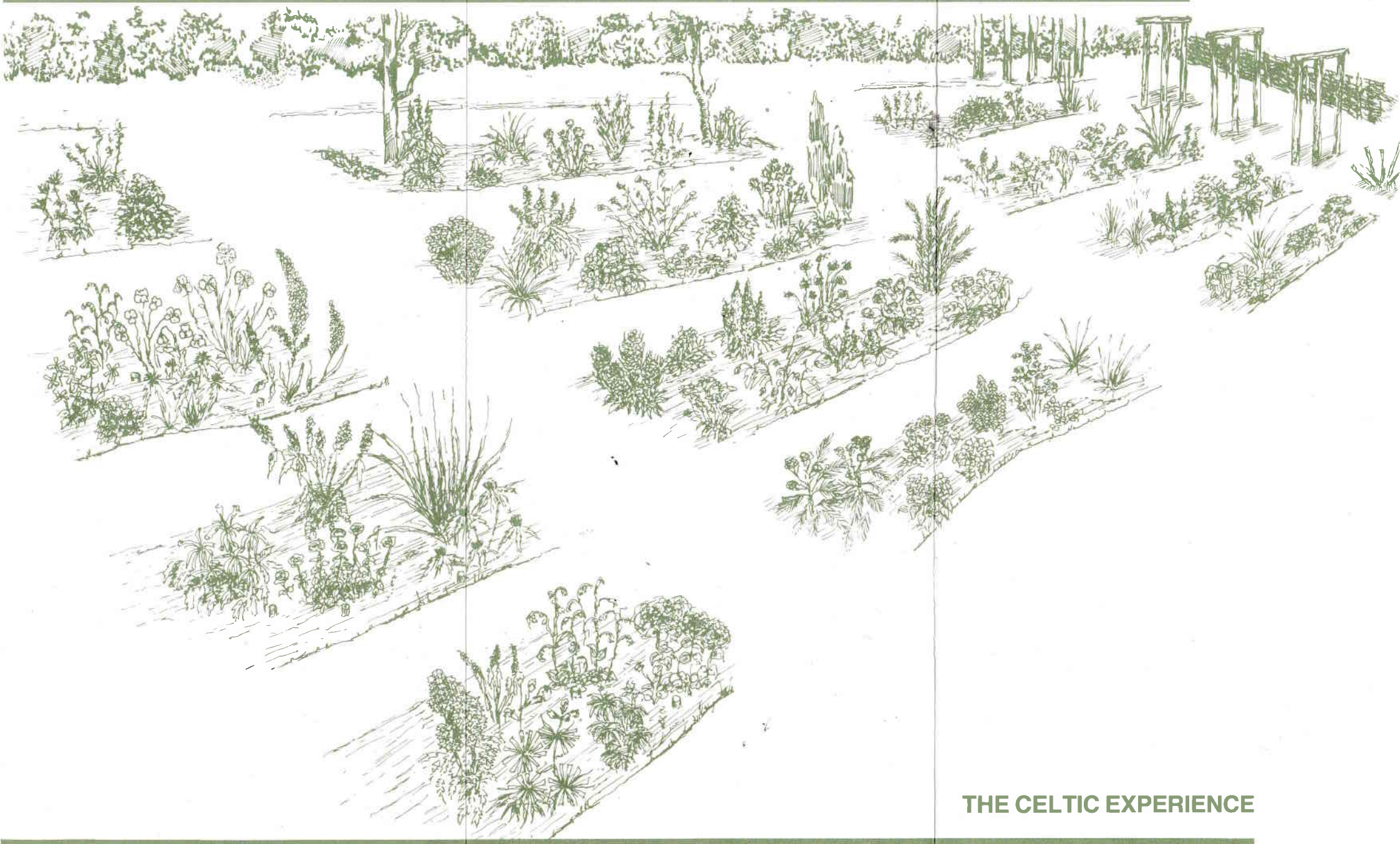
THE HERB GARDEN



THE CELTIC EXPERIENCE

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Man has used plants ever since his emergence as a separate species. The first hunter-gatherers of the 'Garden of Eden' undoubtedly relied more upon plant resources than the riskier and more unpredictable hunting of animals for their food supplies. The principle of utilising natural resources has persisted throughout the millennia to the present day when modern man still gathers a host of wild plants and fruits including blackberries, bilberries and hazel nuts. With the advent of agriculture and cultivation of cereal and vegetable crops, the specific cultivation of 'useful plants' inevitably followed. Although a 'herb' virtually defies clear definition beyond being a plant useful to man, a number of such herb plants were cultivated as well as being culled from the wild. Indeed, the whole ethos of agriculture is to remove the uncertainty of supply and certain herbs would fit into this category of required plants.

