



Klara Alen

THE

RUBENS

A Masterpiece in Bloom

GARDEN

HANNIBAL
RUBENSHUIS



With heartfelt thanks to Dr med Bettina Leysen,
without whose generous support this publication would not have been possible.
The English translation of this book was made possible through
the kind support of the American Women's Club of Antwerp.
The Rubenshuis is indebted to Boortmalt, its principal sponsor.

BOORTMALT
› MASTERS OF MALT

**Also, remind
Willem the gardener
that he is to send us
some Rosile pears and figs
when there are some,
or any other delicacy
from the garden.**

Rubens's only written reference to his garden,
dated 17 August 1638





Crispijn de Passe II, *Spring* from the *Hortus Floridus*, 1614, Oak Spring Garden Foundation, Upperville, Virginia (USA)



The garden pavilion in the summer of 2024

Foreword

Planting a garden, by definition, is an act of optimism, of belief in growth and development, of faith in the future. At the same time, the new garden of the Rubenshuis is deeply rooted in the site's centuries-old history. Thorough scientific research underpinned the design, which meticulously restores, preserves, and enhances the *genius loci*, its spirit of place. In a sense, this new-old garden has become a 'seventeenth-century island' in the heart of Antwerp.

Its use of historical dimensions based on the Antwerp foot (a unit of length that was smaller than the imperial foot), the restoration of central and radial sight lines and perspective depth, the clever proportioning of paths and parterres, the addition of shrubs and trees of varying dimensions, and the berceau with arcades that is proportionate to the existing historical architecture: the new-old garden evokes Rubens's unique and highly Italianate contribution to the garden tradition of the Low Countries on every level. Archaeological excavations also added a turbulent chapter to the history of Antwerp.

Gardens as witnesses of the cyclical return of seasons question our linear conception of time, of past, present, and future. The cosmic order and the cycle of seasons is immune to our annual

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

HISTORICAL RESEARCH FOR THE RUBENS GARDEN

- 19 Embellishing the garden
- 24 Willem and Jaspar, Rubens's gardeners
- 30 *Atro telluris occulta*. Hidden in the darkness of the earth
- 35 The portico: the crown jewel of the Rubens Garden
- 42 The pavilion: the eye-catcher
- 46 The berceau
- 54 Antwerp city gardens in Rubens's time
- 57 From the library of Rubens and his son Albert
- 62 The flower catalogue of a Brussels painter
- 66 Painted flower pieces for the Rubens Garden

A SMALL FLORILEGIUM OF THE RUBENS GARDEN

- 78 *Aquilegia vulgaris* / Columbine
- 81 *Borago officinalis* / Borage
- 85 *Calendula officinalis* / Marigold
- 89 *Citrus*
- 98 *Cyclamen hederifolium* / Sowbread
- 103 *Dianthus* / Carnation
- 109 *Erythronium dens-canis* / Dog's tooth violet
- 113 *Ficus carica* / Fig
- 119 *Fragaria vesca* / Wild strawberry
- 123 *Fritillaria imperialis* / Crown imperial
- 126 *Fritillaria meleagris* / Snake's head fritillary
- 128 *Humulus lupulus* / Hop
- 130 *Jasminum* / Jasmine
- 133 *Laurus nobilis* / Bay tree
- 137 *Pyrus 'Rousselet de Reims'* / Pear
- 142 *Rosmarinus* / Rosemary
- 145 *Taxus baccata* / Yew
- 149 *Tulipa* / Tulip

- 156 Further reading
- 157 Photo credits





PREVIOUS SPREAD Peter Paul Rubens (atelier), *Peter Paul Rubens, Helena Fourment and Their Son Nicolaas Walking in Their Garden ('The Walk in the Garden')*, c. 1630–1631, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen – Alte Pinakothek, Munich

