

A PLACE TO TAKE ROOT

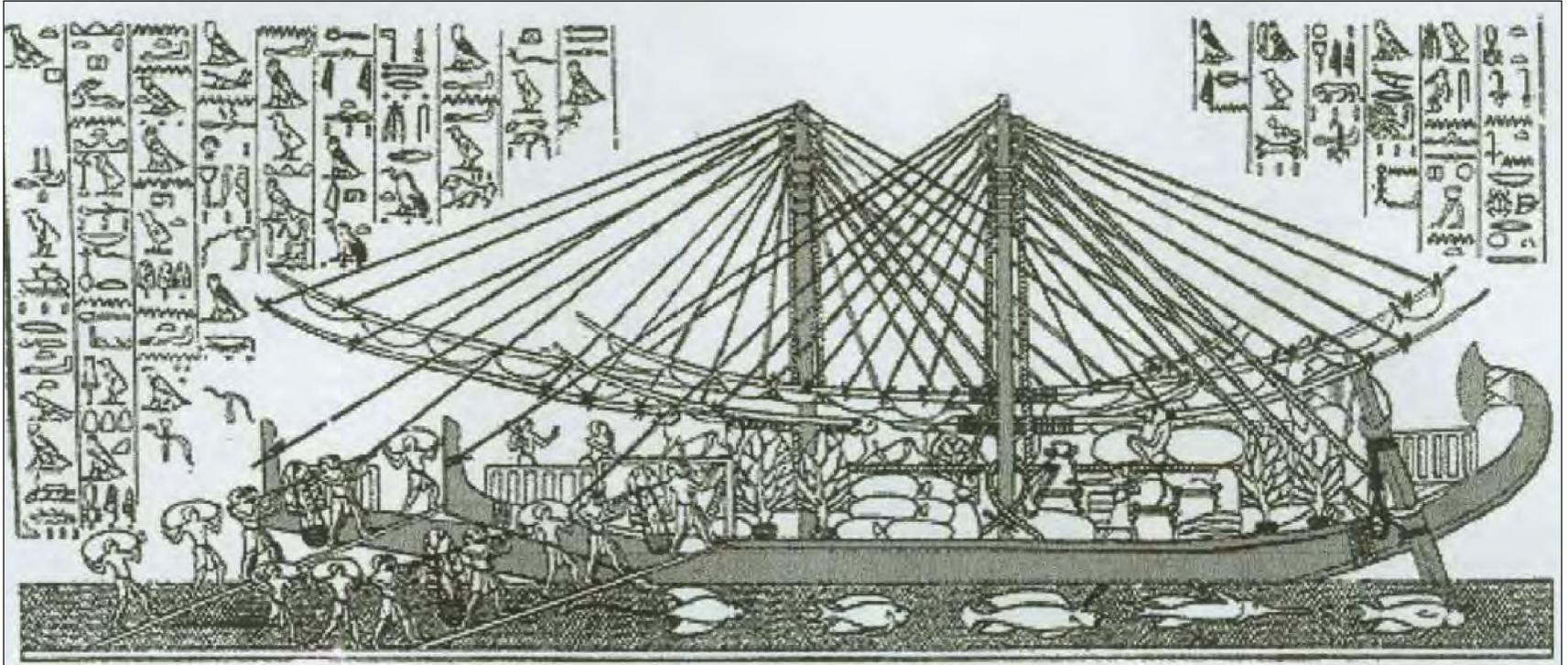
The History of Flowerpots & Garden Containers in America

FOR MOST HUMAN HISTORY PEOPLE had no need for flowerpots. They tended the indigenous plants that grew near their homes. But around the time of ancient Egypt (1,500 bc), as increased trade and travel mingled peoples and traditions, the first flowerpots appeared.

Peoples and traditions melded in America, too, as waves of immigrants created homes in their new land. The first flowerpots were imported from abroad, but as agriculture became increasingly important to growing cities, America's own country potters began to create pots from the native clay.

Discover the origin of the *common flowerpot*. These 60 examples help trace the history of the pot, explore its materials and shapes, and illustrate how it has developed in response to changes in horticulture and garden styles, from ancient Egypt up to the present day. 🌱

Earliest flowerpots



TOP: Wall Painting from Thebes, Egypt, c. 1500 BC

MIDDLE: John Evelyn, Method for propagating plants using pots filled with earth, pen and ink, from manuscript *Elysium Britannicum*, 1657

