

Lochac

Herb & Garden Guild



Guild Journal, Volume 6, No. 7. Spring 2026.

Time for a change

With the summer edition, my term as Chronicler will be up. Would anyone like to take on the job? Please contact the Head Gardener (herb@lochac.sca.org) if interested, preferably copy me.

Currently the magazine is in a quarterly format, prepared in free LibreOffice software, but it can be whatever you want it to be. I'm happy to chat about options, and provide training.

Cristoval, Guild Chronicler

Contents

2. Growing linen flax
4. Why no herbalism?
5. Rosanella's September garden
7. Starting Cucumis
9. Guide to Medieval Gardens – book review
11. From the Head Gardener

Contacts

Website: www.sca.org.au/herb/

Facebook: Lochac Herb & Garden Guild

Email list:

Go to lochac.sca.org/mailman/listinfo/garden

Send Garden mailing list submissions to garden@sca.org.au

Articles: Please send to the Chronicler at rhysh@iinet.net.au.

Patron: Master Seger Boom.

Growing Linen Flax

(*Linum usitatissimum*)

By Caitriona Ruadh inghean Bhriain

After eight years of growing linen flax in my hill-top Wellington garden, these are my observations and some tips/tricks I've developed.

I generally sow in late September or early October (during the school term break), and harvest after Canterbury Faire (in late January or early February). I ret the previous crop in the first half of January when the weather is reliably warmer.

I grow in small patches (rotating around my garden) and cover each one with bird netting (using bamboo poles and polythene irrigation pipe as arches to support a full bird net). This keeps birds from getting at seeds both recently sown and ripening on the stems. It also keeps small creatures (including neighbourhood cats) from seeking shelter among the stems and causing lodging. You want to avoid lodging, because it bends the plants, reducing the ease of fibre extraction by making bundles misshapen.



Young plants weather wild winds well, but as they get bigger, they need some support and protection. When the stems are on a lean after rain, a little shake will remove water weighing them down and help them stand up again. I also tie string between bamboo poles to give support around the edges of each plot.



string support (look closely)

If you are growing to get flax fibre, then you want to grow tall plants. You need to make sure the growing conditions are right:

A fibre seed variety - in the past, seed flax and fibre flax were the same. Now there are different varieties for different purposes, so growing flax seed from the supermarket won't get you good fibre. The Koanga Institute has seeds, or you can make contacts with your friendly flax-grower (I always have more seeds than I can use, one plant creates MANY seeds). Importing from overseas is possible, though paperwork-heavy.

Sowing at the right time - too late and the plants won't get tall enough before their seed ripens and growth stops.

Heavy seeding to grow plants close together can encourage elongation, though this has to be balanced with fibre development - thinner stems are harder to extract fibre from.

Appropriate nutrition (good soil that can hold water), good amounts of water (if you use a hose, direct the water at the soil instead of on top of the plants), and enough sunlight (shade will result in short plants).

Finally, **harvesting**:

- Seed bolls get caught up in the stems of other plants, but I've found that a wee shake frees things up quite easily.
- Keeping the bundles small makes all the steps of processing easier - retting will be more even, rippling the seed bolls will be easier, and the processing steps of breaking, scutching, and heckling will be far more manageable.

All my experience (and a bunch of photographs) is on my blog. Have fun learning from my mistakes!

Caitriona

<https://growmyowngarb.wordpress.com>



bundling and retting – shows two varieties with different heights, though the Essene variety was planted a bit late so wouldn't have achieved maximum height.

Why No Herbalism?

By Master Cristoval

One of the guild founders commented recently on an apparent loss of interest in herbalism within the guild.

Partly, that's on me as the magazine editor. I'm a much better cook than gardener, and I tend to look at herbs as ingredients rather than medicine.

Partly it's on our members. I used to get article submissions, from many different members, about one plant they were currently passionate about. They'd look at their herb books, research a bit on Google, and put together an interesting one or two page article. Now I rarely get those submissions.

AI will do that for you in seconds, so nobody's bothering any more. For the record, I'm still willing to print them, particularly where the author has some personal experience about growing or using that plant. But not where the AI has done the work for you, I'm looking for a human voice.

