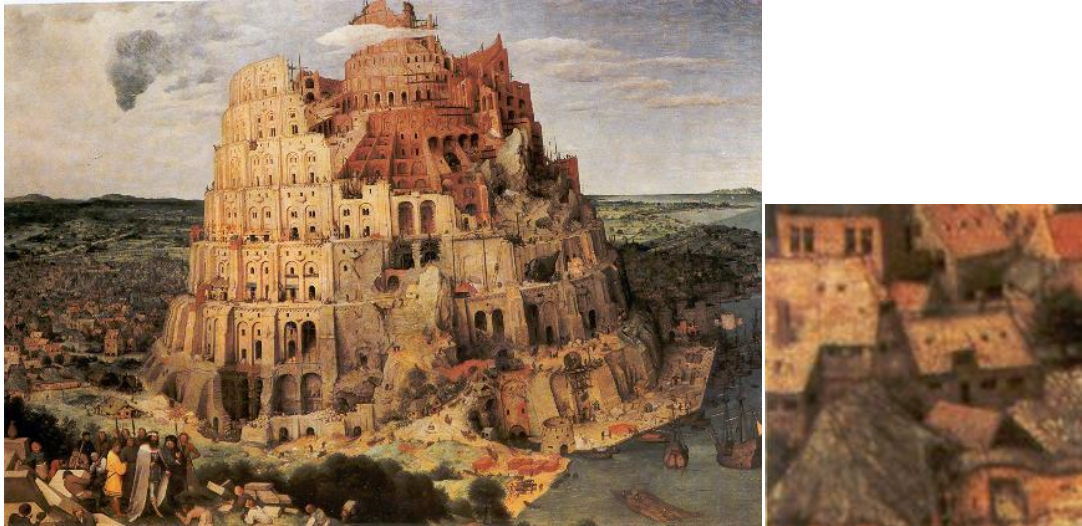


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The history of the medieval vegetable garden of the common man and woman: the pooriness of descriptions and pictures

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Abstract

In search of depictions of medieval vegetables, a study of medieval vegetable gardens of the common man and woman was made. These gardens commonly occurred, but as they were probably too vulgar they were not described and depicted. In legal cases or financial accounts their presence has only been documented. Exchange of seed, seedware and knowledge between the common man and woman maintaining vegetable gardens and gardeners of vegetable gardens of castles, mansions, monasteries, abbeys and hospitals, and vice versa is described. It is suggested that links between both groups were frequent and strong, as most monks, although often entering the monastery at a young age, and servants of chatelains have grown up in 'common' families and 'received' their first practical training in gardens of the common man. During visits seed, seedware and knowledge will have been exchanged.

Introduction

After having studied the presence of vegetables and their forms in the 16th to 19th centuries as shown by paintings made in Flanders and North Netherlands (ZEVEN 1993, 1994, ZEVEN and BRANDENBURG 1986) it was decided to extend the study to vegetables of the Middle Ages. For Northwest Europe almost no vegetables as such have been depicted and described for this period. Therefore, our search was extended to studying medieval vegetable gardens, in the hope to find depictions and descriptions of vegetables in such gardens.

The result is that almost no descriptions and pictures are available. And if available they commonly refer to vegetable gardens of castles, mansions, monasteries, abbeys and hospitals. We may find information on these gardens in manuscripts and altar paintings (BEHLING 1967, HORST et al. 1984, MALO 1940). Vegetable gardens of the common man and woman, living in towns, in villages, on farms and market gardening enterprises, are little referred to (HADFIELD 1960, HYAMS 1970). Although these vegetable gardens also are earthly paradises, they have hardly been mentioned in the catalogue *Aardse Paradi-*

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zen (*Earthly Paradises*) (JONG et al. 1996), a catalogue mainly referring to the period after 1500. The same is true for books on medieval gardens: those of the common people are hardly mentioned. For instance, the item 'vegetables' is mentioned by HARVEY (1981) in his *Mediaeval Gardens*, but no attention is paid to the medieval vegetable garden where these vegetables were grown. Exceptions are the paper by STANNARD (1985) in *Medieval gardens*, the book *Tuinen in the Middeleeuwen* (*Gardens in the Middle Ages*) edited by STUIP and VELLEKOOP (1992) and *The Medieval garden* by Landsberg (1995) where little information is presented. Therefore, we conclude that, in general, medieval vegetable gardens have not attracted the attention of garden historians. Maybe, for that reason, STANNARD (1985) explained to the participants of a congress of medieval gardens that there are archival records on 'plants and trees deliberately grown, maintained, and collected in medieval gardens primarily for food and/or medicine'!

