



Chelsea Physic Garden is a quiet oasis for Londoners. Far left: Its four-acre site is surrounded by grand houses

Chelsea's hidden gem

Behind high brick walls in the wealthy London district lies an urban paradise for plant lovers. Ciar Byrne pays a visit to the city's oldest botanic garden

The annual flower show is not the only reason for garden lovers to visit Chelsea. Just a short distance down the Embankment, entered by an unassuming side gate on Swan Walk or a doorway in a high wall on Royal Hospital Road, is a hidden four-acre urban oasis that is celebrating its 350th anniversary this year.

The Chelsea Physic Garden is London's oldest botanic garden, founded in 1673 by the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries for apprentices to study edible and medicinal plants. Today, once behind its sheltered walls, you will find yourself spoilt for choice about which direction to explore first. Expansive lawns and abundant flower beds are intersected by allées overlooked by tall, elegant townhouses.

As you enter through the reception area and small shop you see the café, which always seems to be busy with local denizens enjoying coffee and cakes. Above is a large study room, where I spent the winter before covid struck studying for a diploma in garden design with the English Gardening School. At break and lunch we would head out into the cold but beautiful garden, vigilant for coughs as the pandemic crept up on us.



Sir Hans Sloane, the garden's greatest benefactor

Turn left and you reach the Victorian glasshouses, which have recently reopened after undergoing a three-year restoration to conserve them and better highlight the important collections they house. After more than a century of near constant use, these glasshouses, home to over 1,000 plants of historical significance, were in desperate need of repair. The plants were overcrowded and the structures themselves a risk to staff and visitors. A three-year campaign raised £3.2 million for the project, helped by a National Lottery Heritage Fund grant as well as many private and institutional backers.

Built in the 1900s by Foster & Pearson, a company founded in 1841 that is still thriving, the glasshouses were originally made from Burmese teak, which is now a protected material. As part of the garden's commitment to sustainability the repairs have been made using native-grown sweet chestnut. Likewise, the Cool Fernery, which sits by itself on the far side of the garden, is made of Douglas fir.

New timber was spliced with existing wood, retaining as much of the original material as possible. Horticultural glass was removed, cleaned and replaced. Blinds have

It was founded in 1673 by the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries'

been added to allow for shading when necessary, and new temperature monitors and controls have been installed, as well as a misting system. Automatic doors have been added to improve accessibility and new lighting can be used for events and when natural light levels are low. There is also a new rainwater-harvesting tank to provide water for the fernery, which is home to a healthy specimen of the Killarney fern (*Vandenboschia speciosa*). This plant was hunted almost to extinction in the 1800s at the height of 'fern fever' before being declared a protected species in 1975.

One of the most noticeable additions to the garden are the many new information panels that explain where the plants come from and how they came to be here. The interwoven history of colonialism and plant collecting is also explored.

One of the best places to hang out on a cold winter's day is the newly revamped Tropical Corridor. Here you will find a *Cinchona pubescens*, or fever tree, donated by Kew Gardens. The bark of the tree is used to produce quinine, used for hundreds of years as a treatment for malaria.

There is also a vanilla plant (*Vanilla planifolia*) with a board explaining that when the species was first taken from its native Mexico to Madagascar by Portuguese colonisers, it didn't produce fruit due to lack of pollination. That remained so until a 12-year-old enslaved boy, Edmond Albius, worked out how to pollinate it by hand, a method still used in commercial production today.

In the Pelargonium House visitors are invited to get hands-on, rubbing the leaves of scented pelargoniums between their fingers to release their rich fragrances ranging from attar of roses to lemon, cola and peppermint.

There are eight glasshouses in total, including the Pit House, which is sunk into the ground to keep in heat and is used for storing plants over winter and propagating succulents.

The Southern Africa collection contains plants from the Cape Floristic Region, one of the world's 35 biodiversity hotspots, where

Glorious gardens

70% of the plants do not grow anywhere else. The last Ice Age 12,000 years ago did not reach the southern tip of Africa, meaning botanists can study an unbroken line of plants dating back tens of thousands of years.

One of the gardening team's favourite plants in this house is the unusual quiver tree (*Aloidendron dichotomum*). Its hollowed-out branches are used by the San people of southern Africa to hold arrows for hunting, and the roots are also used to treat lung diseases such as asthma and tuberculosis. It is now threatened by climate change in its natural habitat, so the specimens here are of vital importance.

Three-and-a-half centuries after the garden was founded, the impact of climate change and other man-made environmental threats are ever-present. In front of the glasshouses are plants which until recently would have been unlikely to survive in the UK but are now found growing in Devon, Cornwall and beyond. Many of them are drought-tolerant. To support the campaign to save the remaining peat bogs the Physic Garden went fully peat-free last year.