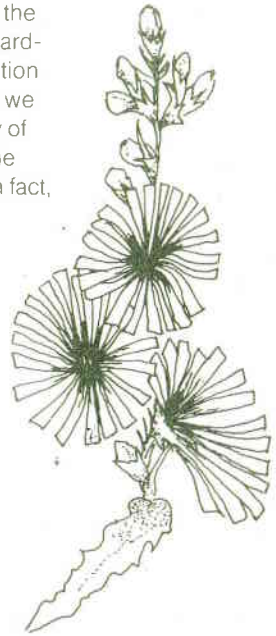
Documentary evidence concerning the use of herbs principally as medicines survives from a number of civilisations, notably the Chinese from 2730 B.C., the Egyptians from 2980 B.C. and the Sumerians from c. 2200 B.C. From Egypt to Greece, Hippocrates of Cos (460–377 B.C.) is regarded as the father of scientific medicine, his name immortalised in the 'Hippocratic oath'. Although the study of anatomy begins at this time, curative medicines then as now were concocted principally from plants. The Roman world, dominated by Greek thought and philosophy, continued this process.

For Europe and Britain, however, we have no real documentary evidence of herbs until much later. However, we can be sure that apart from documentary recording, a similar pattern obtained. Plants necessarily formed an integral part of everyday life. Whether they were used only for medicines or for other purposes, aromatics, narcotics, cosmetics, dyes, alcohol, we can only surmise.

The herb garden itself is landscaped into the sloping banks of the valley on the north west side of the main enclosure. All the beds have been carefully terraced in such a way as to present the best view of the plants to the visitor. The overall impression of the terraces is reminiscent in microform of the early field systems which still survive today as field monuments. In these instances, the terracing is the result of plough action and soil movement creating the dividing banks which are referred to as lynchets.

The beds are separated into three distinct units by broad paths. Each unit is further divided into four sets of beds devoted to specific plant usage although in the case of a large number of plants which have more than one use this division is rather arbitrary. In addition there are a group of nursery beds to the south and to the north a small Roman type vineyard, where the different ways of viticulture as practised in the early part of our era are demonstrated.

The southern and central beds are devoted to those plants which were available for use in Britain before the Roman period while the northern beds are planted with species introduced to Britain by the Romans after A.D. 43. Unfortunately since there is no documentation available for the prehistoric period in Britain regarding plant usage, with the exception of Caesar's reference to woad, we cannot be at all sure if all or any of the plants were in fact used. The probability, however, is high. In fact, evidence is emerging that gardening, in the sense of small cultivated plots immediately adjacent to houses, began as early as the Bronze Age.



The scientific purpose of the herb garden is directed towards learning more not only about the plants themselves but also about their potential role in the prehistoric period. The first objective is to gather and maintain a viable seed bank of all the species in the garden. Thereafter research is carried out into their potential use and the kind of waste product therefrom which may result in the carbonisation of seed or other woody plant elements which could be isolated by archaeological excavation of Iron Age sites. Secondly a full collection is being made of the pollen grains of all the plants primarily as a comparative resource for palynologists studying the micro fossil debris from excavations. This aspect is particularly important since herbs are invariably used in the leaf and flower state rather than after they have fruited. Gradually it is hoped to establish a greater understanding of which plants were important then and how they were used. Tantalising evidence which hints at usage has been discovered in the stomachs of Iron Age people recovered from peat bogs both in England and Denmark.

The tiny vineyard now approaching maturity demonstrates the different systems of Roman viticulture. The vines themselves are the earliest variety available and are thought to be exactly similar to those imported by the Romans. In the Roman period there were several vineyards set up in Britain.

There are over one hundred and sixty different species of plants in the garden, many of which are rare today. Except for the darkest months of winter there are always a number of plants in flower. A full catalogue of the plants in the garden is available as well as a comprehensive plant list.

Please do not pick any of the plants. A number are available for purchase and special requests can be accommodated. Please stay on the pathways and do not walk between the beds. Every weekend Mr. & Mrs. P. Mason, who created and maintain the garden, are on site and will help you to enjoy your visit.