

Green Fingers

My first home in Japan was a 1 room apartment in the unlovely Tokyo suburb of Minami Gyotoku. It was tiny but, in its way, charming. The building was painted green and had a French name. It was peaceful at night, apart from the occasional bosozoku drive by and I was only 5 minutes walk from the station, so I was happy enough. Only one thing was missing – a garden. Minami Gyotoku is made entirely of concrete, even the parks.

I left after a couple of years and one of the joys of my current flat is that, technically at least, it has a garden. It may be only 1 metre squared but no matter. It's mine and after a hard day's work there is something psychologically comforting about returning to ones very own patch of turf.

The importance of gardens to the British cannot be overstated – 60% of us claim to be active gardeners. This figure will range from those that just like 'pottering' (casual gardening) to the zealously committed who study horticulture, attend shows and enter competitions for the largest cucumbers, firmest marrows and most aesthetically pleasing cauliflowers. Some of the keenest gardeners even believe that talking to plants helps them to thrive.

The best gardeners are said to have 'green fingers' which implies an almost supernatural ability to grow thriving and beautiful plants and flowers through skill alone. Other gardening expressions that have become popular include:

`Don't let the grass grow (under your feet)` means don't delay.

`Grasp the nettle` means to tackle a problem bravely or take an opportunity.

`Nip it in the bud!` means to deal with a small problem quickly before it becomes more serious.

And for people:

an `English rose` is a delicate, pale skinned beauty while a `shrinking violet` is a shy person who doesn't express their views.

We also have the very curious expression `a gooseberry` which refers to a person who hangs around a romantic couple hampering their chances of any intimacy:

`I went out with my girlfriend last night but her sister came along. What a gooseberry!`

The Royal Horticultural society has four beautiful gardens and their website recommends and offers information on another 140. They also have details on forthcoming shows such as the Wisley Flower Show where you can see examples of flower arranging British style (compare it with Ikebana) and the London Autumn Harvest Show where you can get your hands on those massive cucumbers and taste the best of the local produce.

And if you do ever feel a twinge of homesickness there at least 10 Japanese gardens in the UK. My favourite is hidden away in a quiet corner of lovely Holland Park in West London.

So please drop in to one of our lovely gardens on your next trip to the UK. Find a park bench, sit back and enjoy Britain in full bloom. And if you do see someone trying to have a conversation with a rose bush, don't be alarmed.

<http://www.rhs.org.uk/whatson/gardens/wisley/Wisley-flower-show.html>

http://www.rhs.org.uk/WhatsOn/Events/londonshows/london_tickets.htm#information