

Cambridge University Botanic Garden

The original Cambridge University Botanic Garden was started in 1760 on the site of a former Augustinian Friary, but was displaced by the building of the Cavendish laboratories near the centre of town. One of the problems with the location was that the original site was only about 5 acres, so in 1831 Professor Henslow, who importantly was Charles Darwin's teacher, decided that a larger garden was needed. Therefore, in the Victorian era, with the research focus on understanding species especially developed by Darwin and his colleagues in botanical science, the plants were moved to a new 40 acre site on Trumpington Road. The first tree was planted in 1846 where trees and shrubs were planted in their botanical sequence, which by the end of the 1800s meant that the Botanic Garden contained the rarest tree collection in the country.

The Botanic Garden continues the tradition from the Victorian era of carrying out important research on the subject of plant genetics, understanding how plants develop, which is now called Plant Science rather than Botany. One of the most interesting features for historians to see today, is the series of Chronological Beds which show how plants have been introduced into cultivation in Britain from the earliest times to the present day, and also tells the story of global travellers who brought back new specimens & species to the UK. For example, it is thought that the Holly Hock (which is an Anglo-Saxon word) was brought from Israel at the time of the Crusades, with the Knights returning from the Wars who liked the flowers and brought back the seeds.

The early Potato came to England in Tudor times, possibly with the Elizabethan travellers Drake or Raleigh, who brought back varieties from Spain which had come from Peru. But the potato from South America that we eat today, is linked to the potato brought back from the islands off Argentina by Charles Darwin himself! The tomato also came from South America, and was again brought to Europe from Peru in Tudor times and the first written evidence of a tomato eaten in Italy dates from 1550 and in England seeds were grown from the late 1590s but lots of people were worried about eating them because there were rumours that they were poisonous!

