Today's artists share their avant-garde ancestors' passion for plants. But instead of paint, they are using unusual materials and media – including gardens themselves – to break creative boundaries. Sam Phillips meets six figures at the forefront of new thinking about flora

Up the garden path

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THE HOSPITAL GARDEN
Jyll Bradley
Portrait by Thierry Bal
A corridor at a hospital in Lille has morphed into a metaphorical journey through greenhouses filled with botanical plants

It is an unlikely place to have a transcendental experience of art. But visitors to Hôpital Roger Salengro in Lille can expect just that, as they walk between the building's two wings. What was once an oppressive corridor has been transformed this year into an immersive artwork by Jyll Bradley. Entitled *Le Jardin hospitalier* (2015), it brings sensations and ideas associated with gardens into the architecture of the hospital.

'The garden is a perfect metaphor for what happens in a hospital,' explains the Folkestone-born artist (left), as we wander down the 100m-long passageway. 'In particular, plants in greenhouses are like humans in hospitals – both rely on others to bring them the essentials for life. Both gardens and hospitals are ecologies of care.' Along the corridor one encounters several different elements in this artwork. There are floor-to-ceiling back-lit photographs of Lille's botanical greenhouses, which have long grown medicinal plants; wide panels of Douglas Fir, a wood with a warm, beautiful grain that was often used by one of Bradley's artistic heroes, American Minimalist Donald Judd; abstract planes of fluorescent yellow Plexiglas; reproduced texts by Shakespeare and Proust; and sections of partly corrugated white metal, which Bradley describes as 'breaths' to balance the other sensory elements.

As the Academy's exhibition 'Painting the Modern Garden' reveals, Monet and other European painters of his time revolutionised art through their images of gardens. Today's conceptual artists, however, focus less on the visual representation of gardens and more on how ideas about horticulture – social and spiritual, cultural and commercial – can be communicated with clarity, and how gardens themselves might act as a material or medium.

Bradley's composition for the corridor, for example, drew on the ethics of Ikebana, a Japanese form of flower arranging. 'The idea in Ikebana is to create a flower arrangement that has enough space for a butterfly to fly through, so it can experience the arrangement from all angles,' she says. 'A thoroughfare like this is a really challenging site for art because we're conditioned to look at artworks face on – my task was to create something that people would experience from the side as they walked. So I had Ikebana in mind, to make sure I allowed enough space and time for patients and doctors to relate to the work, giving them something different in their daily lives, such as a contemplative moment.'

Passers-by slow down and, thanks to the brightness of the large back-lit photographs, sense they are outside instead of in. These behind-the-scenes images of Lille's greenhouses do not feature people, but include as much apparatus as they do flora: the pipes, hoses, thermometers and other gauges parallel the technology used by doctors and nurses across the hospital. The photographs also show dying plants, as well as those that are thriving. 'An important element of Ikebana is that you don't just include flowers in perfect bloom,' Bradley continues. 'You include one that's about to bloom, one in perfect bloom, and one that's dying away. I have kept that in mind with the choreography of the images, to be true to the passage of time and the cycle of life.'

But in an astonishing recent work by artist Maria Thereza Alves, plants have cheated the passage of time. On a concrete barge in Bristol's Floating Harbour, the Brazilian artist and a team of specialists have cultivated a garden entirely from ballast seeds – seeds that many decades ago graced the hulls of ships as ballast.

Between the 17th and early 20th centuries it was common for merchant sailors across the world to load earth into the holds of their vessels, to keep them stable in the water. This earth would contain all kinds of organic matter, including seeds. In the late 1990s the botanist Heli Jutila found that the non-native flora of Reposaari island near Pori in her native Finland were a product of such seeds. Arriving in port ships had unloaded their earthy ballast, and its seeds – from across the globe – would germinate into plants.