In the present paper the histories of gardens of castles, mansions, monasteries, abbeys and hospitals are not discussed. Sufficient literature on these subjects is available. The same is true for archaeological records (VAN HAASTER 1992).

However, I wish to cite only one interesting item. After analysis of a refuse pit, discovered in the Old Town of Hull, it was concluded that near this pit, dated late-13th/early 14th century, a vegetable garden had occurred. Later, in the 16th century, this garden was exploited for growing fruit trees and shrubs (CRACKLES 1986).

Vegetable gardens of the common people

'Ordinary' vegetable gardens are cultivated by 'ordinary' people, i.e. of those living in towns, villages, hamlets and such. They (below referred to as the common man) grow their horticultural crops in their vegetable gardens. The common man was acquainted for many millennia with horticulture and agriculture. For instance, in South-Limburg, The Netherlands, some 7400 years ago the first farmers arrived from Germany (BAKELS 1997, ZEVEN 1997). These farmers had experience with growing crops on small fields, and they certainly will have used this experience when adding new crops to their crop assortment. Therefore, I am not convinced that the knowledge of growing of horticultural crops in West and Central Europe in the 8th and 9th centuries was introduced by Benedictine monks as is often claimed (FISCHER 1929). They, certainly, will have distributed new crops, such as cole crops, onion, leek, garlic and pea, from the south to the north. However, a crop such as perennial kale has very probably been distributed by the Romans (ZEVEN et al. 1996).

In vegetable gardens one may find vegetables, herbs and ornamental plants. The latter may have been grown to decorate churches and altars or used for festivities. Herbs are grown as true herbs, medicinal herbs and aromatic herbs. Several plants have more

than one use. Also garden plants with other uses, such as being a source of pigment will have been grown.

There are many examples of plants grown for more than one purpose. An example is foxglove: it provides medicine, and it is an ornamental. And certainly, any volunteer plant will be accepted, even if it grows in the 'wrong' place. This is still being done.

A vegetable garden could have an economic base: the products could be home used and any surplus could be sold. Some may gradually have developed into market gardens.

Distribution of seed, seedware and knowledge

As the common men also had to work in gardens of the (original) land owner, they obtained good knowledge of the crops and quickly became acquainted with any new crop brought from elsewhere and with new techniques (BRUNNER and JARITZ 1985). After all, monks travelled from one monastery to another. They will have distributed appreciated crops and forms of them. The same is true for chatelains and their trains, which moved from one castle to another. However, monks grew up in families of various standings. They will have obtained their first horticultural experience in the (vegetable) gardens of their parents and neighbours. The same also is true for servants of the chatelains. Monks and servants will have visited their families from time to time, exchanging seed, seedware and knowledge between their original and present homes. Therefore, any new crop, any new type or any new technique will have quickly spread between the gardens of common men, monks and chatelains.

Keen 'common' gardeners will have observed any useful new form; they will have collected seed or seedware and also distributed the material among those interested, living nearby or far away. In a next season the latter will also have presented material to others, promoting the quick spread of new forms over large distances.

Such a new type at the end of the Middle Ages was the double columbine ('granny's bonnet') (LANDSBERG 1995). But not is known who was the first observer? The common man?

Demand for vegetables

The continuous increase of the number of people who did not produce sufficient food for themselves have pushed up the demand for vegetables. They lived especially in the towns and large villages. This increasing demand promoted the development of market gardens. As long as there was sufficient space within the town walls, market-gardening developed there. So some town men became market gardeners. In Flemish towns such

changes took place in the 12th century. For instance, in a low-lying area within the walls of Brussels, the 'broeken van Orsendaal' (brooks of Orsendaal) were developed into a market garden area. The gardeners were named after the area as 'broekoizen', a name which became the name of the profession, even after the market gardeners moved to an area outside the town walls (LINDEMANS 1952). Elsewhere too, outside the walls of large towns market gardening developed. For instance, outside Arnhem, the Netherlands, near the Velperpoort ('Velp gate') in 1405 'orti caulinum', i.e. cabbage gardens, were recorded (VERKERK 1992). Outside Deventer, also the Netherlands, cabbage gardens were leased in the years 1363 and 1368 (ZANTKUIJL 1974). In extending towns such gardens became situated within the new walls, and in due course, they were being used for house and street building.