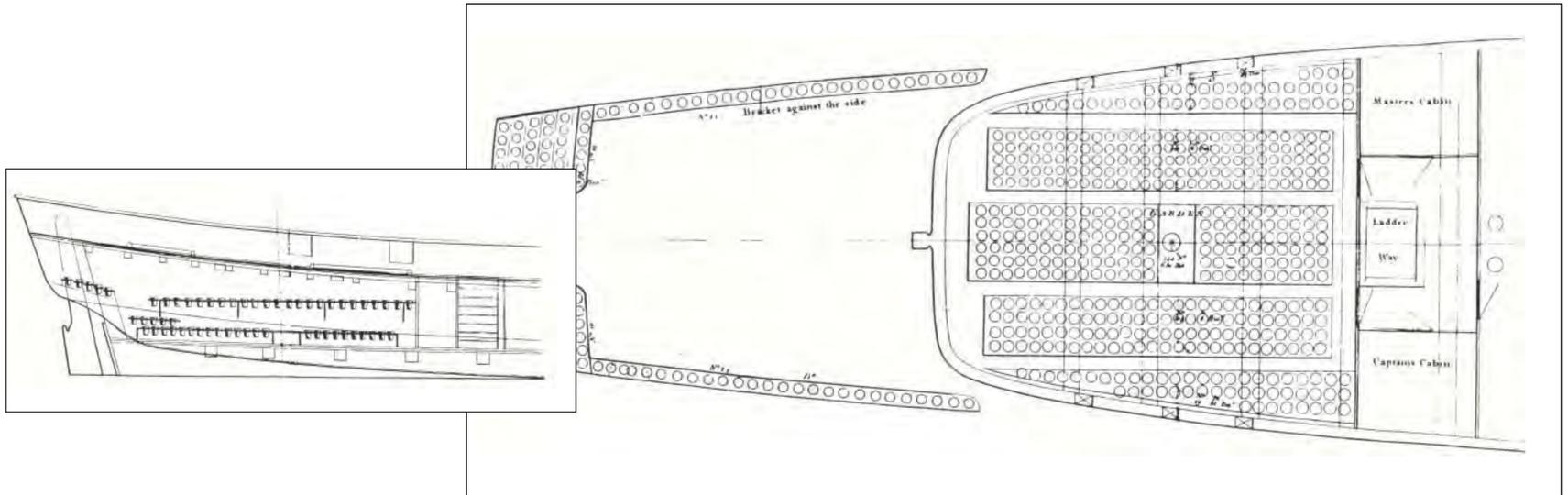
BOTTOM: John Evelyn, Method of tagging a plant, pen and ink, from manuscript *Elysium Britannicum*, 1657

COOKING POTS, BASKETS, STITCHED LEATHER SATCHELS — the first flowerpots evolved as a means of transporting plants and whatever was at hand was used. Wall paintings at Thebes, Egypt, show Queen Hatshepsut's (c. 1504–1482 BC) plant gatherers in Punt (Somalia) where they are loading myrrh-bearing incense trees (*Commiphora myrrha*) in pots on ships bound for Egypt. The great Kublai Khan (1219–1294) had choice trees dug up and carried back by elephants to his palace gardens in China.

A passion for new plants in 16th-century Europe stemmed from the introduction of exotic species like tulips from Turkey. Possessing tulips and the other rare flowers and fruits celebrated in Dutch still life paintings became a sign of culture and material success. Many of these non-native plants needed to be grown in pots because they were exhibited indoors and had special horticultural needs. The Dutch developed elegant, as well as utilitarian flowerpots for these treasures, some with small handles attached at the sides.

England echoed this enthusiasm for plants, importing 7,000 plant species from America during the reign of King George III (1738–1820). 🌱

Seaworthy pots



PLAN & SECTION
— of part of the —
BOUNTY ARMED TRANSPORT.
showing the manner of
fitting and stowing the Pots,
for conveying the
Bread fruit plants.



TOP: Plan & Section of part of the Bounty Armed Transport, engraving, 1878.

BOTTOM: Tree fern in half-barrel container. Plate VII, engraving, from *Ferns in Their Homes and Ours*, by John Robinson, 1878.

EARLY PLANT HUNTERS often risked their lives seeking out new plants. But the problem of keeping the specimens alive on the trip home was even more of a challenge. The voyage across the ocean could take longer than expected depending on the weather. Any delay could be disastrous as salt spray and erratic variations in temperature caused many plants to die at sea.

The common clay pot played an important role in improving the success of plant imports. The famous Captain Bligh's mission of 1878 was to transfer breadfruit (*Artocarpus altilis*) from Tahiti to the West Indies. His ship, the *HMS Bounty*, carried pots in which to transport more than 1,000 breadfruit seedlings.