Herbalism in the SCA

It's still the case that many new SCA members express an interest in herbal medicine. There's clearly lots of old knowledge ripe for exploring, and it's one of the cheaper SCA specialisations to get into.

On the medicine side, people soon realise that it's not easy to do well. There's lots of contradictory and contested information, and of course you need enough gardening skill and space to carry it out.

Variation in effect

You soon realise that the herbs behave differently according to the seasons, and time of day, and specific variety. Perhaps the phase of the moon, but I can't really comment on that. The treatments after harvesting also make a difference: whether you grind them or dry them, ferment or boil them etc.

In cooking, sometimes herbs will knock your socks off, and other days they are subtle to the point of irrelevancy.

I expect the same variation in effects is true for medicinal uses. I use my limited amount of

judgement and experience in using them as ingredients; that will be true of medicine too and harder to learn.

What's the evidence?

I'd love to see some articles about which herbal medicines have some evidence behind them. I guess I mean science, though in 2026 that tends to mean sponsored by large pharmaceutical companies with a financial interest in the answer.

For instance, comfrey has a well-known healing effect for bone and joint injuries, supposedly by stimulating cell growth and repair. What are the main studies that support that, and how well are they currently regarded? Are any uses actually dangerous?

What other herbs have clearly-demonstrated benefits? Which ones are regarded now as erroneous folklore or wishful thinking? Hard to write, but I'd like to read and publish such articles. To be clear, I am happy to get articles on particular salves or treatments.

Caveats

There's also the issue of our printing advice which people then rely on instead of conventional medical advice. If somebody sues the Lochac Herb & Garden Guild, or the national SCA corp, what happens?

Hopefully a judge would see any advice here as being a fragment of the knowledge multiverse, and require some personal judgement and responsibility, but who knows.

Leadership

Lochac doesn't have prominent Laurels where herbalism is their major theme. It is hard to get a laurel award in gardening at all, and herbalism could be controversial for all the reasons previously discussed.

So this magazine, for all its limitations, is still the best place for herbalism in Lochac. If you'd like to see more herbalism, do contribute an article.

My September Garden

By Her Excellency Rosanella Soranzo

Greetings to all from Rosanella Soranzo of Southron Gaard.

I recently joined the Lochac Herb and Garden Guild to help inspire me with my gardening efforts through connection with other like-minded souls.

Southron Gaard has been my home since 1999, when I started dance classes with the local College. Since then, I have dabbled in many areas including costuming, embroidery, heavy fighting, archery, leatherwork, stewarding events, council and kingdom officer roles, and other bits and bobs.

Mundanely I trained as a herbalist the early 2000s and currently work as a registered nurse at Christchurch's intensive care unit.

My current personal focus is my garden, and getting it sorted so it can produce enough food to sustain me over the seasons.

Progress to here

It is taking some time to get it all together, and I did require the assistance of a young and energetic landscape gardener about seven months ago. He was skilled enough to get all the structures in place, so now I can just get started with planting.



I have two bugbears, however, left to sort – irrigation and adding the glass to the glasshouse. My back is a little tender these days, and while fine for tilling the soil it is not much good for the consistent movements required for lifting heavy glass into place. I will get there though, one pane at a time.

Propagation

While I procrastinate about those two jobs I am enjoying propagating seedlings. This is the first time I have done this and I'm excited to wake up each morning to see which plant has popped its happy little head up.

I have set up a small greenhouse in the lounge, which I spray with water twice a day. Everything seems to be going well so far, as you can see from the photos.



Seed varieties currently germinating include a variety of alliums, tomatoes, chillies, courgettes, pumpkins, corn, many many leafy salad plants, sunflowers, hibiscus, rhubarb.

I have one spare tray ready to plant with herbs. I also intend to germinate some edible flower varieties.



Outside I intend to direct sow beans and peas, root crops. I currently have potatoes chitting in the garage (originally started in the pantry).

Some rescues

The bottom shelf of the indoor greenhouse contains three plants from my childhood home that was recently demolished to make way for townhouses. I found out about this early enough to drive over and grab some branches of some of my favourite plants that still existed there.

The cuttings consist of two azaleas (well over 50 years old) and a bay tree that sat underneath my bedroom window. I took the cuttings and prepared them by trimming off the bottom leaves, dipping in rooting hormone and placing in a commercial propagation mix.