Lack of studies of the history of vegetable gardens

One wonders why garden historians have not studied the gardens of the common man. One explanation is that garden historians are thinking only of gardens of delights, their neighbouring vegetable gardens, and of gardens of religious institutions. Gardens of the common man, although also composed of plant beds, and covering in total a much larger area than the first mentioned gardens are 'too vulgar' to write about. So, MCLEAN (1981) describing the English Domesday Book of the end of the 11th century wrote 'The Domesday survey lists thousands of (—) yards and gardens attached to cottages or to town and manor houses of all sizes.'

A second explanation is the lack of descriptions and pictures of vegetable gardens. Were these gardens in the Middle Ages too 'common' to become described and depicted?

Poverty of descriptions of medieval vegetable gardens

When searching for data of Medieval times in archives one has to consult any record. Especially, 'uncommon' events have been described. For instance, in a chronicle by chaplain Trecpoel living near Maastricht, southern Netherlands, one finds that the winter of 1477/78 was very mild and that pansies were flowering on the 2nd of February 1478. Similarly, in the chronicle by canon Gilles Jamsin at Liège, Belgium, also 1478, he recorded that on the 5th of February white roses were in bloom. On the 28th of April he picked ripe strawberries, on the 4th of May there were ripe cherries on the market and on the 29th of that month the lilies flowered and he ate fructus pisorum (sugar peas). These records probably derive from plants growing in convent gardens, but may also hold for the plants grown in the spring of 1478 in gardens of the common man.

Many archival records report cabbages, leek and onion and a few other vegetables for the Netherlands (SANGERS 1952, 1953). These crops must have been grown in vegetable gardens, but in these records such gardens are not described and rarely mentioned. With high prices of building land as in Amsterdam, most land had to be used for buildings. In the back yards and gardens second houses ('achterhuizen') were erected and in such towns the houses lost their gardens. However, small nooks will have been saved as long as possible to grow herbs and a few ornamentals (ROEVER 1992, SCHELLER 1992). But this is not the case for less crowded towns. Here the yards and gardens were used for vegetables, and second purposes (for instance baking houses, loos, horse stables, pigsties and chicken pens). When there was still some space left one or more fruit trees were grown (MEISCHKE 1980). Also, cow stables, vineyards and haystacks could be found (HENNEBO 1962, OERLE 1975). Some towns such as Wageningen (Fig. 1) had quite some open areas in the 17th century which were used as gardens and even as arable fields. These open areas will have been larger in the Middle Ages. In addition to vegetables, arable crops were grown, whereas several orchards are documented. In Amsterdam, such an orchard was abolished to build the 'New Church' in the 15th century (DUDOK VAN HEEL et al. 1993). Near this area a plum orchard and a vegetable garden with sage, cole crops, leek, onion and garlic occurred in 1421. This garden still existed in 1482, but in 1543 it was used as a yard. Mostly, orchards in town were owned by rich people (ROEVER 1996) and were mostly apple orchards, but pear, plum and cherry orchards did also occur. For instance, the count of Holland must have possessed an orchard in the town of Leyden, as records dated 1363 and 1381 refer to the 'Graven boomgaard' (count's orchard).

Similar developments took place in other towns in Europe. Names of town quarters such as the 'Mennelines Gärten' in Worms, mentioned in 1307, and the 'boumgarten' (orchard) in Augsburg in 1383, both in Germany, conserved the former land use (ENNEN 1978). In Amsterdam the quarter 'Jordaan' might refer to a garden. However, the etymology of the name of this quarter is not known (French: jardin) (VEEN 1998).

A record by the ambassador Ibrahim ibn Ahmed at-Tartoesji travelling to the German Emperor, and passing Mainz in the 10th century, mentions, that he was astonished to see that a part of the town land was used as arable land. He reported: 'she (= Mainz) is rich of wheat, barley, spelt [fields], vineyards and fruit' [orchards] (DROSSAERS 1968).

