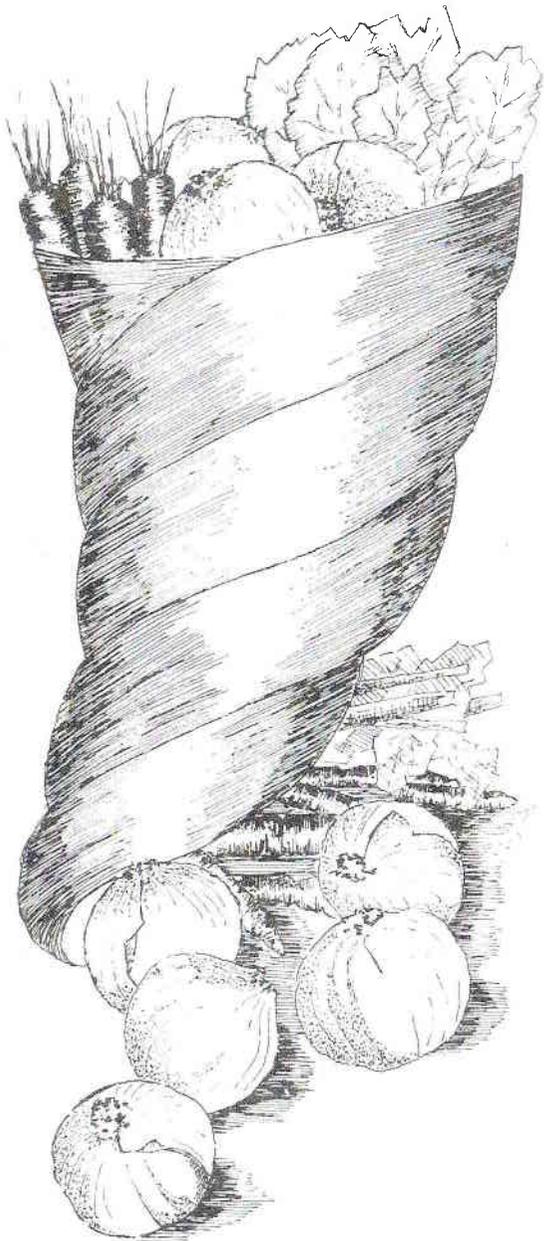


# VINES VEGETABLES AND HERBS AT THE ROMAN PALACE

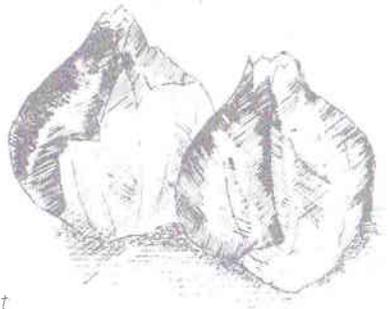


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The Roman vegetable garden is a complete revelation to modern man not only because of the large and diverse range of vegetables that were cultivated but also the methods by which they were grown. Indeed, the modern gardening manual is in many ways an update of books and treatise which were written two thousand years ago. Our principal sources from the Roman period are Pliny and Columella, both of whom wrote extensively upon the subject of agriculture and plant husbandry, and Apicius who wrote a treatise on Roman cookery. Not only do we have information upon techniques of cultivation but also how to prepare the products for the table.

The range of vegetables is quite remarkable, many of which were actually imported into Italy from other countries like Syria, Greece, North Africa and Germany. Today, however, many of the actual species of plants have been lost either through neglect or, more commonly, hybridisation leading to 'improved' varieties and, recently, by Common Market Regulations which forbid the sale and propagation of certain old varieties. Consequently in this presentation of a Roman vegetable garden the majority of the plants being grown are modern equivalents. Some may even be the direct descendants of Roman types. For example, the onion Pliny refers to as coming from Ascalon corresponds exactly with the modern shallot both in its description and cultivation. Oddly enough the shallot is occasionally referred to as a scallion in certain parts of Britain even today, a word which is doubtless derived from Ascalon.