**HISTORICAL
RESEARCH
FOR THE
RUBENS
GARDEN**



Peter Paul Rubens, *The Artist and His First Wife Isabella Brant in the Honeysuckle Bower*, c. 1609, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen – Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Embellishing the garden

On 1 November 1610, a notary finalised the sale of a house with a former bleachfield along the Wapper in Antwerp. The new owners of this exceptionally large and green plot on the fringe of the city centre were Rubens and his wife Isabella Brant, and they had a very special reason for wanting to live here. Upon her return from Germany in 1587 – after the death of her husband Jan Rubens – Rubens’s mother Maria Pijpelinckx had moved in with her parents, who lived in *Den Cleynen Arnold* on the Meir (where it still stands at no. 54 today), with her three young children. From the roof window of his grandparents’ house, the young Rubens could see the rows of wooden frames on the bleachfield, on which cloth was stretched to dry. Rubens would have also seen a row of tall linden trees to the left, adjacent to the bleachfield and next to a long garden wall. This was the vast garden of the Kolveniersgilde, the Antwerp guild of arquebusiers whose members met here for shooting practice and festive gatherings.

Rubens knew the surroundings like the back of his hand because he used to play here as an 11-year-old boy. More than 20 years later, he saw the plot’s great potential: it was big enough to build a large studio, convert a spacious existing house, and enjoy a large, sun-drenched garden in the company of his family and guests. The family relocated here in the autumn of 1615, with



BELOW Detail of the later Rubenshuis site with the wooden frames on the bleachfield and the Kolveniershof with the double row of linden trees (centre), from: Virgilius Bononiensis (draughtsman) and Gillis Coppens van Diest (printer), *Map of Antwerp*, 1565, Museum Plantin-Moretus, Antwerp

Rubens's garden became a meeting place for his family and friends. A playground for his children Clara Serena, Albert, Nicolaas, Clara-Johanna, Fransje, Isabella, Peter Paul junior and Constance. The workplace of Willem and Jaspar, his gardeners. A prestigious networking venue for the artist's international clients. A garden of love for Rubens and Isabella Brant and later – following his second marriage – Helena Fourment. A backdrop for Rubens's own work and that of contemporaries such as Jacques Jordaens, David Teniers, Anthony van Dyck, and Gonzales Coques. The territory of the Rubens family's cat. A picking garden for their scullery maid Willemyne. An exhibition space for a peerless collection of antique sculptures. A showroom with a harmonious Italian portico and a charming garden pavilion. A drying area for large canvases and panels. A safe haven for three horses. A heavenly place to linger, enjoy, read, feel re-energised, make music, unwind, and dance, where the senses were stimulated and the mind invigorated. 'As the painter sharpens his tired eyes from prolonged and concentrated gazing with a mirror or among greenery, thus our dulled and distracted minds are refreshed in the garden', the scholar and humanist Justus Lipsius wrote in his book *De Constantia* (On Constancy), in which he revisited the ideals of Greco-Roman stoicism.

Il acheta donc une grande maison dans la ville d'Anvers, il la rebastit à la Romaine, & en embellit les dedans, qu'il rendit commodes pour un grand Peintre & pour un grand Amateur des belles choses. Cette maison estoit accompagnée d'un jardin spatieux, où il fit planter pour sa curiosité des arbres de toutes les especes qu'il put recouvrer.

He thus bought a large house in Antwerp, refurbished it in the Roman style and embellished the interior, making it comfortable for a great painter and lover of beautiful things. This house came with a large garden, where he had trees planted of all the species he could find to assuage his own curiosity.

Roger de Piles, Rubens's biographer, *Conversations sur la connaissance de la peinture*, 1677, based on the *Vita Petri Pauli Rubenii* by Philip Rubens, the artist's nephew.

