Sissinghurst and strawberry fields: despite some eccentricities and errors, the British Library’s exhibition of gardens and gardening in books and manuscripts is richly rewarding

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This is undoubtedly the most important exhibition to be held on the subject of gardens since ‘The Garden’ exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, a quarter of a century ago. That show was the brainchild of Sir Roy Strong, who has since done more than anyone to bring the subject of garden history into the mainstream of art criticism. Strong gave ‘The Writer in the Garden’ a ringing endorsement in a speech on its opening night, and no-one with an interest in the subject will dissent from that, given the extraordinary amount of revealing material on show. There are certain limitations in terms of scope, and a number of dated interpretations, but any cavils are easily outweighed by the sheer quality of the exhibits and the attractiveness of the exhibition’s design. ‘The Writer in the Garden’ is also fleecy, and justifies repeated visits.

First, the title, which should not be understood literally: this exhibition is not about writers in gardens, as such, but about gardens, real and imaginary, as depicted in books and manuscripts. The show is divided into five main chronological sections—the first on pre-1600 material, the rest on successive centuries—a conventional approach that nevertheless provides a satisfying feeling of travel through time and space. The exhibition designer (Declan Buckley, a garden designer) has, in dividing up these sections by colour-theme, created an elegant progress through a number of discrete, enclosed, yet spacious-feeling areas. It is not like being in a garden, exactly, but there are certain spatial similarities that will not be lost on the gardening audience. The taped birdsong which accompanies the visitor...

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A. Gardening is a well-known favourite. As the weather in Britain is rather mild, British people manage to do gardening almost all the year round. Sometimes this can be just weeding and sometimes, serious vegetable and fruit growing. Some people also buy holidays fo
r the summer or even next year during the festive season as it can work out significantly cheaper than buying closer to the time of travel.

According to statistics, the number of family breakdowns doubles in the post-Christmas period as a result of stress, debt and over-consumption of alcohol. Art collectors from around the world gathered to buy some of the world’s most famous paintings. The auction began with a painting that was not on any museum’s list. It was the painting of the man’s son. The British people are great lovers of gardens, dogs, cats and horses. Animals are not only loved but protected by law. Books and magazines are published giving step-by-step instructions and there are also shops, which cater for the requirements of the amateur craftsmen. Though Britain does not often produce world-famous sportsmen, the British people are sport-lovers and taught the rest of the world organised games. Golf was first played in Scotland in the 15th century, cricket was first played in England in the 16th century. But some people doubt whether there is anything that can be called a British national character as the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish have retained their separate identities despite English domination.