

# When Paris Became a Garden: The Greening of the City in the 18th Century

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## ABSTRACT

The 18<sup>th</sup> century was a key period in the greening of Paris. Although demographic expansion required new constructions, many parks and gardens were also established in the French capital, providing its inhabitants with certain amenities and improving the overall hygiene of the urban area. Whether royal or private, those parks and gardens multiplied and diversified in both form and function, as well as in the types of plants grown there, as more and more exotic plants were acclimatized. They represent one of the faces of nature's presence in the city.



*The Tuileries Garden, opposite the Louvre Palace, in Paris, engraving, 30 x 48 cm, v. 1780, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Engraving and Photography Department, LI-72 (1)-FOL, Source : [gallica.bnf.fr](https://gallica.bnf.fr)*



Jean-Baptiste Hilaire, *The King's Garden: The Greenhouses*, 1794, Pen-and-ink drawing with water-color and white highlights, 17.4 x 25 cm, BNF, Engraving and Photography Department, RESERVE FOL-VE-53 (F), Source : [gallica.bnf.fr](http://gallica.bnf.fr)



Louis Carrogis Carmontelle, *View of the Monceau Gardens*, oil painting on canvas, 65 x 93,5 cm, v. 1778, Carnavalet Museum, Paris, Source : [wikipedia](http://wikipedia)

## Green Paris

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Paris was covered with a green cloak of flowers, trees and plants of all sorts, to the point that nature acquired a presence throughout the city. That presence was both utilitarian – with many kitchen gardens and market-garden plots – and recreational, as can be seen by the number of pleasure gardens that opened to the public in the latter half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. According to a memo from the Atelier parisien d'urbanisme (Parisian Urbanism Workshop), in 1730, nature covered more than 73% of the 105 km<sup>2</sup> (40 square miles) of today's Paris, and approximately 19% of Paris as it was defined in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. All by themselves, the Tuileries Garden (16 hectares, 40 acres) [Illustration 1], Chartreux Convent (16 hectares, 40 acres), Luxembourg Garden (13 hectares, 32 acres) and King's Garden (8 hectares, 20 acres) added up to nearly 50% of the total park and garden surface. In addition to royal gardens and privately owned ones, those belonging to religious congregations, which were generally walled and included fruit orchards and both kitchen and ornamental gardens, constituted a significant share of the city's gardens. Finally, the verges of boulevards and footpaths, like those along the Champs Élysées, were also planted.

Over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, courtyards and private gardens tended to shrink in the center of Paris, all the more so in that demographic pressure led to a proliferation of anarchic constructions, and that royal urbanism operations sometimes led to the disappearance of certain gardens. In 1773, for example, a flower garden and some kitchen gardens with fruit trees became the new calf market, on a walled plot sold by the Cistercians. Nevertheless, the creation of several large parks and gardens in the heart of the metropolis was seen by people of the day as a necessary [remedy to the noxious air of the city in an urban space where, ideally, air needed to be able to circulate freely](#). By virtue of the neo-Hippocratic medical doctrine that then held sway, parks and gardens, like all public places, were seen as improving the city's overall hygiene. According to the architect Pierre Patte, however, the size of a city's gardens mattered less than their even distribution.

## **Distant Plants, Local Plants**

And so, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Paris became an iconic site for [acclimatizing exotic plants](#). As early as 1714, several greenhouses were built in the King's Garden to acclimatize Java coffee trees from the Dutch Republic – a gift to Louis XIV from the burgomaster of Amsterdam – before being transplanted to the Antilles, a sign of the breadth of the kingdom's imperial horizons [Illustration 2]. Along with the royal greenhouses (in both Choisy and Versailles), private greenhouses increased in number throughout the century, to the point where they became key material elements in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Parisian gardens. The greenhouses of Mr. Bombarde, near the Luxembourg Garden, and those of the Duke d'Ayen, in Faubourg Saint Germain, were two of the most notable ones in existence in 1759. We learn this from Jèze in his *Tableau de Paris*, although we shouldn't overlook the remarkable increase in greenhouses on Faubourg Saint Marcel. This craze was motivated by a combination of ostentatious, distinctive consumption; curiosity, and true scientific interest. The tropical greenhouses in Monceau Park, where the Scottish gardener Thomas arranged the plant collection as a school of botany reserved for the Duke of Chartres and his children, are a perfect illustration of that.