The top leaves of each cutting have been trimmed back to about a third of their original size so they can still assist with photosynthesis, but not drain too much moisture from the soil. . Crossed fingers I see some roots happening in a few weeks!

The plan

I am not particularly focused on plants or horticultural techniques of the Middle Ages at this point, this is a purely “have a go” garden to see what works and what doesn’t.

Over time, I intend to diversify as I become more confident in what I am doing. As I have four vegetable beds I do intend to undertake crop rotation.

In the future I will set up a home composting system so I can replenish the soil.

Future developments include the addition of fruiting crops. Three weeks ago, I planted gooseberries, blackcurrants, and redcurrants. I am looking into ways to grow raspberries where they can remain contained (they do like to wander...). Strawberries will be planted in the glasshouse.

Fruit trees will appear over time as energy and funds allows. I hope to have cherry, apple, pear, fig, quince, damsons and sloes. Plus more berry varieties. I will likely espalier some of the trees along the fence line.

In addition, I wish to have more medicinal and culinary herbs dotted around the property. Some herbs are hard to come by, but I have managed to

source quite a few from a local seed merchant. When vegetable propagation has slowed, I will move into herb propagation.

It’s a lot to think about and plan, particularly when working shift work, looking after furbabies, and dealing with other life matters.

The walnut

I am very lucky to have a mature walnut tree in the backyard. I need to consider how to manage planting around that. While this produces delicious walnuts, it also leaves a toxin called juglone that spreads through the soil and stunts the growth of other plants.

This does mean I have to be careful about where I place certain plants, and this project will be very much trial and error as the juglone appears to travel quite a long way under the ground (books tell me it shouldn’t go much further than the tree canopy but they lie).

There are several companion plants that manage to resist this toxin which is helpful. The spring flower bed underneath, planted in June, appears to be doing very well indeed.

The present

It is still quite cold here in Southron Gaard, I woke up to 0 degrees and a frost this morning. Things will start to getting going very soon, especially with the warmer days we are experiencing.

This is the busiest time for gardeners so I really need to get a wriggle on.

Jobs for September:

- Monitor seedlings and prick up when their true leaves start to show, harden off when ready
- Finish off the glass house construction.
- Sort out irrigation
- Tidy up and plant out some pots
- Freshen up indoor plants with new potting mix
- Continue weeding and monitoring for pests and diseases
- Prepare a planting plan for the rest of summer and through to Autumn next year
- Start reading “The Green Ages: Medieval Innovations in Sustainability” by Annette Kehnel

A method for starting Cucumis

Testing Columella's gardening tips

By THL Melissa Wijffels

While researching protected cropping structures for my previous article, I read the sections around where Columella describes an early portable glasshouse, and found another, more curious, suggestion for how to produce Cucumis (snake melon; *Cucumis melo*; Paris 2008) earlier in the season.

Columella's De Re Rustica (X1. III. 53) states:

But we read in Bolus of Mendes, the Egyptian writer, that this end can be achieved with much less trouble; for he advises us to have in our garden, on a site open to the sun and well-manured, fennels and brambles planted in alternate rows, and then, when the equinox is past, to cut them a little below the surface of the ground and, after loosening with a wooden prong the pith of the bramble or fennel, to put dung into them and insert the cucumber seeds, so that, as they grow, they may unite with the brambles and fennels, for by this method, they are nourished not from their own roots but from what may be called the mother root; and the stock thus engrafted yields the fruit of the cucumber even in cold weather. (Forster and Heffner, 1955)

Now, it seemed quite unlikely to me that the Cucumis roots would actually form a graft with the fennel or bramble roots, being plants of three separate families (Cucurbitaceae, Apiaceae, Rosaceae), however just because a historical author's theory about why something works is incorrect, that doesn't mean the method doesn't work. So, having a patch of fennel at the end of winter in 2025, I set out to test what would happen.

The experiment

I thought I'd test the method with *Cucumis sativus*, as I had seeds for them, and hadn't had much luck getting them started in a timely fashion for the season.

I started by cutting my fennel just below the growing point.