Alves met Jutila at a conference over 15 years ago, and the Finn's science soon became the substance of the Brazilian's art, after a major revelation. 'Jutila said that these seeds can lie dormant for hundreds of years, and that it was possible to germinate them today,' says Alves. 'It can be difficult and you might need laboratory conditions, but they can be grown, as long as you take some care.' The artist then embarked on her ongoing research project 'Seeds of Change', to discover sites of unloaded ballast around port cities such as Marseilles. In Bristol, commissioned by the city's Arnolfini gallery, she went several

THE TIME-TRAVELLING GARDEN
Maria Thereza Alves
Portrait by Ben G.J. Thomas
Centuries-old seeds that found their way to Bristol as ballast on slave ships are given new life in a floating community garden

THE FLYING GARDEN
Tomás Saraceno
Portrait by Wilfried Meyer
At Dusseldorf's art museum the sky's the limit, as visitors roam through 'In Orbit', Saraceno's floating spheres surrounded by plants

stages further, by digging up soil samples from the sites, extracting the seeds, and germinating them into plants. In 2012, in collaboration with partners including the University of Bristol Botanic Garden, she arranged the resulting flora into a wonderfully varied garden in the harbour (above). One hears an echo of Alves' project in Abraham Cruzvillegas's current installation in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, in which soil from London's parks sits in wooden planters, some with stowaway seeds ready to germinate.

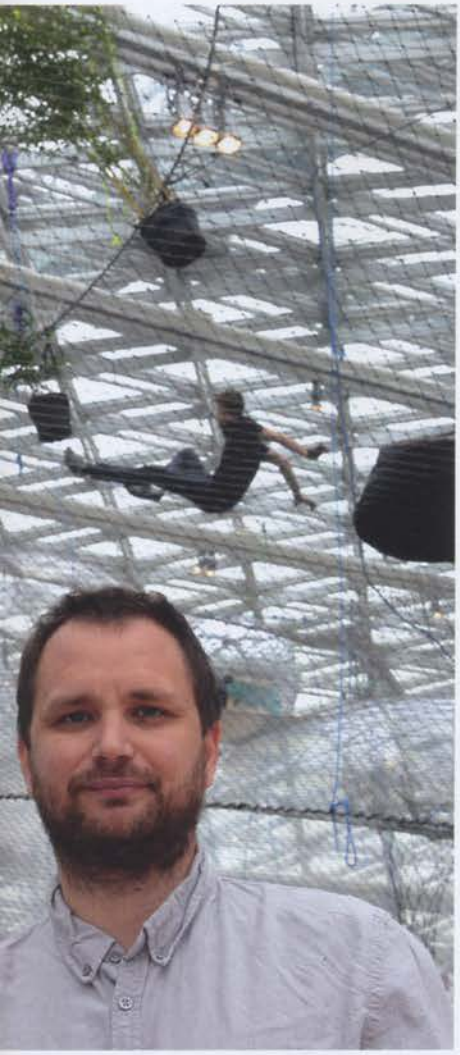
Alves' garden is not a science project, but rather a rich conceptual artwork in which a garden becomes a living metaphor for histories of trade, migration and colonialism. 'I've come to see these seeds as witnesses to complicated stories between us as people,' says Alves. Bristol was a key port in the Atlantic triangular trade route, which involved goods from England being shipped to Africa in exchange for enslaved Africans, who in turn would be traded in the Americas for other goods. 'Ships from Bristol would take slaves from Sierra Leone to Jamaica, where they would replace the indigenous Arawaks, and then on to the Carolinas, where they would replace the Cherokees. Flora in the garden, such as *Salsola kali* from Africa and *Amaranthus albus* from North America, are tied to the histories of these indigenous people.'

The garden gives these complex ideas an accessible form. 'A garden is a public place. It's easily accessible, it provides refuge, and it's a place to sit down and think or read. And a garden allows the possibility for local people to interact on these issues with botanists and historians outside the context of an academic institution.'