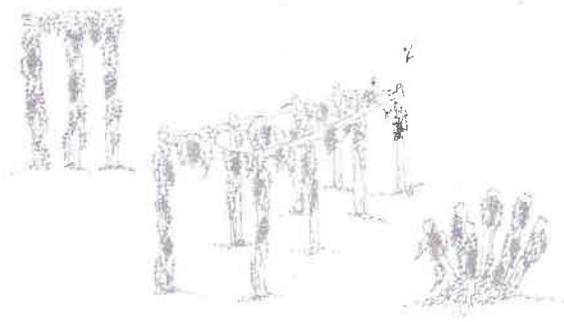


Shallot

In Britain our evidence for Roman or prehistoric vegetable gardens is extremely slight. In fact, the excavation of the Roman Palace revealed only one cache of carbonised seeds identified as '*Lathyrus sativus*', a member of the pea family. Normally in the absence of documentary records we have to rely upon such scanty evidence as seed impressions fired into pottery, carbonised or waterlogged seed and pollen grains. Seed impressions in pottery are, in comparison to the prehistoric period, very

rare. Carbonised seed is usually restricted to cereal plants which are invariably the side products of waste disposal or accidental burning like the barley seeds often recovered from the furnace entrances and flues of Romano-British malting floors. Vegetables, on the other hand, by their very nature are unlikely to come within any system which might allow accidental carbonisation. Most likely sources of evidence are coprolites which may contain seeds like grape seeds which are not easily processed by the human digestive system. Unfortunately this kind of evidence is extremely rare. Waterlogged material, like that recovered from excavations of London Roman waterfront are far more productive. Pollen evidence is specifically restricted in terms of survival to acid soil types. However, one of the research objectives of this simulated vegetable garden is to examine the potential of pollen in determining both the presence and, indeed, the husbandry of vegetables in the archaeological record. At the elementary level a pollen grain bank will be created from the plants and consequently, even against good gardening practice, vegetables will be left to flower for this reason.

There is little doubt that gardening existed as a practice in Iron Age Britain though our knowledge of what was exactly grown is extremely limited. From Roman towns, however, evidence has been recovered of a number of exotic plants like grape, fig, date and olive though the last two are unlikely to have been grown seriously. In addition, cabbage, celery, mulberry, lentil, millet and anise have been identified suggesting that these too were grown either horticulturally or as main agricultural crops. Their survival as archaeological evidence is probably a function of their urban context. The actual evidence which would prove a plant was grown in a given location does not exist. In fact, all archaeological evidence, with the possible exception of pollen grain, is found after being subjected to at least one or two subsequent processes.



The vegetable plants being grown here at the Roman Palace will vary from year to year according to both availability and research design. The details are available on the dated plant list and plan as well as the labels on each plot.

The tiny vineyard, first set up in 1985 with cuttings, is exclusively of the variety known as Wrotham Pinot. This vine is believed to be the direct descendant of the vines imported by the Romans in the first century A.D. The different systems of viticulture are demonstrated as they have been described by Columella and Virgil. The simplest is the trailing vine where the plant is given no support at all. The palisaded vine is given some support by a grouping of stakes around it. The grower carefully trains the vine around these supports. Similarly the yoked vine is encouraged to climb the upright posts and then to twine itself around the horizontal timber crosspiece. The continuous yoked vine is similar except that row management is much easier. Finally the pergola vine is a development of the last system but provides even more support to the vines and yet easier management. The grapes from this variety are dark and sweet and should, in the fullness of time, yield a full bodied, rich and mellow wine. It will be at least five years before these vines mature sufficiently to yield a crop and probably a decade before the vineyard will be fully operational.

The herb garden again is only representative of the many different varieties of herbs which were grown during the Roman period. Herbs were used extensively in the preparation of food and for medicinal purposes. For example, Apicius gives a recipe for roasted kidneys which includes a stuffing of ground pepper, pine kernels, very finely chopped coriander and ground fennel seed. Lavender, on the other hand, was used to scent bathwater. Details of the plants grown are given on the dated list and signed by the labels besides each plot. As with the vineyard it will be several years before the herb plots fully mature.