The restoration project aims to attract new and diverse communities to the garden. Young people will be offered work experience and schoolchildren were invited to visit as part of Black History Month in October. This year also saw the garden's first ever LGBTQ+ history programme, A Dash of Lavender.

In the centre of the garden stands a statue of Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753). He was a wealthy physician and natural scientist who had studied at the Physic Garden in his youth. In 1713 he bought the land on which it stood and leased it to the Society of Apothecaries in perpetuity for £5 a year.

By the 1890s the society could no longer afford to maintain the garden and it was taken over by the City Parochial Foundation, a charitable body. The Physic Garden became a charity in its own right in 1983 and opened to the public for the first time shortly afterwards.

There is much to see beyond the glasshouses. The Garden of World Medicine explores how people have used plants for healing throughout history. Pharmacists, the modern-day equivalent of apothecaries, studied at the garden until the 1970s, and it supplied plants for research until the early 2000s.

This heritage is further explored in the Garden of Pharmaceutical Medicine, where you will find opium poppies (*Papaver somniferum*), which have been used as far back as the Minoan civilisation 3,500 years ago. In 1805 a German scientist, Friedrich Sertüner, was the first to isolate morphine from the plants.

Artemisia annua, or sweet wormwood, was used to treat malarial fevers in China in the fifth century AD, but it wasn't until 1972 that a Chinese scientist, Tu Youyou, identified the compound artemisinin, which kills malarial parasites in the blood. In 2015 she was awarded the Nobel Prize for her work.

Inspired by monks and women who practised herbal medicine, in the late 1700s the English physician William Withering researched the use of preparations derived from foxgloves (*Digitalis*) for treating heart

conditions. Today, the compounds digoxin and digitoxin, which are deadly poisons in large doses, are produced synthetically to treat irregular heartbeat and heart failure.

The Garden of Useful Plants explores other practical products derived from flowers, shrubs and trees. The leaves of *Lawsonia inermis* are dried and ground to make henna, and the roots of dyer's woodruff, *Asperula tinctoria*, were used by the ancient Greeks and Romans to make another red dye. The hard spherical seeds of *Canna indica*, a plant native to South and Central America that is now a popular ornamental, have been used in jewellery-making, in musical percussion instruments and even as shotgun pellets. Orris root (*Iris germanica* var. 'Florentina') was used to prolong the life of perfumes and cosmetics.

The Poison Garden, where deadly plants are labelled with a skull and crossbones, is morbidly fascinating today but served a very serious purpose in the past. Apothecaries needed to be taught the differences between plants that resembled one another but had very different properties, such as lethal hemlock and medicinal sweet cicely.

The significance of the Physic Garden is perhaps best summed up by one of the new panels installed for the 350th anniversary. It tells the story of Philip Miller, head gardener from 1722 to 1770, who turned it into one of the best-known gardens in Europe. In 1731 he published *The Gardeners Dictionary*, which was a huge success, and was also responsible for introducing hundreds of plants from the Americas to Europe. It was

Miller's realisation that *Gossypium hirsutum* from the West Indies would be an ideal crop to grow in the American colony of Georgia that led to the widespread cultivation of cotton on the continent and its terrible legacy of slavery.

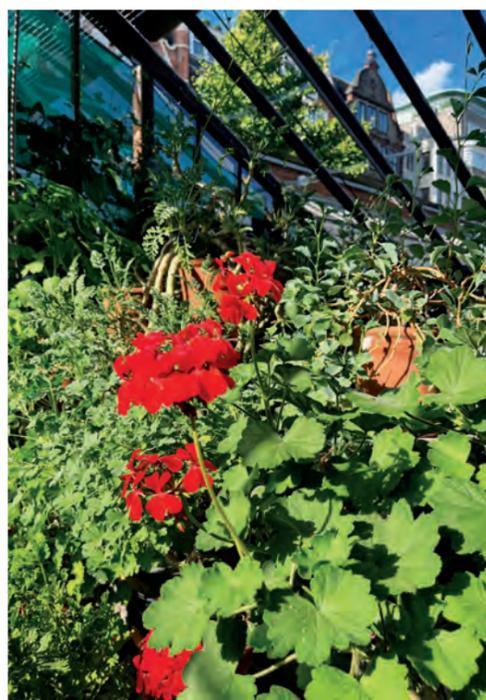
There is something for every plant lover at Chelsea Physic Garden, including courses, workshops, events and tours. Check the website for opening times and further details. ■

◆ chelseaphysicgarden.co.uk

Pharmacists, today's apothecaries, studied at the garden until the 1970s'



Clockwise from top left: the Pelargonium House; snowdrops; pelargoniums; cardamom; the Tropical Corridor; woody nightshade; a scarlet pelargonium; the giant staghorn fern, *Platycerium grande*, and one of the garden sculptures. Opposite page: the Cool Fernery



PICTURES: CHELSEA PHYSIC GARDEN