Plants in Paris were not all exogenous, of course. Regular maintenance and replacements were necessary for the more typical plants in the royal gardens, which were bedecked with elm, linden and horse-chestnut trees, as well as bowers and boxwood hedges. That task fell to the six royal plant nurseries that could be found in Marly, Choisy, and, most importantly, at Le Roule, next to Faubourg Saint Honoré. They were intended to supply the gardens and footpaths of royal houses with flowers, trees and shrubs. The nursery in Le Roule, which the first written reference to dates to 1669, before it moved, in 1720, essentially restocked the capital's gardens as needed.

Yet for the royal authority, the tensions stemming from the conflict between their mission to supply public gardens and the need to meet aristocrats' and clergymen's demands for restocking their own gardens were not easy to regulate. Insofar as private gardens also contributed to acclimatizing species, it was often complicated for the administration to choose between different customers' needs, especially since the plant economy was based on the clientelist relationships that were typical of Ancien Régime society. That issue led to frequent shortages, and to the closing of Le Roule nursery in 1773.

## **A Green Ring**

So more and more private nurseries opened during the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, bearing witness to sales in town. In Paris and the Paris area, fruit-tree farming was a dynamic sector meeting growing urban demand for fresh fruit. Demand was maintained by the elite's unfailing appreciation for that type of agriculture (peaches from Montreuil, pineapples from Choisy and strawberries from Meudon). The gardening frenzy was strongly underpinned by the publication of horticulture treatises and plant catalogues, as well by city-dwelling elites' obvious interest in gardening. Plant nurseries cropped up all around the capital, to the extent that they created a veritable green ring, from Fontenay aux Roses to Le Pré Saint Gervais. When it passed near Villejuif, the road from Choisy to Vitry was particularly densely lined with nurseries. Vitry's nurseries, which were renowned for their quince trees, benefitted greatly from their proximity to the capital, which they supplied massively. Their customers could, however, be found throughout the kingdom, including cities as distant as Bordeaux, Montauban, Abbeville and Rouen. Louis-François de Calonne even claimed that many plants from nurseries in Vitry had been sold on African, American, Russian and Swedish markets.

In the 1770s, new landscape gardens in the Anglo-Chinese style were created in Paris. They reflected a newfound appreciation for nature's irregular, sinuous shapes and a rejection of the symmetry of the traditional French garden, which had come to be seen as lacking in warmth. Those new gardens, which were sometimes called "follies," developed to the west of the capital, where real-estate speculation was most promising then. The area was less densely populated, but still reasonably close to the new promenades and entertainment areas enjoyed by Parisians [illustration 3]. The garden in Bagatelle, designed by Thomas Blaikie for the Count of Artois and begun in 1777, is a perfect example of that style. The first species planted were Italian buckthorn, laurestine and Spanish broom, which created a backdrop for an obelisk, a Chinese bridge, a Gothic house and a pharaoh's tomb. The diverse constructions were meant to turn the place into a "land of illusion" reflecting all places and eras.

Plants and nature are, therefore, nothing new to Paris. Their roots go back in part to the modern era, when gardens were highly appreciated. They were seen as a way to alleviate the unwholesomeness of cities, feed the population and provide city-dwellers with recreational areas. While ornamental pleasure gardens gradually opened to the public, it wasn't until the French Revolution that they became entirely public and national. The National Convention had the ornamental plants in the Tuileries and Luxembourg Gardens replaced with potato and beet tubers, turnips and Jerusalem artichokes to feed the nation.

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