

# Beauty and Utility: Dutch Kitchen Gardens in the Seventeenth Century

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In the seventeenth century, Dutch kitchen gardens showcased a blend of beauty and practicality, defying the ideas of gardener André Mollet (ca 1600-1665), who believed kitchen gardens were unsightly and should be hidden away. Contrary to this view, the gardens of the Dutch Republic revealed a harmonious relationship between aesthetics and utility.

The stability enjoyed by the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth century was a key factor in the significant economic growth and rapid urban expansion. By 1650, Holland had become the most urbanized region in Europe, leading many city dwellers to rely on market gardens for their food supply. This demand spurred the rise of market gardens surrounding cities, notably evident around The Hague, and facilitated the exchange of knowledge and techniques among gardeners about cultivating vegetables and fruits.

The wealth generated from trade in the Dutch Republic allowed merchants to establish an elite engaged in governance and society—this new class invested in country estates adorned with gardens, showcasing their wealth and status. Although smaller in scale than France or Britain due to the Netherlands' limited land, these gardens showcased intensive space utilisation. Surrounded by water, Dutch gardens exemplified a creative blend of beauty and utility, seamlessly merging ornamental and kitchen elements.

Three distinct gardens illustrate this combination of aesthetics and practicality: a wealthy merchant's garden in the Beemster Polder, the Zorgvliet estate of the Earl of Portland, and a more modest garden belonging to an aspiring merchant.

The first garden in the Beemster Polder emerged from a drained lake and transformed into fertile farmland in the early 1600s. Established in the 1620s, its geometric design symbolises human dominance over nature while blending utility and beauty. Visitors like Prince Cosimo de Medici admired this meticulous layout, which was delightful. The land was strategically sectioned, assigning the richest soils to market gardens and country estates.

Frederik Alewijn, a prominent Amsterdam merchant, built the estate Vredenburg. The design included a house island encircled by a wide canal and a garden island. The layout emphasised practicality, with two-thirds of the estate dedicated to utility gardens featuring cherry orchards instead of less valuable fruits like apples. Notably, the design remained aesthetically pleasing despite focusing on economic gain, as evidenced by the careful arrangement of trees and waterways.

Market scenes and documented records, including Jan van der Groen's *Den Nederlandtsen Hovenier* (1669), reveal the variety of vegetables, herbs, and fruits cultivated in these gardens. Head gardeners were tasked with managing up to fifty different types, highlighting the elaborate systems for maintaining these productive gardens.

The second garden at Zorgvliet was owned by Hans Willem Bentinck, Earl of Portland; his estate reflects his high status as chamberlain of King-Stattholder William III. Zorgvliet's design encompassed established kitchen gardens, orchards, and a frame yard for exotic crops, indicating a blend of practicality and grandeur.

The Zorgvliet estate included intricate ornamental elements like parterres, berceaux, and even artificial landscapes. The production from the gardens served multiple purposes, not only as food staples but also as luxurious gifts for esteemed guests, enhancing the host's social standing.

The final garden, owned by Mr. Dirk Rijswijk in Beverwijk, exhibits charm and adaptability despite the limitations of its irregular plot. The site flaunts a geometric design, incorporating two kitchen gardens. The first garden mirrors the practicality expected of a market garden, showcasing various vegetables. At the same time, the second is more aesthetically focused, lined with dense hedges, ornamental features, and sightlines designed to guide views from the house to the garden.

Recent research utilising georeferencing techniques has enabled the calculation of the ratio between ornamental and utility sections in these gardens. At Zorgvliet, the utility garden constituted 15%, Vredenburg 40%, and Graafwijk 60%. This analysis demonstrates that even the kitchen gardens, often viewed as practical, could harmoniously coexist with ornamental features while enhancing the overall allure of the estates.

In conclusion, exploring these three Dutch gardens illustrates the integration of beauty and utility in seventeenth-century kitchen gardens. They challenge André Mollet's notion, revealing that kitchen gardens were not merely functional spaces but also significant contributors to Dutch society's aesthetic and cultural fabric. Through their design and use, they embodied the very spirit of their era, showcasing a commitment to both beauty and utility.