Willem and Jaspar, Rubens's gardeners

Digging, sowing, growing, planting, fertilising, sweeping, raking, hoeing, weeding, grafting, propagating, sanding and painting trellises and gates, showing guests around the garden, harvesting. These are just a few of the many tasks listed in 17th-century garden maintenance contracts in the Low Countries. We do not know whether Rubens also concluded such a comprehensive contract with his gardeners. Around 1640 – the year of his death – the family employed three women and five men. Coachman Jan used the stables in the garden. Willemyne the scullery maid knew best what to pick each season in Rubens's garden. But Jan Drion (the manservant, who also laid out the table), Franchois (who ground the master's pigments) and Anneken and Adriaenken (the maids) also knew their way around the garden. Gardeners Willem Donckers and Jaspar Verbrugghen tended to the garden.

Willem took care of the general upkeep of Rubens's garden and – along with Jan Drion – was the highest-paid employee. His annual salary was 72 guilders, a high sum that can be explained by the relationship of trust between Willem and Rubens. In August 1638, Willem had access to the garden while Rubens and his family stayed at their country house *Het Steen* in Elewijt near



David Teniers II, *Spring*, c. 1644, The National Gallery, London

Mechelen. No doubt gardeners also continued to work in the garden when Rubens and his family moved to an inn in Laeken for a year and a half from August 1624 because the plague was rampant in Antwerp. Without maintenance, the Antwerp garden would have been completely overgrown. This trusting relationship between Rubens and Willem was significant for another reason: theft of flowers – in particular of precious (tulip) bulbs – or of the garden’s spoils, such as eggs, was rife. It was thus in Rubens’s interest that Willem kept an eye on it.

Jaspar was paid by Rubens to look after the orange trees. He must have been a sought-after gardener who worked with assistants or subcontractors because Jaspar also did gardening jobs on the plot of Rubens’s neighbours, the Kolveniers, and worked for the Moretus family, the successors of printer-publisher Christopher Plantin. He supplied fruit trees to the Moretuses and took care of garden maintenance, the pruning of the grapevines, and the pickling of the grapes. Moreover, Jaspar became a close neighbour of Rubens during the last years of his life. On 30 September 1637, he bought *De Blauw Banck*, a house with a large garden on

Boortkund afgelede
 deftoer — of 17-17
 Lorenz die fapw foud
 voor de fapw gag
 van oranje boom
 die vooft fort
 gaed laeg
 ————— of 20 —

Payment to Jaspar the gardener for tending to the orange trees in the *Staatmasse* or settlement of Rubens’s estate in 1645, Felixarchief, Antwerp



Copper plate and partly coloured drawing of *Cyclamen hederifolium* in preparation for the engraving in the *Hortus Eystettenis*, Albertina, Vienna & Universitätsbibliothek, Erlangen-Nürnberg