Figure 1: Cutting fennel at the soil line

Fennel roots are not hollow – not even pithy, so I took a knife to carefully hollow out the centre of the root so I could place both a seed and some rabbit manure into the hole, which Columella extols as being of particularly high quality.

I repeated this in six different fennel roots that were large enough for the procedure



Figure 2: Fennel root cut at the growth point before being hollowed out with a cucumber seed and manure added to it.



Figure 3: After being hollowed out with a cucumber seed and manure added to it.

Results

Now all there was to do was wait! But after two weeks, there was no germination. Thinking it might just be the cold and dry weather (we had a particularly dry winter in 2025), I patiently waited longer. However, after three and four weeks, not only was there no germination, but the seeds were gone.

My garden has a lot of snail activity, so that could be it, however, reading even earlier in that same section of Columella's *De Re Rustica* (X1. III. 50), he writes:

Care, however, must be taken that a woman is admitted as little as possible to the place where the cucumbers and gourds are planted; for usually the growth of green stuff is checked by contact with a woman; indeed if she is also in the period of menstruation, she will kill the young produce merely by looking at it. (Forster and Heffner, 1955)

Alas! Perhaps my frequent checking on my experiment could have been to blame according to the Roman agronomist.

As I didn't get a big enough fennel crop overwintering to re-run this experiment at scale, I encourage my readers here (particularly men, as Columella seems to believe this will increase success) to have a go themselves, and please report back on the results!

References

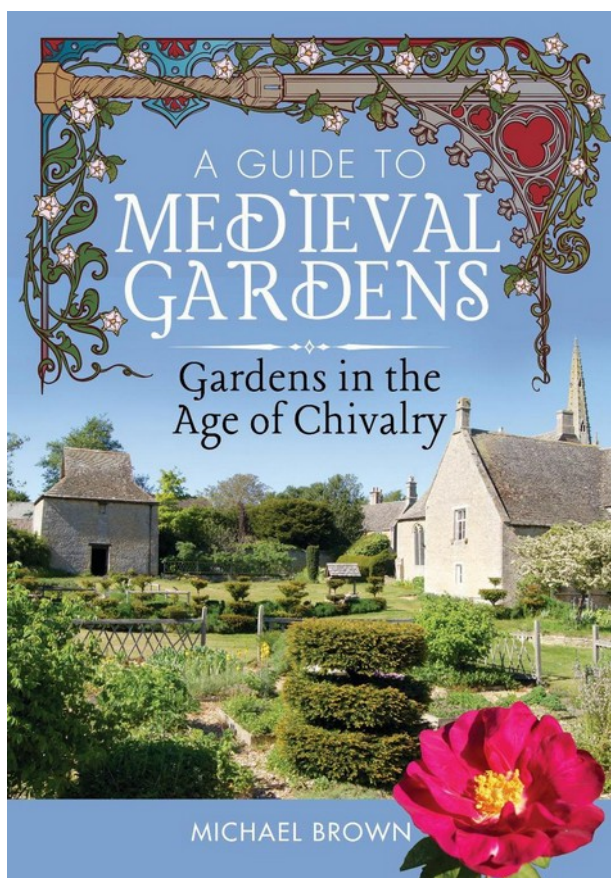
- Forster, E. H., and Heffner, E. S. (1955). Columella, *On Agriculture*, Volume III: Books 10-12. On Trees. Harvard University Press.
- Paris, H. S., Janick, J., & Pitrat, M. (2008). What the Roman emperor Tiberius grew in his greenhouses. *Cucurbitaceae 2008*, Proceedings of the IXth EUCARPIA meeting on genetics and breeding of Cucurbitaceae (Pitrat M, ed), INRA, Avignon (France), May 21-24th, 2008

A Guide to Medieval Gardens

A book review

By Mistress Adrienne Furet

This month I read 'A Guide to Medieval Gardens - Gardens in the Age of Chivalry' by Michael Brown. Or rather, I re-read it with more of a conscious thought to a book review!



Medieval gardens usually rate very few pages in the garden history books. The general perception is still of small gardens in the corner of a castle.

Recent research has shown that the gardens were larger than we previously believed. This book contains information and pictures that have not been generally available before, including the theory and practice of medieval horticulture.