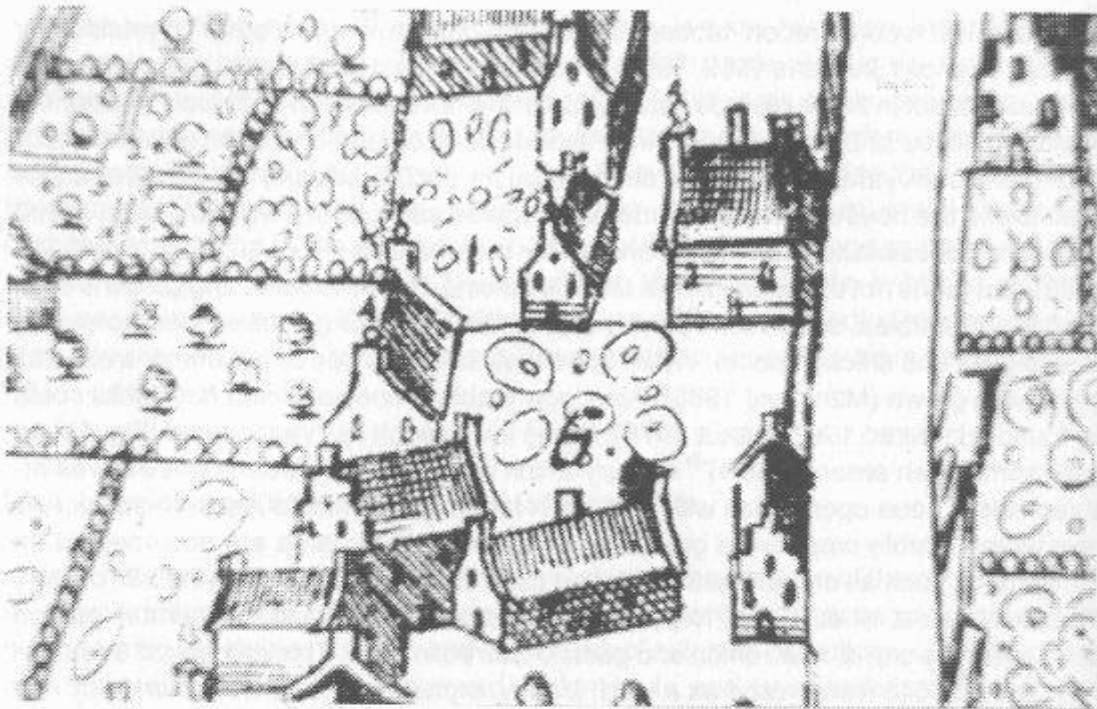


Fig. 1: A bird's-eye view of a part of the city of Wageningen, the Netherlands
Note the many empty areas, which are vegetable gardens, the orchards, and the haystack. The hay may have come from the grass grown under the orchard trees.
Borrowed from SLICHTENHORST (1654)

In several towns quite a number of farmers were living. In this respect we should remember that several towns started as a walled-in farmer's village. Later, these farmers could organise themselves in guilds. Hence, we find records in Nijmegen of a 'boulude' (farmer's) guild and in Maastricht of an 'oofmengers' (fruit tree growers) guild (ALBERTS 1983). In this town an alderman with the name 'Jan de gherdenere' occurred in 1294 (VENNER 1998). Apparently, the profession of the alderman was gardener. Both towns are in the Netherlands. In Lübeck, a market gardener's guild existed. The members were considered second-class citizens ('Medebürger', i.e. co-citizens); they had to maintain the earthen wall, ramparts and canal, and to clean the city (Busch 1984). This last occupation should have brought in compost for their gardens. In Würzburg, guilds of gardeners ('ortulanorum') existed in 1373 (KITTEL 1970). Lübeck and Würzburg are both in Germany.

Parish priests also maintained gardens, in which they grew vegetables for home consumption and ornamentals to decorate the church (SANECKI 1992).

