

Abbey Gardens

When we visit an abbey today most of what we see are the ruins of buildings. It's easy to forget that when nuns and monks lived in them they were surrounded by gardens.

These gardens had several uses:

- Growing fruit and vegetables for food
- Growing herbs for medicine
- Places to sit peacefully and think about god



Growing food

In many abbeys the ordinary monks and nuns ate mainly a vegetarian diet and abbeys would have had a kitchen garden to supply them with fruits and vegetables. Things you might have found in an abbey kitchen garden include leeks, onions, carrots, kale, turnips, radishes, peas and beans as well as apple and pear trees.

Most abbeys kept beehives to produce honey and beeswax and had farms where they grew wheat and barley. In general, they tried to be self-sufficient and produce their own food. They were also often given food grown by people who lived nearby as payment for living on abbey lands. If Abbeys had extra food they could share it with people who were didn't have enough to eat

Growing herbs for medicines

Abbeys were important places for providing medical treatment. During medieval times people thought differently about illness than most of us do today. They often believed that diseases were a punishment from god, so going to a religious person for treatment made sense, as they could pray for you to be healed. However, monks also had another ability that made them able to practise medicine: they could read and write. This meant they could write books and share and pass on information about how to make medicines.



These are pages from a medieval herb book written in Latin called 'Circa Instans'



Herbs were the key ingredients of many medieval medicines. They could be dried and made into a tea and drunk, distilled into a tincture to extract the essential oils, or used fresh by being ground into a paste which would be smeared on the body as a poultice. Specific herbs were used to treat specific problems. While many of these treatments had no scientific basis (and some were even dangerously poisonous!) we still use some of them today. For example, drinking mint tea or having an after-dinner mint to help you digest your food, drinking chamomile tea to help you relax and sleep, or putting arnica cream on bruises.

Some medieval herb treatments included:

Coriander – was used to treat fevers

Lavender – was to treat chest pain, fainting and sleeplessness

Rosemary – was put under the pillow to protect against nightmares

Marjoram – was smeared on as a paste to treat bruises and swellings



Places for contemplation

Most abbeys had a cloister, a central walkway around a garden in the middle of the abbey buildings. These cloister gardens were mostly used as peaceful place for monks and nuns to spend time talking together or thinking about god. Many people today, whether they have religious beliefs or not, find spending time outdoors in the company of plants restful and soothing.



The cloister gardens today at Jedburgh Abbey (left) and Iona Abbey (right)

Some things to try...

- Find things in your home that smell nice. Do any of these come from plants?
- Find a quiet spot in a garden or a park. Close your eyes and breathe slowly in through your nose and out your mouth. What can you smell, hear and feel?
- Write down everything you eat in a day. How many of these come from plants? (Make sure to check the ingredient list on things that come in a packet – you might be surprised!)
- Take some photos of your favourite gardens and parks near where you live, or look online or photos of beautiful gardens or parks around the world.