

Amsterdam antidote

Gardens | Tucked away behind the Dutch city's grand mercantile homes are green oases offering respite from the urban hubbub. *By Jonny Bruce*

Amsterdam welcomed 8m tourists last year – equivalent to half of the Netherlands' entire population, making it Europe's fourth most visited city. Drawn by the city's culture and history, the hordes teem through narrow streets, spilling off the pavements and sparking occasional rage and much bell-ringing from resident cyclists. Though this bustle is part of Amsterdam's appeal, for three days in summer it is possible to steal away into some of the city's secret green spaces.

The Open Tuinen Dagen (open garden days) have been running, in various guises, for more than 20 years. The past 15 have been overseen by Tonko Grever, director of the Van Loon Museum. This institution is important in the history of Amsterdam and especially the city's canal gardens, as it is one of only three houses of its era to retain its original structure, built in 1672.

"It was really about protection," Grever says about the motivation for the scheme. Despite laws dating from the 17th century regulating the gardens' structure and function, Grever feels there is still a fragility in their obscurity. By drawing attention to them, he hopes to preserve their heritage.

Although the design of a garden may (and should) change over time, real threats have been faced – and battles lost. In the mid-1930s, despite outrage from heritage protesters, one of Amsterdam's oldest canals, the Rokin, was

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partially filled in to create a new road artery. The perceived need to rationalise the layout of the city centre and provide more housing led to the call to "fill up them canals", which echoed through the postwar years and threatened both the canal houses and their gardens.

Considering Amsterdam has an estimated 165 canals and 1,281 bridges, some might sympathise with the urban planners. However, this unique network of waterways has become a tourist gold



Keizersgracht garden – *Marijke de Ridder*

mine and in 2010 was made a Unesco world heritage site, with protection extending to the complex layering of canals, houses and gardens and not simply the bridges and façades that adorn postcards. Since the 1960s, stricter planning regulations have been implemented, but much still comes down to the commitment of private owners.

Passing through the heavy doors of the canal houses into the green space beyond, the layering of history becomes apparent. The grand canals of Keizersgracht and Herengracht were begun in 1613, with parcels approximately 54 metres long by 8.5 metres wide permitted for houses and gardens. These were expensive residences, mainly for the city's merchant class. The gardens often terminated in magnificent coach houses that housed servants and horses. The Van Loon is one of the few properties that have retained this feature as most were demolished at the end of the 19th century, when plots were divided to house the booming population.

In this early period, as can be seen in the extraordinary detail of Bathasar Florisz van Berckenrode's maps of the 1620s, the canal gardens were very similar. Clipped evergreens in geometrical patterns dominated, with very little in the way of flowers or colour. As little as this may sound, it makes sense if one considers these were winter residences, their owners generally escaping the heat of the city in summer, so the focus was on providing interest in the coldest months. The elevated ground floor level



A Robert Broekema-designed garden on Keizersgracht, shared between nine owners – *Marijke de Ridder*

in these canal houses also offers a good view of formally arranged gardens.

This love of clipped forms persists in Dutch horticultural taste and has been cleverly reinvented by contemporary designers such as Robert Broekema and Michael van Gessel. An example of Van Gessel's work can be seen in a garden on Keizersgracht that is participating in the Open Garden Days, where tightly clipped box hedging holds centre stage.

This style, however, was largely superseded in the 19th century as the English landscape garden craze swept through Europe. The monumental beeches, oaks and sycamores that punctuate today's canal gardens are testament to this bucolic longing. Since the 1980s these trees have been given special protection that not only prevents them being cut down but obliges the owners to keep the trees in good health and, in some cases, replace them if they are stricken with disease or damage.