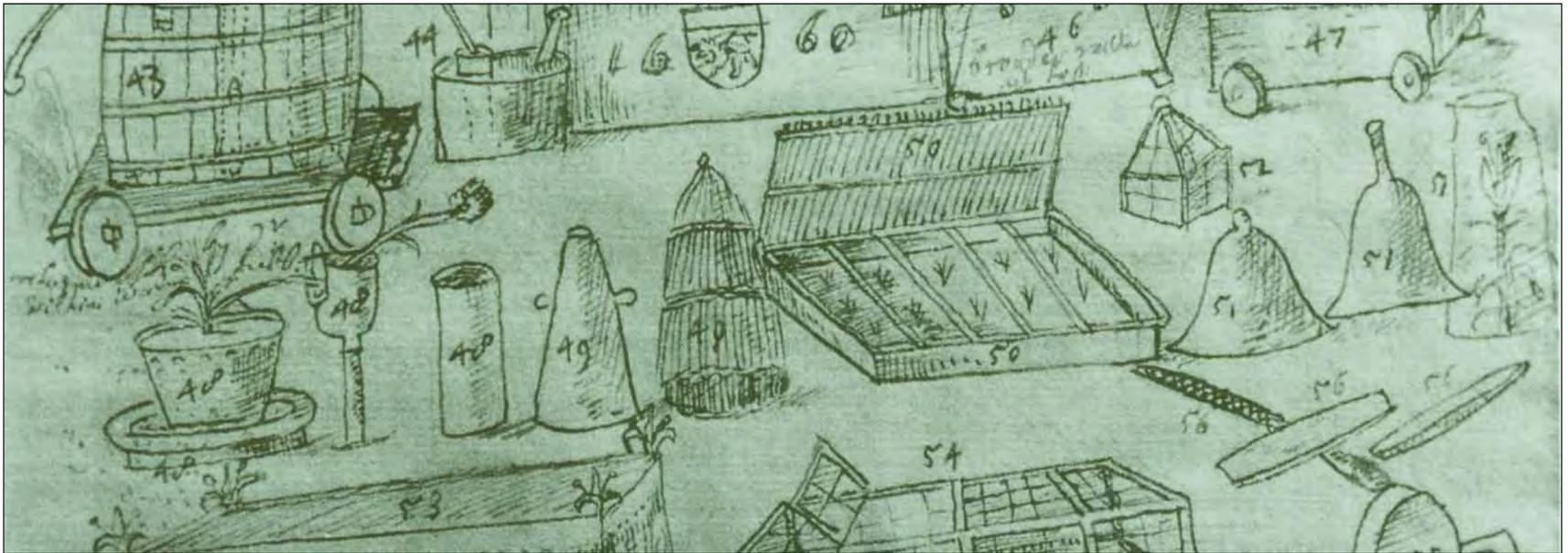
The great cabin was appropriated for the preservation of the plants... It had two large sky-lights, and on each side three scuttles for air, and was fitted with a false floor cut full of holes to contain the garden pots, in which the plants were to be brought home. The deck was covered with lead, and at the foremost corners of the cabin were fixed pipes to carry off the water that drained from the plants, into tubs placed below to save it for future use.'

— Captain William Bligh, diary, 1878

By the early 1700s, English ships brought exotic flora from around the world for private gardens and nurseries. The journey from China to England was especially hazardous for plants with one in a thousand surviving the voyage. To combat such losses, an East India Company surgeon, John Livingstone, proposed potting the plants at least six months before they were shipped to enable the roots to become well established.

By the late 19th century, faster travel and more effective means of transporting plants improved the survival rate. The tens of thousands of new and exotic species brought back by plant hunters—many of them planted up in pots—helped to change the face of gardening. 🌿

Pots for tender plants



TOP: John Evelyn, Illustration of garden tools and implements, from manuscript *Elysium Britannicum*, 1657

UPPER MIDDLE: Four-holed pots for air layering, uncovered at Pompeii, 1st-century AD, photo: Stanley Jashemski

LOWER MIDDLE: Attic pot, photograph, Eric Ellis Soderholtz

BOTTOM: John Evelyn, Method of layering plant using divided pot, pen and ink, from manuscript *Elysium Britannicum*, 1657

THE ANCIENT GREEKS KNEW terracotta pots provided an ideal container in which to grow seedlings and cuttings — plants that need special care. Growing conditions within the pot are easily tailored by altering the soil, the drainage, or by adding or withholding water.

The Romans, too, were plant lovers and it was in the small courtyards of Pompeii that flowerpots began to be integrated into the design of the garden. It was necessary to grow plants in pots, where they could be given extra water, because the climate in Pompeii was so dry.

The Romans invented window boxes and developed many different fruit tree containers. Their favorite pot plant was citrus — oranges, citron, lemons and limes — a plant they had learned about from the Arabs. But because citrus is easily killed by frost, the Romans grew their trees in pots so they could be moved in winter to sheltered environments.