Many features of later gardens were already a part of medieval gardens. The number of plants was limited, but was still no less than many modern gardeners use in their own gardens today.

Yet medieval gardens were imbued with meaning. Whether secular or religious, the additional dimension of symbolism gave a greater depth to medieval gardens, which is lacking in most modern ones.

Brown's approach

This book will be of interest to those who know little about medieval gardens and to those with more knowledge. It contains some of the vast amount of research that the author carried out to create the medieval gardens at the Prebendal Manor, Nassington, Northamptonshire.

The author has tried to use previously unused sources and included his own practical experience of medieval gardening methods that he carried out to maintain the gardens. Some worked, others certainly didn't.

The book starts with an introduction of the author, his research, and an overview of the Medieval English world that explains the significance of what archeologists and researchers have discovered pertaining to gardens of that period.

Gardens were for upper class pleasure and status symbols, but they were also as practical as they could be providing for the household and those who lived in the castles, villages, and monasteries.

The book 'visited' several fine examples, mostly around England of what was left of medieval gardens, some archeological finds, and in archival pages the plottings of those gardens of the past and what could be found in them.

It was fascinating to know what was grown in those gardens and ponds, but also how they were laid out and who used them. It is interesting to see the connection our modern gardens have to those in the past and what parts of our landscaping choices hail from that period.

This is a general guide on medieval gardens, specifically in England. It consists of 13 chapters, a conclusion and a quick listing of medieval gardens in England that can be visited.

Key themes

The chapters are all fairly short and to the point. They are:

- Evidence of Medieval Gardens
- Influences of European Medieval Gardens
- Monastic and Sacred Gardens
- Secular Gardens
- Medieval Garden Features
- Water in the Garden
- Parks and Pleasure Parks
- The Plants of the Medieval Garden
- The Medieval Gardener
- The Gardener's Tools and Equipment
- Cultivation Techniques
- The Medieval Gardening Year, and
- Making your own Medieval Garden.

The first few chapters give background on how we know what little we know, and what types of gardens were grown.

I enjoyed the later chapters more as they got more specific regarding the types of plants you could find and going over individual tools that gardeners used.

I wished some of the sections were fleshed out more. It felt like just as you got into a topic and wanted to know more of the deeper details the chapter ended.

I can understand that there's limited information but the author worked on medieval gardens at the Prebendal Manor and I would have enjoyed hearing more about things he learned from

practical experience trying out medieval tools and techniques.

For example, the chapter on making your own medieval garden simply mentions having a water source and gives some general advice. There's no sample layout with ideas of what plants fit well together.

Illustrations

There is a good number of colour photographs illustrating what the author is discussing. I enjoyed the mix of the author's photos and images from medieval sources, misericords and manuscripts. Not every tool got an image, and in some cases, like the spud, I would have appreciated a photo to better understand the tool as I've never heard of it before and the description left me somewhat unsure of what it looked like.

I'd have loved to see a few more photos from the gardens he maintained, including what he chose to grow where.

My take

If you're new to medieval gardens, this is an excellent primer that goes over the basics and then some.

If you've read a couple of books on the topic already, some of the later chapters may still hold useful information for you."

Michael has also written a couple of other books that I want to track down now. 'Death in the Garden - Poisonous Plants and their Use Throughout History', and 'Medieval Plants and their Uses'.

I borrowed this book from my local library, but it was only recently printed (2022) so is still in print and able to be ordered.

From the Head Gardener

Greetings guild members! Spring is here, and with it, hopefully some fine gardening weather.

Now is a great time to think about planting the garden and arranging local seed swaps of difficult-to-source plants. Just have a chat with your local event organisers, and you can start an official Herb & Garden Guild swap!

If you've been experimenting with new equipment, plants, or gardening techniques, please consider sharing what you've learned in a short article or with photos of what you've done either here, on the mailing list, Facebook group, or the Herb & Garden Guild channel on the Lochac Discord server.

We're working on tidying up the old Herb & Garden guild website - if you have books about herbs, agriculture or gardening you'd like to link to, or would like to be included in a public list of Guild members so that others can find you and ask you about plants, please flick me a message at herb@lochac.sca.org

In Service

THL Melissa Wijffels