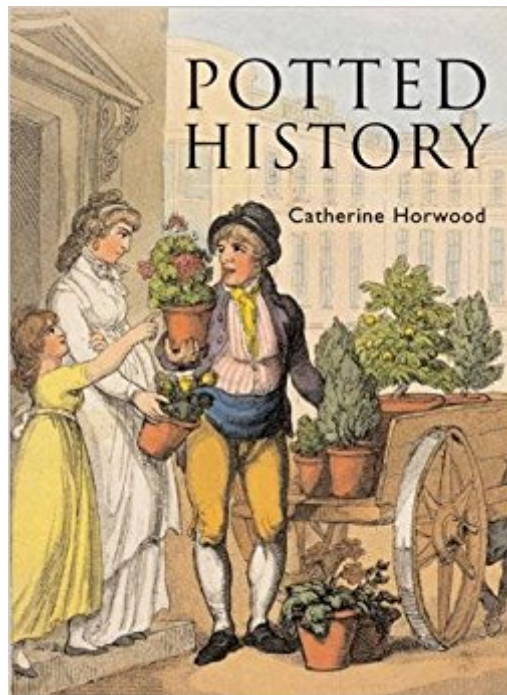


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# Potted History: The Story Of Plants In The Home



## Synopsis

There are plenty of books on how to look after houseplants but Catherine Horwood is the first to show us how, when and why these plants came to be found in our homes. We learn how potted plants are as subject to fashion as pieces of furniture. For the Victorians it was the aspidistra in the front parlour; for us it is the orchid in the designer loft. We find that Wedgwood created a market for special bulb pots and that some of Conran's early designs were for houseplant containers. Then there is the story of mignonette: a modest plant once prized in every home for its intoxicating scent &#150; a scent now lost to us for ever. Catherine Horwood's novel combination of social history, plant history and the history of interior design is intriguing. Her illustrations come from a variety of unusual sources since potted plants can be found in many unexpected corners.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Intriguing blend of social history, horticulture and interior design that examines changing fashions in houseplants  
Bookseller An interesting take on a topic that has rarely been discussed. Spectator A well-researched and intelligently written book, with appropriate and useful pictures - but also plenty to read. This is a book to recommend, both to those with an interest in growing plants indoors and under cover, and also those with an interest in social history. Garden An interesting book, well researched and illustrated, and an enjoyable read. Professional Gardener

Dr Catherine Horwood is a cultural historian and honorary research fellow at Royal Holloway, University of London. A former research fellow at the Yale Center for British Art, she has recently

been awarded a Fellowship at the Huntington Library and Botanical Garden in California. She has published and broadcast widely on 20th-century social history. Dr Horwood has been involved with the National Gardens Scheme for many years and has a roof garden in north London and a patio in Oxford, both packed with pots.

Everyone knows how highly praised are the charms of an English country garden. But how about an English indoor garden? For centuries, Britons have been bringing plants indoors for various reasons - for fashion, for prestige, to clear the air, or just because it's nice to have something natural indoors. It's part of their illustrious gardening history, and now in *Potted History: The Story of Plants in the Home* (Frances Lincoln Limited), historian (and gardener) Catherine Horwood has examined this important part of the British fascination for gardening, and has often placed the particular history of indoor plants within larger British social history. This is a satisfying volume about what might be an obscure subject, made accessible due to its larger themes and also through the lovely pictures, mostly color reproductions of historical paintings and prints showing plants and the interiors that held them. Horwood explains that the British relationship with plants in the home has fluctuated; "...sometimes we fill our rooms to bursting with greenery or scented plants, then banish them on the grounds that they are unfashionable or too demanding." One of the reasons Horwood can so well document indoor gardening trends is that Britons not only love gardening, they love reading about it, so that she can provide plenty of delightful quotations from advice books. She traces the history of bough pots, which sat in the unused fireplaces during summer months, large ceramic pots to contain plants. Forcing bulbs like tulips and hyacinths to bloom out of season was first noted by the botanist and physician with the fitting name Nathaniel Grew in 1682. There are pictures here of glass containers especially made to hold the bulbs just above the water in which the roots are suspended. They look just the same as the ones you can buy at the garden store still. If you tour stately homes in England, you often visit what used to be the orangery but nowadays there are never any orange trees in them; it was eventually cheaper to import oranges. Victorian homes were crammed with everything, but they were dark from the coal dust outside and the gas lamps inside. The classic "cast iron plant" of the time was the aspidistra, which had been brought from Hong Kong in 1863. Poorer Victorians who might have a window bought cheap geraniums for their ledges, and artists of the time would include a forlorn red geranium on a sill as a symbol of the inhabitants' aspirations to respectability. The upper class mania for improving the lower classes was manifest by flower shows; the poor would be issued plants to look after, and several weeks later would bring them in for judging by professional horticulturalists. A minister who organized such a competition

said that caring for the plants would give the poor a "simple recreation" and might improve their "spiritual condition". With modernism, cluttered plants gave way to simple cacti or rubber plants, but in the 1950s, with bright rooms and controlled temperatures, houseplants as décor were big again. Horwood notes, though, that as the century ended, houseplant enthusiasm was declining. "Time had become the precious commodity and houseplants just were not 'instant' enough for the next generation." Horwood shows the *Zamioculcas*, which are becoming popular "because of its strong lines and easy-care regime". Peace lilies and orchids are also in style now. Whether they will boom like aspidistras, and whether future indoor gardeners will regard them with the quaintness the aspidistra now claims, no one can predict. But there is no reason to doubt: there will always be an England, and it will always have plants indoors. Horwood's entertaining book documents centuries of this truth.

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