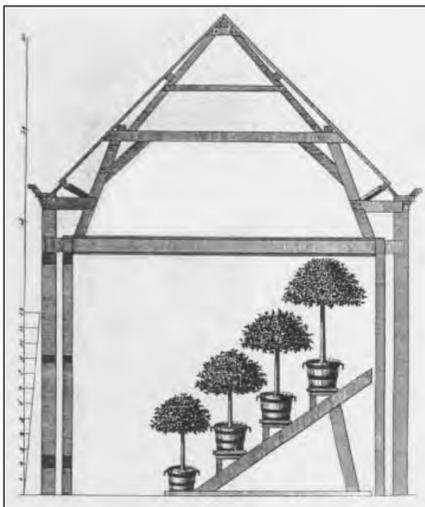
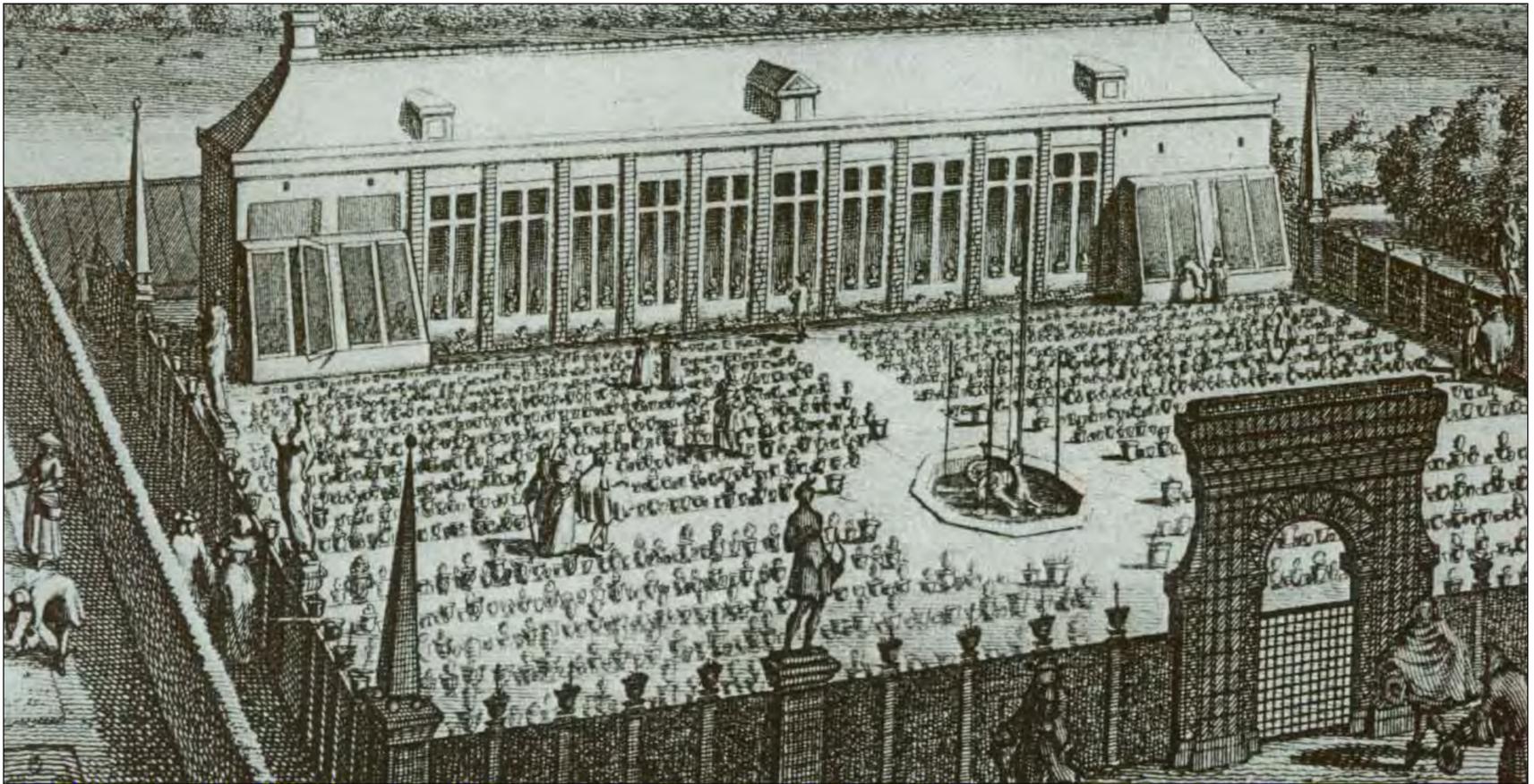
A fashion for ‘place making’ was started by England’s King Charles II (1630–1685). As gardening grew in popularity, specialized plant pots became more common.

In his gardening manuscript, the English virtuoso and writer John Evelyn (1620–1706) wrote about the garden pots available at this time.

[Pots] may be employed for the sowing, setting in and preserving of the choicest flowers... and therefore to be made of various sizes, depths and diameters, frequently and commodiously enough moulded of common potters earth, but always pierced at the bottom, for the passage of superfluous showers, which otherwise would overwash rot and starve the roots they contained.

—John Evelyn, *Elysium Britannicum*, 1654 

Flowerpots come indoors



TOP: Garden of Magdalena Poule, engraving, from *De Nederlander Hesperides*, by Jan Commelin, 1676

MIDDLE: Section Dutch orangery display, c. 1675

BOTTOM: Victorian window jardinière, Plate IX, engraving, from *Ferns in Their Homes and Ours*, by John Robinson, 1878.