Alves also gave the local community a central role in the growth of the garden. She had around 200 pots of soil samples with seeds, and it was important for the seeds to start growing within three days, or otherwise they would lie dormant. 'I was able to find community groups in Bristol to look after the pots, and many of them had links with the regions where the seeds were from – there was a black women's theatre group, where some of the women or their families were from Africa. That became a far more rewarding experience than placing the pots in a greenhouse, and it has become a blueprint for how I can work in the future, inviting the community to participate from very early on.'

Community gardening, as a way of improving neighbourhoods and strengthening bonds between people, has never been more popular both in the UK and abroad, and an increasing number of artists are becoming involved, most commonly bringing their skills to bear on design and construction. But in the community gardening projects of Californian artist Fritz Haeg, art is at the core of the whole process, rather than an add-on.

Haeg's series 'Edible Estates' (2005-13) comprised 15 gardens planted in different cities across the world, from Baltimore to Budapest (see page 62). Each garden saw Haeg work in collaboration with a local family or community group to produce an edible garden – a patch where every plant produces an element that can be eaten. In Brookwood House estate in Southwark, London, for example, plum, apple and bay trees came together with berry bushes, beds of herbs and vegetables, and calendula, marigolds



THE GREENWASHING GARDEN
Rachel Pimm
Portrait by Alastair Levy
The cynical use of nature and environmentalism is spotlighted in Pimm's 'Garden City', which mimics a temporary retail display

and nasturtiums, all with edible flowers.

'The art, for me, was in everything,' says Haeg. 'It wasn't just in the aesthetics of how a garden looked or in the relationships between people that were performed, and it wasn't just in the abstract concept of an edible garden. It was all those things together – the entire task of creating the garden. People will see the project through a particular lens, depending if they are, say, a serious gardener or a conceptual artist. But I was looking at both ends of the spectrum and taking them equally seriously.'

The palatable nature of the plants was essential. 'I wanted to take on the fundamental principles of how we're living and how we're engaging with the natural environment, life cycles, our immediate neighbours and our community,' continues Haeg. 'And what made the most direct and most physical impact was that, as well as watching the garden grow, you could put the garden in your mouth. You could consume it, and there's something very intimate about that, and very provocative, as it is ingesting our environment. Our consumption has become abstract, disconnected from the environment, but this project made a complete shift in people's minds so that they realised that we do actually ingest our environment every day whenever we eat food. That captured the imagination of everyone, especially children.'

A similar shift is attempted by Nicole Dextras, a Vancouver-based artist whose work merges the disciplines of art, gardening and fashion. Instead of reminding us that we ingest our environment, Dextras reminds us that we wear it. She fabricates elaborate clothes from flowers, fruits, weeds and leaves, dressing models in her creations and then choreographing performances to engage the public.

Her *Mobile Garden Dress* – adorned with pots, formed from coconut husks, housing herbs and flowers (see page 62) – was taken to a shopping centre, for example. 'The fact that the dress itself was so fantastic meant people were casually drawn in, and that way we were able to get people into genuine conversations,' recalls Dextras. 'The model would then ask passers-by about their clothes, asking where they came from, and then we'd look at the clothes tag and discuss the material and whether it was made in Guatemala, Honduras, Canada or wherever. I found that was a beautiful way to raise the subject of sustainable fashion and to remind people about the content of fabric, that it comes from a plant.' All of her works are biodegradable, meaning that, when exhibited as objects in exhibitions, they decompose dramatically in front of viewers' eyes. A highly accomplished photographer as well as designer, Dextras also produces stylish photographs of models wearing her clothes – images, she says, that walk 'a tightrope between glamour and critique'.

The way that nature is appropriated in fashion, interior design, public relations and other areas of commerce is a theme of Rachel Pimm's work. Before undertaking her Masters in Fine Art at Goldsmiths, the British artist (above) worked creating show homes at London's Ideal Home Show. 'I was asked to design these eco-friendly homes, with glass counter tops recycled from smashed car windows, or furniture recycled from rags,' she explains. 'This environmentalism was being added on afterwards, as a PR exercise,

and I wanted to examine in my work this "green" methodology.'