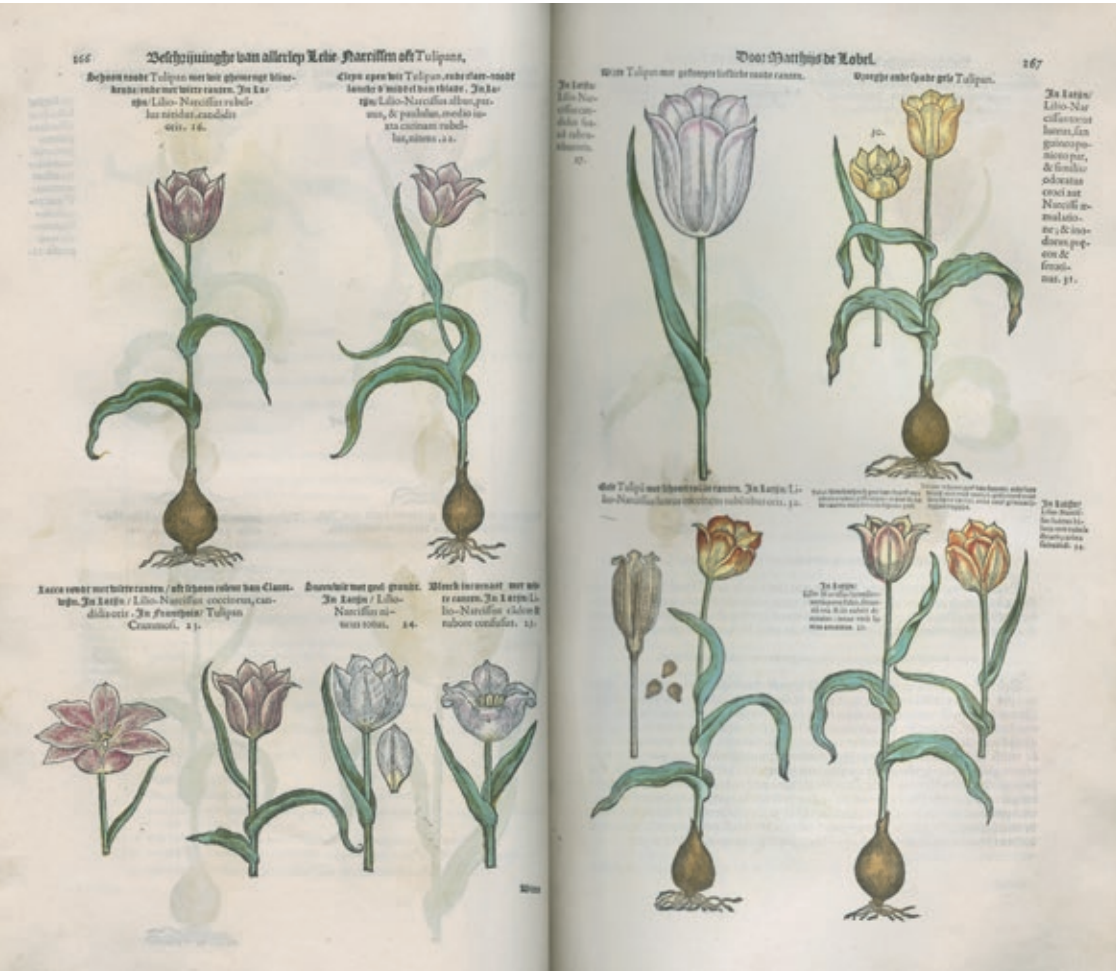


Engraving of *Cyclamen hederifolium* in a coloured edition of the *Hortus Eystettensis*, 1613, Teylers Museum, Haarlem

Although Rubens's collection of books became dispersed after his death, we have a good idea which books would have lined his library shelves. Rubens paid 98 guilders to Moretus for his copy of the *Hortus Eystettensis*, possibly making it the largest and most expensive book in his collection. We cannot be certain whether he owned a coloured copy or a black-and-white edition. Uncoloured, unbound copies started at 35 guilders. A coloured luxury version would likely cost five times more. We can be certain, however, that very few other Antwerp citizens – perhaps nobody – owned a copy of Besler's book. Besler's *Florilegium* served as inspiration for the new museum garden's plant palette, but its influence as source material for Rubens's garden should not be overestimated. The work takes you through a unique, early 17th-century garden with many rare plants, which in those days would have been shared by a small network of botanists and collectors. Rubens's garden was definitely not a copy of this exceptional garden.

Among the many books on architectural theory in Rubens's library, there were also two works by the engineer Salomon de Caus, including *Les raisons des forces mouvantes*, in which all kinds of designs for caves and fountains with surprise effects were developed, in text and visuals. After Rubens's death, the *Hortus Eystettensis* and the works of De Caus ended up in the bookcase of Rubens's eldest son Albert. This also contained several important botanical works: the *Historia Stirpium Commentarii Insignes* by Leonhart Fuchs and the *Kruydtboeck* by Matthias Lobelius. Lobelius's book was published by Christopher Plantin in 1581 and featured more than 2,000 woodcuts of plants. Albert also owned a copy of *L'agriculture et maison rustique* by Charles Estienne

(1564), a gardening and farming manual. There is a good chance that these books originally came from Rubens's library, as Albert inherited all his father's books. But Albert was also an avid book collector, and the collection of books of Jan Brant, his maternal grandfather, had also been left to him.