Poverty of pictures of medieval vegetable gardens

When GÖTHEIN (1926) illustrated her chapter on medieval gardens she used a painting of Pieter de Hooch (1629-1683)! She probably did so as she could not find an older picture. Earlier and later crop and art historians studied many medieval paintings and manuscripts (mostly with a religious background) as source of information on many subjects of interest. It appears that these sources document wild and some domesticated ornamental plants, but no agricultural crops and vegetables (VAN KREVELEN 1977, ZEVEN and STEMERDING 1986). Any depicted garden is that of a castle, a monastery, an abbey or a hospital. Further, we may find pictures showing activities of farmers on the field, for instance harvesting a cereal crop, but it is impossible to say whether it is wheat, barley or rye. Also garden activities are depicted as digging, planting, grafting and pruning. But

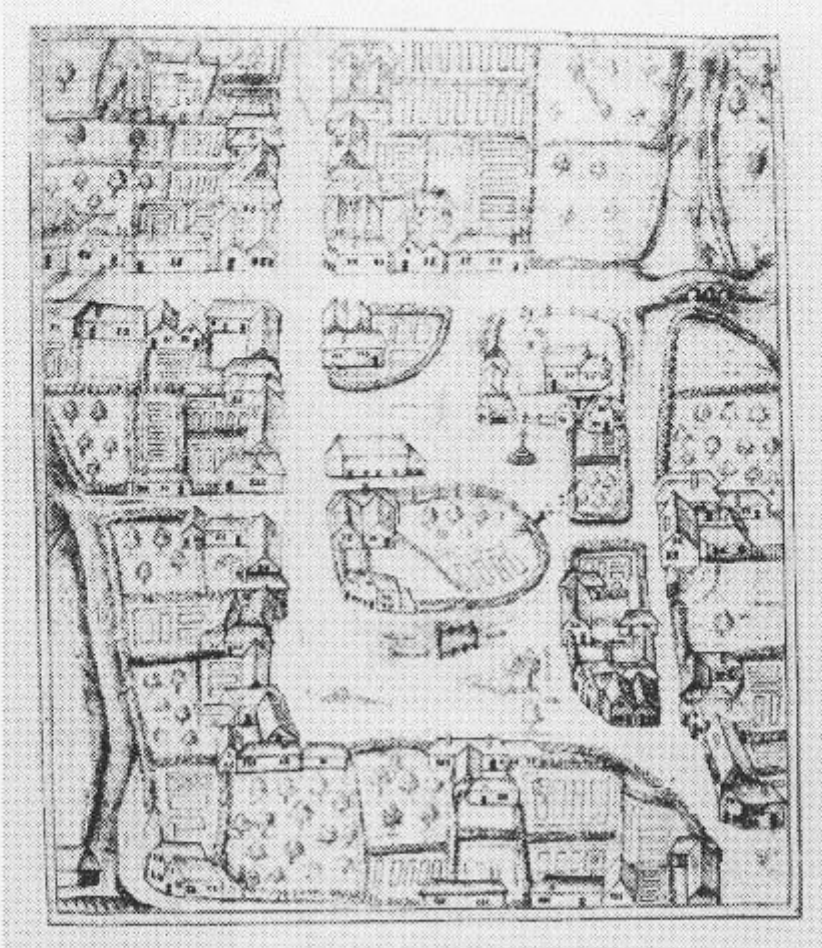


Fig. 2.: A plan of Wilton, Great Britain, ca 1565

Note the gardens and orchards scattered about. Borrowed from LANDSBERG (1995)

whether after the digging a vegetable garden was established is not shown (ZEVEN 1993, 1994). Up to now we have not found for northwest Europe a picture of a medieval vegetable garden of the common man. As GOTHEIN in 1926 we still have to use for northwest Europe post-medieval illustrations.

The town plans, made by Jacob van Deventer for the Habsburg king Philips II around 1570, are important sources for the Netherlands and adjacent areas. As already illustrated above (Fig. 1), the plan of Wageningen drawn in a bird's-eye view in ca 1640, shows many gardens. These will have been vegetable gardens. The first two documented true ornamental gardens date from the 19th century (ZEVEN 2001).

Similarly, for many other towns vegetable gardens occurred within and outside the town walls. An example is given by WILLERDING (1987), who showed that between the inner



