

Green Space of the Month - November 2003

Chelsea Physic Garden

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Chelsea Physic Garden today

Chelsea Physic Garden was founded in 1673 by the Society of Apothecaries. It is one of Europe's oldest botanical gardens. 'Physic' is the old fashioned name for the healing arts, and apothecaries were the ancient masters of those arts in Europe, in times gone by. The cures they offered were mostly plant-based remedies. This wonderful garden was established to teach students of medicine about the healing properties of plants.

Today Chelsea Physic Garden is a registered charity, open to the public, showing countless examples of medicinal plants gathered from all over the world. Carefully planned and labelled beds illustrate the history of how our knowledge of plant cures has been shared among the many peoples from all corners of the globe.

Archives of ancestral wisdom

Cultural Botany is one of the special subjects staff at Chelsea Physic Gardens can help bring to life. Exploring the links between people and plants can be fascinating. The Physic Garden is more than just a museum of plants. Dawn Sanders describes people from the ethnic community groups she work with, rather poetically as 'walking archives of ancestral wisdom'.

Previous projects have helped to capture this wisdom. The Al-Hasaniya Moroccan Women's Centre project aimed to record and present older Moroccan women's botanical knowledge, in order to raise their self-esteem and strengthen bonds with young women in the community. Dawn explains

"We feel that traditional knowledge amongst urban cultural communities needs to be recorded and presented, in order to rebuild personal self-esteem and communal social fabrics, severely compromised by radical geographical and cultural changes in people's lives. The preservation of this knowledge we hope will encourage the reinforcement of previous connections with plants and the wider landscape, and change perceptions of the botanic garden to a place where many tongues are spoken.

In naming the plants (in poster, exhibition and CD ROM format) we have used four labels: Arabic, Berber, Common English and scientific (Latin). As the project's main role is to encourage access and the sharing of knowledge, the use of appropriate languages is important in the work that we produce, to enable participation and empowerment as much as possible."

The Development Education Journal, Volume 5 Number 2 February 1999 p21-22

Since the success of this project, the women are now hoping to obtain a grant, through North Kensington Arts, for planting in the famous Meanwhile Gardens.

Aylesbury Turkish Women' Project: Partnership work with Chumleigh Gardens and Chelsea Physic Garden a report by Aziza KhamIichi Walworth Triangle Forum, Southwark.

The project was run in partnership with Chumleigh Gardens and Chelsea Physic Garden.

I organised several meetings with the project co-ordinator, worker and users, which culminated in an assessment of their needs. I also organised workshops to explain about the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), New Deal for Communities (NDC) and encouraged them to participate and become involved. I worked closely with Groundwork Southwark to create and launch the Mediterranean Garden.

The garden helped the women:

- To improve the environment and provide a relaxing space which will encourage more women on the estate to use the centre.
- To enable the women to become involved in a community project, which allows them to demonstrate they are willing and able to solve certain problems and fulfil certain local needs for themselves.
- Building self esteem and new skills for the users, for example gardening and networking with the Moroccan Cultural Botany Project at Al-Hasaniya and The Chelsea Physic Garden
- To visit each other's projects and exchange their expertise on the medicinal purposes and using herbs in cooking Mediterranean dishes.
- To support the elderly women share their knowledge of plants to the younger generation
- To enable the women to grow exotic plants and vegetables Chelsea Physic Garden donated a mini greenhouse and continues to offer advice and work on a joint project

Amongst other activities Walworth Triangle Forum organised:

- A picnic at The Chelsea Physic Garden
- A visit to Chumleigh Garden, which also support the Turkish women's' garden

Ideal growing conditions

The climate is milder in Britain's cities than in the countryside, and particularly sheltered spots like this walled garden, near the river, will support tender plants not usually seen in this country in the wild. The

greenhouses at Chelsea contain still more delicate specimens. There are ferns; tropical plants like bananas, papayas, ginger and sugar cane; cacti; and even carnivorous (insect eating) plants!

Ethnic community groups can visit as members of the public during the summer - check website for opening times. For a small fee you can become a Friend of the garden. Friends may visit free of charge at any time, and will receive a Spring and Autumn newsletter, detailing events. The gardens are open on Sunday 2nd and Sunday 9th February 2003 for viewing the Snowdrops, then from April to October on certain days.

You can also talk to Dawn about doing a project together. There is a classroom with art and science equipment. Facilities are available to primary and secondary school and child-minder groups. Visits can be tailored around a wide range of topics, to meet your group's needs. In-service training sessions can also be arranged.

Dawn Sanders has also been conducting outreach work. The Pockets of Paradise project, in partnership with Toynbee Housing Association, aims to cultivate methods of encouraging resident participation in the design of landscapes near their homes. By listening to people's stories about cultural relationships with plants and animals, the project will not only support creation of 'wildlife corridors' in the urban setting, but will also help to strengthen people's links to nature and to one another. This project is mentioned in the new England Biodiversity Plan.

Resources

You can read more about the multicultural background and contemporary practice of growing and using medicinal plants generally, in a beautifully written and illustrated book called *The Healing Garden: Natural Haven for Physical and Emotional Wellbeing*, by Sue Minter, curator of the Chelsea Physic Garden, published by Headline Books, London 1993.

You can find more information about Al-Hasaniya Moroccan Women's Centre at <http://www.rbkc.gov.uk/a-z/a-z.asp?OrgId=39>