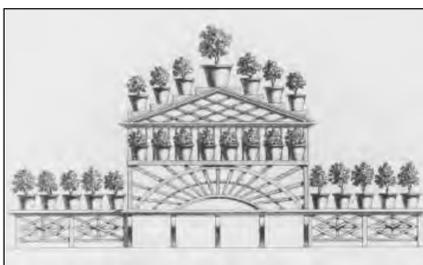
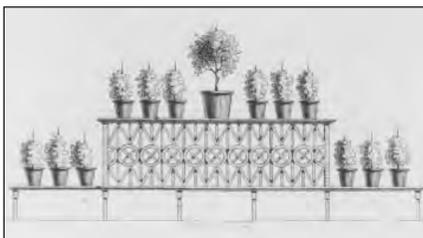
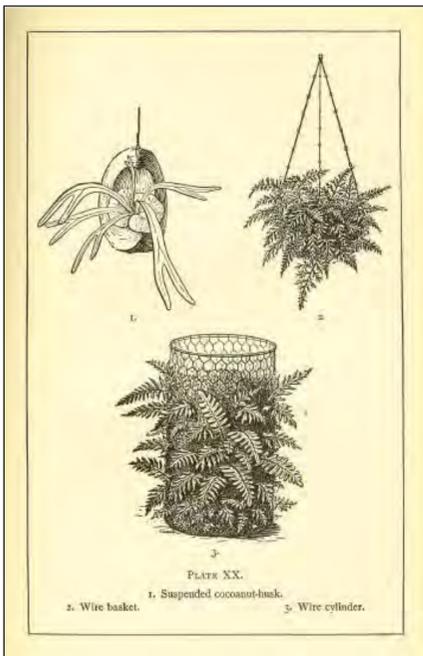
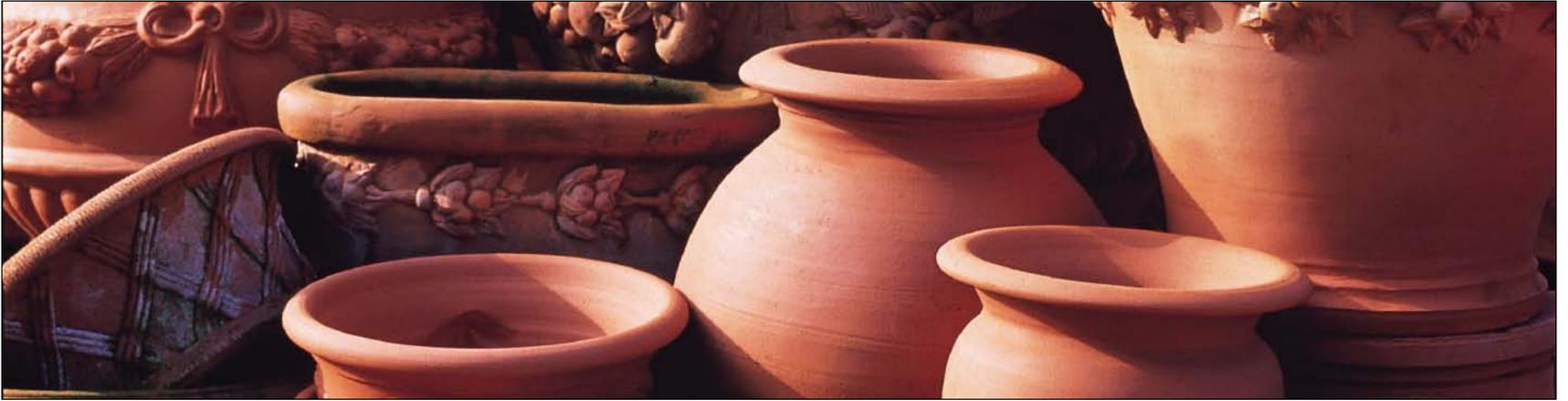
THE REVOLUTION IN INDOOR GARDENING had a profound influence upon the evolution of the flowerpot. Without its pot, a plant had no where to grow. The first practical glasshouse appeared in 1599 at Leiden University in the Netherlands where it held exotic medicinal plants and citrus trees. In summer the plants, all in pots, were set out in the yard.

King Charles II (1630–1685) sheltered tender evergreens in his *greenhouse*. Soon thereafter, the *orangery*, another glassed-in area, evolved as a place to grow citrus trees in large pots. King Louis XIV's (1638–1715) magnificent *Orangerie* at Versailles held 1,200 orange trees and 300 other kinds of trees — all potted in ingenious oak tubs designed by the king's gardener Jean de la Quintinie (1626–1688). A 19th-century variation, the *grapery*, both advanced and extended the fruit's growing season.

Innovations in glass production during the 18th and first half of the 19th centuries made sheet glass more affordable. Larger windows brought in more light to 19th-century homes thus enabling plants to thrive indoors. James Hartley's sheet glass process in 1847 eliminated bubbles in the glass and reduced damage caused by light burning plant leaves. Hartley's patent (and, in England, the repeal of the glass tax) made it affordable and fashionable for the middle classes to attach plant conservatories to their houses and to erect glasshouses.

This new way of gardening brought about innovations in the growing and presentation of plants. 🌿

New pots



TOP: Flowerpots, Whichford Pottery, UK

MIDDLE: Innovative Victorian fern pots: Suspended coconut-husk, Wire basket, Wire cylinder, Plate XX, engraving, from *Ferns in Their Homes and Ours*, by John Robinson, 1878.

BOTTOM: Grohmann, 'Gradin chinois—sopha de Jardin,' and 'Gradin de fleurs fermant sofa,' engravings from from *Recueil d'Idées* (1802), Lindley Library, Royal Horticultural Society, London

THE 18TH AND 19TH centuries were an era when scientists sought to understand and quantify the world. In the same way Linnaeus examined the plant kingdom, and Darwin mapped out his *Origin of Species* (1859), in Britain flowerpot forms were organized in a system to 'work' for horticulturists with ever greater efficiency. British horticulture ware such as seed pans, thimbles, graduated pots and saucers, long toms, orchid pans, multi-perforated pans and forcing pots were utilized by growers to aid a plant at each stage of its development. Pots were designed to fit the plants' root system: shallow seed pans were for starting seeds, diminutive thimbles provided seedlings their first individual homes, tall 'long toms' provided depth for plants having deep roots or bulbs.

The needs of exotics led to the development of special pots. The hanging basket for growing epiphytic orchids was first developed by the naturalist and plant explorer Sir. Joseph Banks (1743–1820).

Gardeners' horticultural expertise developed. Looking back in 1883, garden writer Shirley Hibbard wrote that the previous fifty years had '*seen horticulture develop from an empirical mystery to an art founded on the truths of nature and the achievements of science.*'

New plants from abroad were propagated commercially and readily available. Burgeoning nurseries required a great numbers of pots. The coming of the railroads meant that nurserymen could ship their goods rapidly throughout the country and especially to the cities where a new population wanted plants for their windowsills and conservatories. And whereas rural gardens symbolized continuity, city gardens were transient, the their changing tenants ever ready to try new things. Victorian garden sundry catalogs list a huge range of ornate staging for pots of exotic, colorful plants, available to grace conservatories, hothouses and parlors.