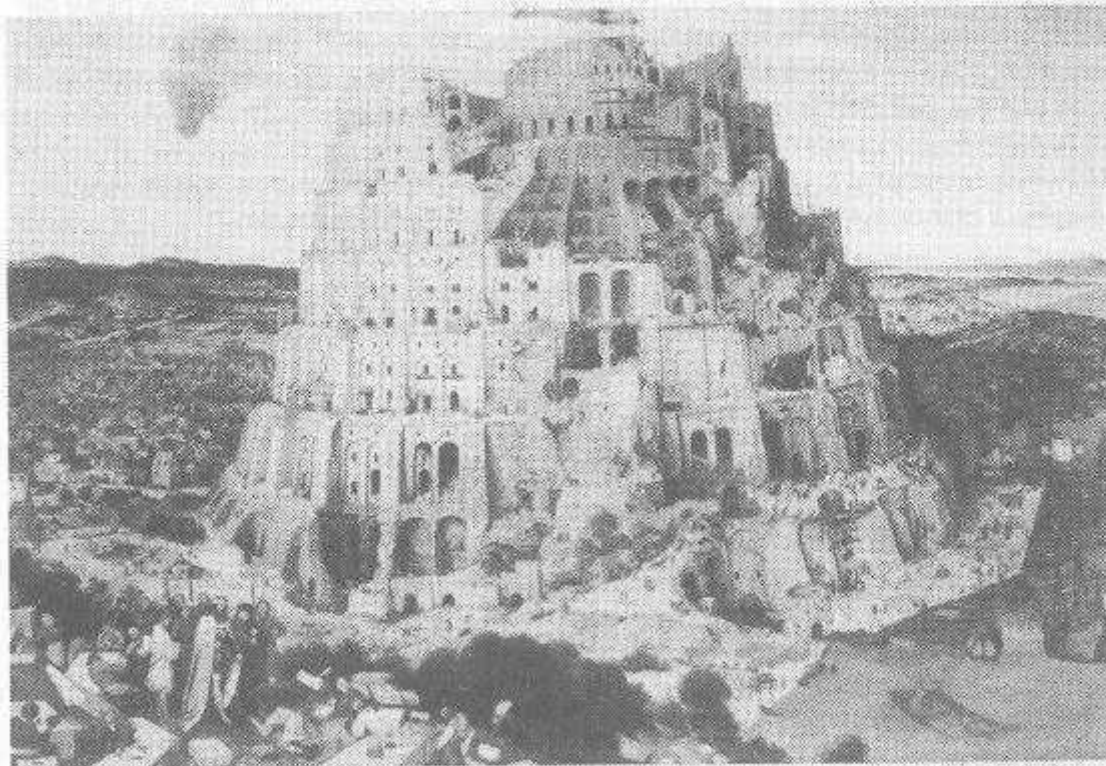
Figs. 3 (top) and 4 (right, detail of Fig. 3):
The Census at Bethlehem, painted by Pieter Bruegel (Museums van Schone Kunsten, Brussels, 1566

A cabbage garden is located at the right hand side in front of the bended person. At the left-centre side at the river bank we see cut stems. They could be left of cut coppice or of cabbage plants. Borrowed from Marijnissen (1969)



and the outer walls of the town of Göttingen, Germany, vegetable gardens were established. Two other examples are presented by LANDSBERG (1995), who depicted bird's-eye view plans of two villages in Great Britain (as example Fig. 2).

Further, some cabbage gardens were painted by Pieter Brueghel. In the painting *The Census at Bethlehem* (Museums van Schone Kunsten, Brussels, 1566) two small gardens are depicted: one with plants of the palm-kale, covered by snow, the other with the left stems of a harvested cabbage plot (Figs. 3 and 4). In the painting *The Building of the Tower of Babel* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, year?) there is also a small cabbage plot (Figs. 5 and 6).



Figs. 5 (top) and 6 (right, detail of Fig. 5):

The Building of the Tower of Babel, by Pieter Brueghel (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, year?)

The house with the cabbage garden is located behind the wall at left-centre



Similar bird's-eye view plans of ca 1640 as those of Wageningen, quite a number of orchards are depicted. Such orchards may indicate that they also existed in the Middle Ages.

Conclusions

In archival documents dating back to the Middle Ages, mention is made of the sale of a house, its yard and its garden. This garden will have been a garden where herbs and vegetables and a few fruit trees were grown. If the garden was large also arable crops may have been cultivated, and orchards established. In spite of their common and wide distribution, the vegetable gardens of the medieval common men have not been depicted and described in northwest Europe. In sales documents orchards may be mentioned because of a result of the financial value of the trees. However, the number of trees and the fruit crop is often not mentioned.

Exchange of material and knowledge will have taken place between common men and gardeners of monasteries, abbeys, castles, mansions and hospitals.

Actually, not much has changed: the vegetable gardens of the present-day common men, although as in the Middle Ages, widely occurring, are still rarely depicted and described. They are too 'common', too 'vulgar'.

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