

HOME-GARDEN

From the sacred to the kitsch: Garden ornaments can take a large range of forms

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Gardens are crafted spaces, composed of both living and non-living elements. Garden ornaments, objects that are part of the garden design, have rich histories, sometimes rivaling the living landscapes they embellish. Inanimate elements like statuary, arbors, fountains, and other decorative objects have adorned our landscapes for as long as people have made gardens. They define space and guide movement but also imbue meaning that shifts with culture and the fashion of the day. From ancient cities to suburban America, the objects we place among our plants and pathways help tell stories and reflect how we use and perceive these spaces.

In the earliest traditions of garden design, such as the Persian Paradise Gardens of antiquity, ornamentation was an essential component. These gardens were conceived as earthly representations of paradise, with water channels, fruit trees, and space for quiet reflection. Decorative elements such as tiles, fountains, and symbolic sculptural motifs were not merely embellishments but integral to the experience. Classical Greek and Ancient Roman traditions borrowed from Persian garden design and further incorporated elaborate water features and sculptures of deities and mythic heroes.

Entire buildings can serve as ornamental accessories in the garden. Garden follies, structures that often serve no functional purpose other than to surprise and delight a guest in the garden, became popular in eighteenth century European gardens. The Robert Jay Folly at New England Botanic Garden catches visitors off guard when

they stumble upon the ruins of a Grecian temple inexplicably nestled among the trees of a Massachusetts forest. The surprise of this 25-year-old replica provides an opportunity for fascination and garden contemplation.

In contrast to formal western garden traditions, the naturalistic Chinese gardens of the Tang Dynasty over a thousand years ago incorporated scholar stones (gongshi). These undulating and hole-filled rocks were seen as microcosms of the universe, representing the mountains and landscapes where Taoist immortals were believed to live. Painstakingly selected and placed in the garden, they emulated dramatic karst limestone cliffs and provided spaces for meditation and creative inspiration.

Contemplate the eons of geologic history that make each Chinese scholar stone unique and then compare it to the injection-molded uniformity of the pink flamingo. Worcester native Don Featherstone kicked off a garden ornament craze in 1957 when he designed the pink flamingo for a Leominster plastics company. The decorative lawn ornament may not inspire calligraphy and meditation, but its cultural importance is significant. Marketed as a playful way to differentiate a cookie-cutter suburban lawn, the pink lawn flamingo now occupies kitsch icon status. The pink flamingo's enduring popularity lives somewhere beyond irony, with these bright plastic birds as an inspiration for nostalgia and campy views of suburban America.

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No garden ornament captures the curious mix of camp and class quite like the garden gnome. For centuries, European gardens have showcased statues of small mythical creatures, often wrapped in folklore and superstition. The gnome we recognize today took shape in 19th-century Thuringia, Germany, where artisans molded terracotta gnomes with meticulous detail and painted them in vivid colors. These whimsical creations captured the fancy of Britain's upper crust, appearing in lavish gardens among elaborate rockeries and miniature mountains. One of England's most famous gnome collections resided in the rock garden tunnels of Sir Frank Crisp's Friar Park estate (later owned by the Beatles' George Harrison) which

featured a scale replica of the Matterhorn. By the mid-1900s, gnomes had wandered out of aristocratic estates and settled into the humbler plots of working-class homes, cementing their place as a cultural garden staple. No longer a fixation of the rich, garden gnomes became polarizing objects for people to measure a gardener's good taste. Garden gnomes are forbidden from the Royal Horticultural Society's distinguished Chelsea Flower show, considered an unbecoming distraction from the dignity of the event. Yet these little figures persist, with their secret garden lives continuing to inspire creative reinvention.

From the sacred symbolism of Persian gardens to the playful kitsch of pink flamingos, garden ornaments, in their diversity and malleability reveal how taste is never static. The ornaments we choose for our gardens tell stories, not just about the spaces we cultivate, but about how we see ourselves in them.

Gardening Central Mass. offers ecologically focused tips and helpful stories for home gardeners from New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and Director of Horticulture Steven Conaway. Located in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at nebg.org. The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.