Gardening became a middle class leisure occupation during the 19th century and the garden pot manufacturers had their heyday. 🌱

America's flowerpots

EARTHEN WARE.
Manufactured
in
WEST-HARTFORD,
Conn.
Hartford, 1834

Bot of Thomas O. Goodwin,

Doz. Milk Pans	21 00	73
Doz. 91 Size Milk Pans	1 00	20
Doz. Large Planters	1 00	
Doz. 24 Size Planters	0 75	
Doz. 30 Size Planters	0 50	
Doz. 9 Gallon Pots	1 25	
Doz. 1 Gallon Pots	1 00	158
Doz. Half Gallon Pots	0 75	50
Doz. Flower Pots	1 00	
Doz. Green Pottery Pots	1 00	
Doz. Piping	1 00	
Doz. Green Piping	1 00	
Doz. Blue Piping	0 75	
Doz. Large Piping Pots	1 00	18
Doz. 24 Size Piping Pots	0 75	
Doz. Piping Pipes	0 75	
Doz. Garden Jars	0 50	
Doz. Half Gallon Jars	1 25	
Doz. Green Jars	2 17	
Doz. Half Gallon Jars	1 00	
Doz. 4 Green Jars	0 54	
Doz. Pink Jars	0 50	
Doz. Chamber Pots	1 00	
Doz. 24 Size Chamber Pots	1 00	
Doz. Green Chamber Pots	0 75	
Doz. Flat Boxes	0 50	
Doz. Half Pint Boxes	0 371	
Doz. Half Gallon Boxes	1 00	70
Doz. Green Boxes	0 75	
Doz. Pine Boxes	0 50	
Doz. Pottery Piping	0 50	
Doz. Half Gallon Piping	1 00	
Doz. 1 Green Piping	0 75	
Doz. 1 Flat Piping	0 50	
Doz. 12 inch Round Boxes	1 25	
Doz. 11 " do	1 00	
Doz. 10 " do	0 75	
Doz. 9 " do	0 50	
Doz. 8 " do	0 50	
Doz. No. 1 Flower Pots, with handles	1 00	74
Doz. No. 2 do. without handles	1 00	20
Doz. No. 3 do. do.	0 54	84
Doz. No. 4 do. do.	0 67	81
Doz. No. 5 do. do.	0 50	67



THE ORIGIN OF THE FLOWERPOT in Rembrandt Peale's 1801 painting of *Rubens Peale with Geranium* is uncertain—but we know the first flowerpots in America were imported. However, immigrant potters from England, France, Germany and other lands set up workshops and by the 19th century were producing work in America similar to what they had done in their home countries. Using native clay, these potteries produced utilitarian tableware and containers along with the occasional flowerpot.



Potteries developed their own styles of garden pots with distinguishing characteristics. Some designs were brought with the potters from their native lands. In New England, where winters bring hard frosts and freezing, a regional style developed as potters began adding rolled-clay 'ears' to their pots — comfortable handles to haul potted plants into a sheltered environment and then out again once spring had arrived. The embargo before and during the War of 1812, which temporarily kept foreign competitive goods from entering the country, allowed small American potteries to flourish.



By the end of the 18th century, it was understood that the lead in traditional glazed pottery made people sick. Potters needed new products to replace the redware dinnerware that had been their staple. In many cases, country potters turned to the production of utilitarian pipes, tiles and flowerpots as a logical extension of their production, (whereas more fashionable 'artistic' ceramics were not).

For country potters, the coming of the railways only added to their difficulties as more less-expensive mass-produced items, including pots, appeared. With all these changes, by 1850 ceramics manufacture could no longer be characterized as a handcraft except in the most rural areas. By the end of the 19th century, potters must have been painfully aware that the cheaper labor force and new technology, which could produce more goods at a lesser cost than the traditional worker, was threatening to replace them entirely.

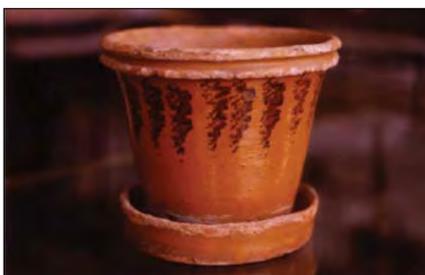
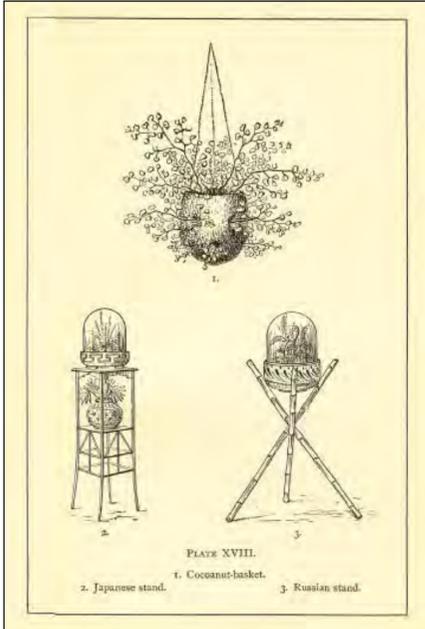
TOP RIGHT: *North Side of Market Street between 17th & 18th Street*, Taylor. Sketchbook. Philadelphia, 1861. Courtesy, The Winterthur Library; Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera

TOP LEFT: Thomas O. Goodwin Broadside, engraving and pencil, 1834. Connecticut Historical Society Museum collection.

