

Gardening Tips For The Global Meltdown

By Barbara Lewis

BEHIND every great man is a great woman, or so the saying goes. By the same token, every famous male gardener must have had a woman at his side. For instance, the first seeds of Britain's Kew Gardens - which celebrates its 250th anniversary this year - were sown by King George II's unfortunate son Frederick, but it was his wife Augusta, princess of Wales, who nurtured his vision for the estate after he died, aged only 44.

Augusta was honoured when Diana, then the reigning princess of Wales, opened the Princess of Wales conservatory in 1987, and now she is being given much mention in Kew's programme of anniversary events just when there are few more fashionable suits than gardening.

especially if you're a woman.

Ex-newspaper editor Rosie Boycott is among the contemporary British women who have hailed gardening, or at least growing your own food. The most topical virtues of this very British pastime include its being an antidote to the kind of grasping materialism that triggered the global financial crisis. In her book 'Our Farm: A Year in the Life of a Smallholding' (Bloomsbury, 2007), Boycott shares her discovery that "this process of planting makes me happy" and challenges the capitalist view that "sustained economic growth will lead us towards happier, more fulfilled lives". Her small holding in the grounds of Dillington Park in Somerset, southern England, she said, enabled her "to step aside

from the competitive world I inhabit in the city during my other life as a writer".

Researchers have concluded that women's aptitude for growing things dates back to their role as gatherers while men were the hunters. Research published in 2000 by the University of Northumbria and the University of Newcastle, both in northern England, found women were a third more likely to identify plants correctly than men and, on an average, 20 seconds faster. It argued that men would have taken longer to find the correct greens for dinner and been more likely to poison their families.

Getting the chance to grow anything to eat is becoming the privilege of the lucky few in London, where most people's homes do not have gardens of any size and waiting lists for allotments

can be as long as 10 years. Increasingly, those in the queue for the strips of publicly owned land are women. A spokeswoman for Britain's National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners said the organisation estimated more than 20 per cent of "allotmentees" were women, up from around four per cent in 1978 and 16 per cent in 1998.

One of the women who has managed to get hold of a plot in Greenwich, east London is Catherine Clancy, who also runs "Inspired Gardens", a garden design business. A former IT consultant, Clancy has applied her business skills to her own company, which has so far proved recession-proof. She says the housing crash meant home-owners were more likely to improve the homes - and gardens - they already had, rather

than seeking new ones, and stressed-out city executives have been taking refuge in greenery. "Men are still the most high-profile garden designers," she said. "But more and more women are being recognised for their talents.... Women just seem to create beautiful poetic gardens in their own quiet way." She reels off a long list of female gardening talent. It ranges

from Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932) - who created more than 400 gardens in Britain, Europe and America and whose influence on garden design has been "pervasive to this day", according to her official website - to Kim Wilde - a British pop singer-turned-gardener and writer of gardening books for children.

One of the most

distinguished of an illustrious group is the artist and radical Octavia Hill (1838-1912). A pioneer of affordable housing and modern social work, her legacy includes Red Cross garden in east London - "an open air sitting room for the tired inhabitants of Southwark", which is still a haven of greenery and bird song tucked away among run-down back

streets. Along with fellow Victorian philanthropists Sir Robert Hunter and Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley, Hill is perhaps best-known as one of the founders of Britain's National Trust, which seeks to protect the threatened coastline, countryside, buildings and their gardens. Founded in 1895, the charity has relatively recently celebrated its centenary, leaving a long wait for the next significant anniversary of another prominent female founder.

—(Women's Feature Service)

The Princess of Gardening

The best thing that happened to the 18th century royal Frederick, the Prince of Wales, son of British King George II and Queen Caroline, was his marriage to Augusta of Saxe-Gotha, who, like him, was German-born. The marriage was also a boon for gardening, as between them the couple sowed the seeds of Kew Gardens, renowned the world over for its exceptional collection of plants and its botanical research.

After Frederick's death in 1751, Augusta carried on with his plans for Kew, extending it and adding buildings and features. Tainted by her husband's poor relationship with his parents, Augusta was not always appreciated during her lifetime. After Frederick's untimely death, her closeness to Lord Bute - who gave her horticultural advice and was briefly Prime Minister - made her the subject of scandalous gossip, which was almost certainly false.

More recently, she has gained due recognition. The Princess of Wales Conservatory, opened by Diana, Princess of Wales, in July 1987, is one tribute to her. Another, which does date back to her time, is a Chinese pagoda that still towers over the gardens. Completed in 1762, it was designed by the princess's official architect Sir William Chambers as a surprise for her. In all, the princess spent between 30,000 and 40,000 pounds on the gardens, according to an estimate by 18th century man of letters Horace Walpole. Frederick had also invested heavily in Kew, which became a retreat for him - away from the politics of London.

During a planting session, he was caught in a storm and contracted pleurisy. He seemed to be recovering when he suddenly died. It was fortunate for the botanists, who mourned the loss of a keen plant-lover, that his wife was also an enthusiast.