In the 19th century these trees provided shade for sun-wary high society,



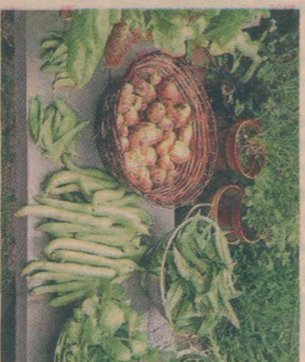
From left: Rosa Bonica; Rosa Guirlande; 'd'amour' (with blue Géranium Roxanne to the rear); Lythrum salicaria 'Blush', all from the Keizersgracht shared garden – *Marijke de Ridder*

Today their canopies plunge the gardens into summer darkness, while their thirsty roots desiccate the soil. Considering these drawbacks, there is remarkably little resentment among residents; rather, the opposite is the case.

"In these gardens we exist in a kind of splendid isolation," says Patrick Keijzers as he stands under the spreading limbs of a young copper beech. Certainly the garden is remarkably quiet. Muffled by the leafy canopy and high walls, the traffic noise of Keizersgracht, less than 50 metres away, is no louder than the bubbling of a nearby water feature. Birdsong, in contrast, seems strangely amplified.

This garden, of which Keijzers is part owner, is actually three gardens in one. Fifteen years ago Broekema had the opportunity to connect the gardens of a pioneering group of neighbours. Such collaborative acts are rare, but the result gives a sense of how these gardens might have felt when they were first created.

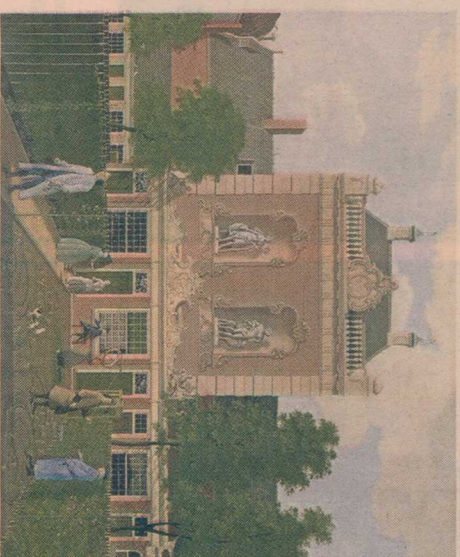
Canal gardens appeared bigger then. More recently, high fences and walls have been erected to reflect a growing desire for privacy, but until the 19th century the boundaries of the gardens were porous, allowing neighbours to flow between a series of outdoor "rooms".



Maartje Romme's community garden on Prinsengracht – *Maartje Romme*



"The Garden and Coach House of 524 Keizersgracht" by Hendrik Keun (1772) – *Rijksmuseum Amsterdam*



It's a way of life that is sadly unrealistic today, and the success of Keijzer's shared garden depends entirely on the sensitivities of its co-owners. Canal house residents are keenly aware of their responsibilities as owners and custodians of these spaces and although no one wants to disturb the peace, they are all prepared to defend it.

Maartje Romme does not live on the grand canals, where the gardens are strictly protected. Her canal garden on Prinsengracht, rebuilt in the 1880s after the house burnt down, is smaller but no less important in providing a calm oasis away from Amsterdam's busy streets. Here self-sown flowers (some might call them weeds) blur the boundary between flower beds and the paths that lead to an allotment of raised vegetable beds – a necessary precaution against a soil contaminated by the historic small industries that were common in the gardens of the less grand canals.

Romme spearheads various community campaigns to resist aggressive property developers and help minority voices to be heard. She wants the peace of these gardens to be maintained and is taking an innovative approach to try to achieve this. Rather than the local authorities policing the gardens, Romme promotes a form of "deep democracy" where councils of local residents work towards a resolution.

Guarded by such caring residents it would seem these gardens are set to endure for posterity. However, the UN has projected that over the next 50 years the world's urban population will increase by 2.5bn and as cities become more crowded, the pressure to build puts gardens under threat. Awareness is crucial for the survival of these antidotes to the chaos of urban life. Exclusive they may be but these gardens have a special place in Amsterdam's cultural history and the Open Tuinen Dagen are a rare opportunity to experience some of the hidden green gems in this city.

Open Tuinen Dagen is on June 16-18; opentuinendagen.nl



The garden of the Van Loon Museum – *Van Loon Museum*