UPPER MIDDLE: Rembrandt Peale, *Rubens Peale with Geranium*, oil on canvas, 1801. Collection: National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

BOTTOM: Winslow Homer (1863–1916) *Girl Watering Plants*, 1875. Watercolor on paper, 11" x 9". Private collection.

Glazed or not?



TOP RIGHT: Gladding, McBean & Co., San Francisco, California, makers of sewer pipe, roof tile and flowerpots, engraving, 1886

TOP LEFT: Innovative Victorian pots and stands, including glazed enclosed ferneries: Suspended coconut-basket, Japanese stand, Russian stand, Plate XVIII, engraving, from *Ferns in Their Homes and Ours*, by John Robinson, 1878.

UPPER MIDDLE: Geddes Stone Ware Pottery advertisement, 1840, from Geddes, New York, featuring saucered flowerpot.

LOWER MIDDLE: This simple glazed flowerpot with attached saucer is typical of the most-common American flowerpot design of the nineteenth century.

BOTTOM: Massive Wedgwood Pearlware Bulb Pot and Cover, Late 18th c., Sides decorated with alternating green and dark brown stripes, the cover with 6 bulb holders, 8" high. Private collection



THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY OF POTS designers have fluctuated between adding holes into the side of the pot to increase water drainage, and adding extra layers to the pot to increase water retention .

The ‘old favoritism for the soft-burned, porous, red pots,’ as Donald Beaton (1802–1863), an expert on bedding schemes and hybridization put it , depended on the belief that it was beneficial for potted plants to develop extensive peripheral root-growth. Porosity of the clay is important for this because it creates a capillary action, which keeps roots damp and cool, and promotes the healthy growth of plants.

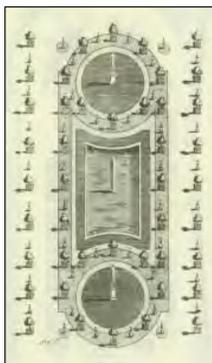
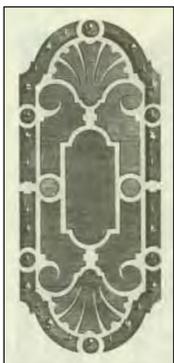
But by the 1850s, leading gardeners turned against porous pots, declaring the importance of *discouraging* peripheral roots. Experiments were made with glazed or zinc pots, and many other materials were tested . We can trace these materials by noting the dates when the first patents were issued for flowerpot designs in different materials: gut ta-percha and India rubber (1855), cork (1856), iron (1861), slate (1870), zinc (1874), glass (1875), asphalt (1895), sheet-metal (1897), coconut shell (for hanging baskets) (1901), celluloid (1907).

Leading gardeners of the time recommended non-porous pots, but their views went unheard. Most gardeners read the contrary opinion of Robert Thompson in his popular *Gardener’s Assistant*, where stated he was against glazed pots because the soil tended to compact into a ball.

Today it is agreed that some plants thrive in porous pots while other prefer to grow in a non-porous container.

One horticultural item that has to be glazed is the ‘flat’; the shallow bowl used underneath flowerpots. Also known as ‘saucers,’ they are glazed internally to retain water. 

19th and 20th century innovations



TOP: Beatrix Farrand in a costume representing the spirit of the classic French garden, with potted tree tub border, ca. 1895. Private collection

UPPER MIDDLE: Two plans that may have inspired Beatrix Farrand: 'Garden in the English manner' and 'Parterre of potted orange trees,' from *La Théorie et la Pratique du jardinage*, Dezalier d'Argenville, translated into the English in 1712

LOWER MIDDLE: Portrait of Eric Ellis Soderholtz, c. 1900, photograph

BOTTOM: Solderholtz studio, West Gouldsboro, Maine, c. 1914, photograph

IN THEIR EMBRACE OF THE 'NEW,' the Victorians turned away from old-style 'picturesque' landscapes, declaring that even naturalistic gardens were inherently artificial, so why pretend to the contrary. Victorians freely incorporated foreign features into their landscapes, exotic plants into their gardens, and new materials into their garden ornaments. Cast iron urns and planters became especially popular. But by the end of the 19th century terracotta returned to favor.

The sophistication of America's Gilded Age gardens owes a small debt to the careful use of flowerpots by the country's first generation of well-traveled professionals, among these the landscape gardeners Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903) and Beatrix Farrand (1872–1959). Olmsted used terracotta pots from Tuscany in his design for the Biltmore in Asheville, North Carolina. In Maine Beatrix Farrand collaborated with the artist Eric Ellis Soderholtz (1867–1959), who had developed a technique for making classically-styled, winter-hardy reinforced concrete pots.

Nurserymen, on the other hand, began to experiment with biodegradable pots—pots that were buried in the soil with the plant, and then left to rot away. The first commercially successful biodegradable design was launched in America in the mid-1950s.

