

# Botanical gardens in colonial empires

Hélène BLAIS

## ABSTRACT

The botanical gardens created in European colonies from the late eighteenth century onward were imperial tools that reflected the desire to control nature, and accompanied the domination of humans in a colonial setting. The chronology of garden creations worldwide both followed and served European colonial expansion. Intended for the reproduction of useful plants (for the military, colonists, and metropolises), they helped implement the imperial dream of acclimatizing tropical plants, from one colony to another and one hemisphere to another. They were geared toward increasing economic crops (tea, coffee, cocoa), but were also places of knowledge that improved classifications and herbariums. These gardens were showcases of colonial power but also disputed sites, enclaves of ordered nature where the tensions specific to colonial societies revealed themselves, and where work often took the form of coercion.<



« Botanical Garden, from the bottom of the central walk », in Lansdown Guilding, [\*An Account of the Botanic Garden in the Island of Saint Vincent, from its first Establishment to the Present Time\*](#), Glasgow, Richard Griffin and Co, 1825, p. 20.



“Algiers. Jardin d’essai. Palm walk,” photograph by Alexandre Leroux (1836-1912), silver print, 23 x 28 cm, in a collection of photographic plates on Algeria and the Near East (1880-1889) from the Zoummeroff gift.



“Saint-Denis, a celebration in the colonial garden,” n.d., n.p. [1905-1920], [Iconothèque historique de l’océan Indien.](#)



Pierre Auguste Renoir, *Le jardin d'essai à Alger* (The Jardin d'essai in Algiers), 1882. Musée d'Orsay.



Louis Antoine Roussin (1819-1894), "St-Denis Botanical Garden: Volière Walk," print 23 x 35 cm, 1867, in *Album de l'île de la Réunion : recueil de dessins représentant les sites les plus pittoresques...*, t.4, p. 164. Bibliothèque départementale de La Réunion, Inventaire R14937.164. DR.

The colonial expansion of European powers was accompanied from the late eighteenth century onward by the creation of botanical gardens. These gardens—connected to the ambition to control nature that was characteristic of the nineteenth-century European imperial undertaking—represented enclaves of ordered nature in tropical environments, and often had diverse forms, sizes, and chronologies. Globally, the networks created by these colonial gardens and those of metropolitan capitals made them essential parts of imperial cultures. Locally, they

can be seen as microcosms that reveal both the functioning and dysfunction of colonial societies, especially in their relation to the environment and exploitation of natural wealth.

## **The imperial web of botanical gardens**

The first European overseas gardens met the fresh fruit and vegetable needs of crews. The first European garden outside of Europe was founded in 1652 in Cape Town, under the auspices of the Dutch East India Company. A number of creations, sometimes ephemeral, were subsequently organized by trading companies, such as the Calcutta Gardens in 1787.

This function of providing sustenance was gradually overtaken by commercial projects. In the late eighteenth century, economic crops were increasingly introduced—spices in particular—in order to enrich colonial trade. The East India Company developed a network of gardens in India and beyond, including Burma, Penang, and Singapore. On Mauritius Island, the botanical garden established by Pierre Poivre in 1768 was located in the Pamplemousses district, which La Bourdonnais had initially reserved in 1735 to produce food crops for troops. The new director introduced spices, such as cloves and nutmeg. Acclimatizations were also attempted in Europe's Caribbean colonies in the late eighteenth century in an effort to increase economic crops, such as in Saint-Vincent (1785), Jamaica, and on the French side in Saint Domingue. In 1788, breadfruit from Tahiti that had passed through the Jardin des Plantes in Paris was introduced in the Jardin du Roi in Cayenne. The name of the species alone sparked European hopes of providing sustenance (although the slaves for whom the breadfruit was intended resisted its adoption as food).

Botanical gardens followed and served colonial expansion, growing in number throughout the nineteenth century. In 1837, there were 22 botanical gardens in the British Empire. In 1900 there were over one hundred as the French, Dutch, and Germans also developed overseas gardens, which were often closely linked to major metropolitan institutions, of which Kew Gardens on the outskirts of London was the most active. By centralizing data, as well as gathering and sending both living and dried specimens, Kew botanists managed the empire of plants, combining scientific curiosity and economic considerations.

## **Acclimatization gardens**

The goal of such gardens was to acclimatize and develop plants that were useful for colonial interests. Many of them also served as nurseries that supplied public services and colonists. Eucalyptus plantings in colonized villages in Algeria, or the imposition of monoculture such as tea, coffee, and cocoa, were made possible by the reproductions performed in nurseries. The acclimatization of new species was a central concern, without contemplation of the notion of invasive species. At the Jardin d'essai du Hamma, successive attempts were made to acclimatize, with more failures than successes, vanilla from Martinique, mulberry trees, cotton, and new species of tobacco. At the Peradenya in Ceylon, plants of economic value were developed, such as gum, quinine, and tea. At the garden in Lagos, which was created in 1887, particular importance was given to coffee, cocoa, and cotton.

Gardens were also places of knowledge regarding nature, bringing together collections of dried plants (herbariums), libraries, and even chemistry or phytology laboratories, which increased during the last third of the century. The Dutch Buitenzorg Gardens in Java, or the Calcutta Gardens, became genuine scientific institutions. They were also places of instruction for gardeners who would go on to work on the colony.

## **Mastery of nature and deviance: disputed sites**

It is also fruitful to consider the history of gardens from the standpoint of the colonies themselves, for locally they were fairly specific sites that helped establish colonial domination by anchoring the European presence within refashioned landscapes. Gardens were conceived as spaces of sociability for Europeans that responded to

homesickness (English lawns, onion crops at the gardens in Sydney) and offered spaces for walks in which ordered paths, benches, and bandstands provided reminders of the parks of Europe.

However, behind the imperial showcase there were constant discipline problems, for as valuable natural spaces gardens were also the object of desire and deviance. The regulations of botanical gardens reflected the tensions in colonial societies, with the theft of flowers and plants, the destruction of parterres, and inappropriate behavior being so many implicit indications of the illusions that guided the planning of these enclaves. Conceived as natural scenes, these gardens were lived spaces that were frequented at night, giving rise to pilfering and willful destruction.

It is also important to note that these artificial constructions mobilized considerable forces. Gardens required structural works involving considerable grading and—in tropical environments in particular—intense efforts to maintain parterres, which were deliberately distinguished from the jungle. Weather-related hazards (typhoons, hurricanes, etc.) made them particularly fragile places. Garden employees, who were generally recruited at low cost (colony prisoners, indentured laborers), and sometimes lived on site in a quasi-military setting, provided sought-after labor to combat the natural order, which was deemed to be disorder. Garden archives are brimming with accounting documents that show the functioning of colonial institutions, with their voracious appetite for forced labor. Garden directors, who were eminent botanists, corresponded with their peers regarding the exchange of plants, but also communicated a great deal with prisons and colonial authorities to demand labor.

In the early twentieth century, reproduction tended to become the predominant activity. The enclosed space of botanical gardens was insufficient, and independent experimental stations were developed, where increasing useful species mattered most. For instance, on the island of Jamaica, at a time when the decline of the sugarcane industry required monoculture to be abandoned, there was an increase in stations experimenting with new crops. The island's botanical gardens lost their budgets and magnificence; the public was no longer a consideration, nor was the staging of refashioned landscapes. Gardens in cities were gradually abandoned between the 1890s and the interwar period, or were given to municipalities in order to become urban parks, bearing only a few vestiges of the global naturalist ambition of nineteenth-century colonizers. The model of the colonial botanical garden seems to have had its day.

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