Her project for her 2013 degree show duly took the form of a temporary commercial display, incorporating materials that, in a similar way to the show homes, wore their 'green' credentials on their sleeves. Some of her display furniture was covered with textured spray paint designed to give the appearance of natural stone, while other structures were formed from wall tiles in 'Utopia Kiwi'. 'These veneers are marketed not only as ecological but utopian,' Pimm remarks. 'On top of this furniture, I displayed fruit and veg, as well as my own range of products. I created cube-shaped soap, which was made out of natural ingredients like charcoal and smelt like soil, as well as towels and cushions printed with grass and hedgerows. It was the fetishizing of natural stuff.'

The title of the project, *Garden City* (2013), alluded to the early 20th-century garden city movement, the brainchild of British urban planner Ebenezer Howard. The artist made the display appear architectural by arranging furniture like buildings in a city, and by including other structural elements such as raised lawn-coloured platforms and beds of gravel, which she saw as 'rows of houses'. Pimm sees environmentalism used as cynically in city planning as it is in retail, in particular by London planners and property developers, who cover the hoardings of building sites with images of gardens and greenery, 'often to disguise something uglier, like social cleansing'. She calls this process 'greenwashing'.

One city planner for whom nature takes a visionary role is Tomás Saraceno. The Argentine, who trained as an architect, now works as an artist, and the cities he has designed are great speculative projects: cities that fly in the sky, or 'Cloud Cities'. They take the form of clusters of spheres or more complex cellular shapes. These structures mimic cloud formations, tree branches, molecule networks and bubbles. Saraceno even studied different species of spider over many years, to work out what nature's master-builders could teach him about architecture.

'You can zoom in and zoom out of nature,' he tells me, 'as a way of understanding scale to create a new three-dimensional architecture.' Saraceno's cities are utopian socially as well as structurally. Floating clusters will constantly migrate and merge with one another in the sky, allowing freedom of movement.

While his cities seem the stuff of science fiction, Saraceno is hoping they can become science fact, and he creates drawings, models, sculptures and large-scale installations in order to excite the world about his ideas. Visitors to his most ambitious installation, *In Orbit* (2013-15) at Düsseldorf's Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen museum, can move between huge transparent PVC spheres suspended 25m up by a safety net from the building's glass cupola (see page 60-61).

This work includes what has become a Saraceno speciality – a flying garden. Often he fills plastic structures with air plants, which can thrive without soil. 'We have many of these plants in Argentina,' he says. 'They live often on electric cables in the streets, or they hang on trees, as the humid air gives them all the water and nutrients they need.'

Saraceno's biospheres are inspired by greenhouses, botanical gardens and, in particular, the geodesic domes of the Eden Project in Cornwall, and he has been working with biologists to devise ways that plants can survive once his cities take off. 'When we go up to the clouds, it might be very cold for plants. So we will need a closed envelope in which we can generate a different temperature to host gardens.'

'In Berlin where I live, we are entering winter and it is grey and dark,' he continues, his voice becoming more enthusiastic. 'Imagine if we could go 3km upwards at this time of year! You could have a flying garden above the level of the clouds, which would be a completely sunny day. The planet is running out of space on the ground, so above highly densely populated areas, you could create three-dimensional architecture that had all the infrastructure for a garden.'

Anyone wanting to look into the future – of both gardens and art – will be taking note of the work of Saraceno and other green-fingered artists of today.

THE WEARABLE GARDEN
Nicole Dextras
Flora becomes fashion shoot, as Dextras photographs her organic wearable works such as 'Mobile Garden Dress'

THE EDIBLE GARDEN
Fritz Haeg
Portrait by Andras Kare
From Baltimore to Budapest, Haeg's community gardens feed their creators