we should assemble a collection in the present day. The National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens have awarded the collection provisional National Collection status and the intention is to aim to achieve full status in 2005. Collecting these trees began in 1996 and at present there are 29 taxa over two sites, the other being Kensington Palace, and it is intended to create a mirror collection in the Royal Gardens at Windsor Castle during 2005.

It is hoped that we will be able to produce a full list of all our collection with corresponding information, once a suitable media is found to distribute it on. Consideration has been given to placing this on the World Wide Web and this might well be our final choice.

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