The 20th century brought increased mechanization to clay flowerpot production: in 1907 clay-extracting machinery was introduced and larger potteries moved into machine production. The smaller potteries gradually declined and the 1960s saw the virtual extinction of the trade.

But clay pots soon began to lose out to plastic. Introduced in the 1950s, plastic pot's advantages included lightness, ease of cleaning, disposability and simple removal of plants. And they're affordable.

Between 1961 and 1963 the nursery trade switched to plastic. This changed the nurserymen's traditional practice of selling trees and shrubs as bare-root stock in early spring or fall, when plants looked their worst but were ablest to withstand the shock of being transplanted. Containerized stock in plastic pots not only looked better, but was easier to handle and required less care. Plants now could be shipped and planted any time of the year. As a result, plant production changed from being seasonal to an all-year-round business. 🌱

Contemporary flowerpots



top: Misty morning at Whichford Pottery, Whichford, nr. Shipston-on-Stour, Warwickshire, England, UK

bottom: Norwich Pot, glazed terracotta, original c. 1750, Guy Wolff & Son Pottery, New Preston, Connecticut, USA

THE CLASSIC POTS IN THIS EXHIBITION are not copies, but were made by artists who are part of an unbroken line of production stretching back hundreds of years. Both Guy Wolff of Guy Wolff & Son Pottery in New Preston, Connecticut, and Jim Keeling of the Whichford Pottery in Warwickshire, United Kingdom, served long apprenticeships at traditional flowerpot potteries. In 1992 Phid Lawless and Dan Farrenkoph started Lunaform in West Sullivan, Maine, reviving and perfecting Eric Soderholtz's concrete planter techniques of the early 20th century. In France, Crete and Impruneta, Italy, the artists still work in potteries that have been in operation for centuries.

Today's flowerpot potters use the best of traditional materials and techniques to create their contemporary designs. Guy Wolff quotes his father, the painter Robert Jay Wolff, to explain why these early designs are significant to his own work, '*Tradition is not a form to be imitated, but the discipline that gives integrity to the new.*' 🌱

Eric Ellis Soderholtz: Maine's Craftsman in the Garden

by Patrick Chassé, A.S.L.A.



At the beginning of the twentieth century, Maine became a crucible for a melding of Eastern and Western ideas in garden ornament through the artful hands of E. E. Soderholtz, a Swedish immigrant transplanted to its rocky shores. His work and technique are a unique legacy to the state he loved.

In 1901 Eric Soderholtz received a commission to photograph ancient art and architecture in southern Europe. Lasting almost two years, the trip had a profound influence upon him and Mr. Soderholtz's photographs became the core of a visual collection that would inspire his later artistic pursuits.



Eric Soderholtz designed and built a home in West Gouldsboro, Maine, upon his return from Europe. An interest in making garden pottery developed from the practical need for planting space at his home, where soils were thin over the granite ledge. He constructed two pots from concrete, and was soon commissioned to make more. This enthusiastic reception provided Mr. Soderholtz the opportunity to set up a studio workshop where creation of garden pottery and ornaments began in earnest.

Eric Soderholtz analyzed the dimensions and proportions of Greek amphoras and Pompeian oil jars—often overlaying diagrams on his photographs—and transposed their graceful shapes into garden-scale vessels. The variety and sophistication of these pieces, plus their durability compared with traditional terra-cotta pots, brought Soderholtz rapid acclaim. Early pieces were faithful copies of their European precedents, edited of some surface decoration. Further inspiration came from the Far East, through images of Chinese and Japanese art. Study of ceramics and ceramic techniques ancient and modern soon led to the conclusion that concrete was ‘...a material enduring beyond comparison with the clay of the originals, more particularly in the rigors of our northern climate.’ Although the pottery pieces were formed by a combination of handbuilding, handthrowing, molding, forming, stamping, and carving, the critical finish layer, with its integral weather-resistant pigments, was applied by hand—sometimes on a wheel. The effect was seamless, and had the individual character of hand-crafted work.



Both Eric Soderholtz and the renowned landscape gardener Beatrix Farrand found inspiration in the rugged beauty of the Maine coast. Mrs. Farrand often used Soderholtz pieces in her work in Maine gardens, like her own Reef Point in Bar Harbor, and some farther afield, like Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, DC. Some of the Reef Point pieces survive at the Asticou Azalea Gardens and Thuya Gardens in Northeast Harbor. Special pieces accompanied Mrs. Farrand to her final home and garden at Garland Farm.



Eric Ellis Soderholtz died in Maine in 1959 leaving a little bit of his soul in each garden where one of his pieces resides. Since his death, several admirers have taken up his torch. At a studio called Lunaform, in Sullivan, Maine, partners Phid Lawless and Dan Farrankopf make reproductions of several Soderholtz pieces along with exciting new designs of their own. The partners continue to explore current technologies in the production and fabrication of these pieces while maintaining Soderholtz's practice of experimental ingenuity. 

TOP: Eric Ellis Soderholtz, portrait c. 1900.

UPPER MIDDLE: Soderholtz's photograph of a classic amphora.

LOWER MIDDLE: The chop mark that often identifies E. E. Soderholtz pots.

BOTTOM: Beatrix Farrand's Bar Harbor home Reef Point showing Soderholtz birdbath, c. 1935.