Matthias Lobelius, *Tulips in the Kruydtboeck*, 1581, Museum Plantin-Moretus, Antwerp

The flower catalogue of a Brussels painter

Charles of Arenberg and his wife Anna of Croÿ-Chimay created ‘*un fort beau et gran jardin*’ (a large and very lovely garden) at Enghien from 1607. In the winter of 1609, the Italian botanist and flower supplier Matteo Caccini asked Charles of Arenberg for a catalogue of his garden. As the garden was not yet ready, and in anticipation of the plant catalogue of his own garden, Arenberg sent Caccini an alphabetical catalogue of flowers in Dutch by a Brussels painter friend of his, ‘*uno dely piu grande harbarista (sic) et meglio provisto*’ (one of the greatest and best-equipped herbalists). This inventory of the Brussels painter’s garden offers a particularly detailed insight into an early Baroque spring garden. The names of hundreds of tuberous and bulbous plants, including anemones, crocuses, hyacinths, daffodils, peonies, and tulips in all kinds of stunning colours which, according to the catalogue, ‘are impossible to define and name’, served as a source for the planting plan of the new Rubens Garden. Illustrations from *Hortus Floridus*, Crispijn de Passe II’s popular florilegium from 1614, give us a good idea of what these flowers would have looked like.



Crispijn de Passe II, *Narcissus* and *Anemone* from the *Hortus Floridus*, 1614, Oak Spring Garden Foundation, Upperville, Virginia (USA)





Jan Brueghel II, *Allegory of Painting*, c. 1625–1630, JK Art Foundation

Painted flower pieces for the Rubens Garden

Painted flower pieces also served as a resource for the planting plan of the new garden of the Rubenshuis. In a letter of 14 April 1606 to his patron Federico Borromeo, cardinal and archbishop of Milan, the Antwerp flower painter Jan Brueghel I emphasised the '*naturallezza*' (lifelikeness), the '*bellezza*' (beauty), and the '*rarita*' (rarity) of the flowers in the painting he had just started working on. In the spring of 1606, Brueghel did not yet have access to a garden with the rarest species in Antwerp, he wrote to Borromeo. To paint some flowers from life, the artist had therefore travelled to Brussels, where he may have visited the garden of the fellow painter, whose aforementioned 1609 flower catalogue survives. On 25 August 1606, he informed Borromeo that he had finished the painting: 'I don't believe that anyone has ever painted so many rare and different flowers together, or finished them with such precision. It will be a stunning sight to behold in winter. Some colours are only slightly different from the natural ones'.

The correspondence between Brueghel and Borromeo shows that there was a direct link in the early 17th century in the Southern Netherlands between flowers in gardens and their representation



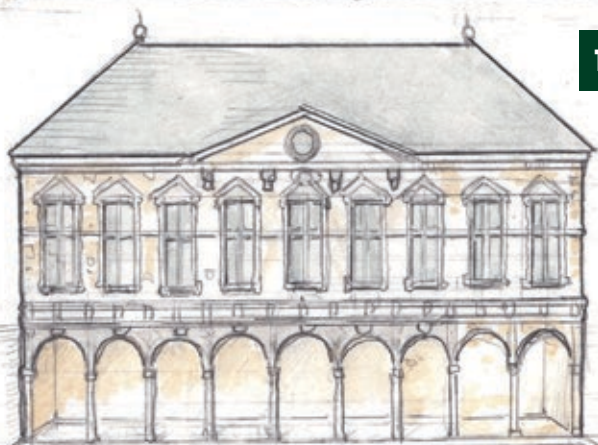
DETAIL FROM Jan Brueghel II, *Allegory of Painting*, c. 1625–1630,
JK Art Foundation

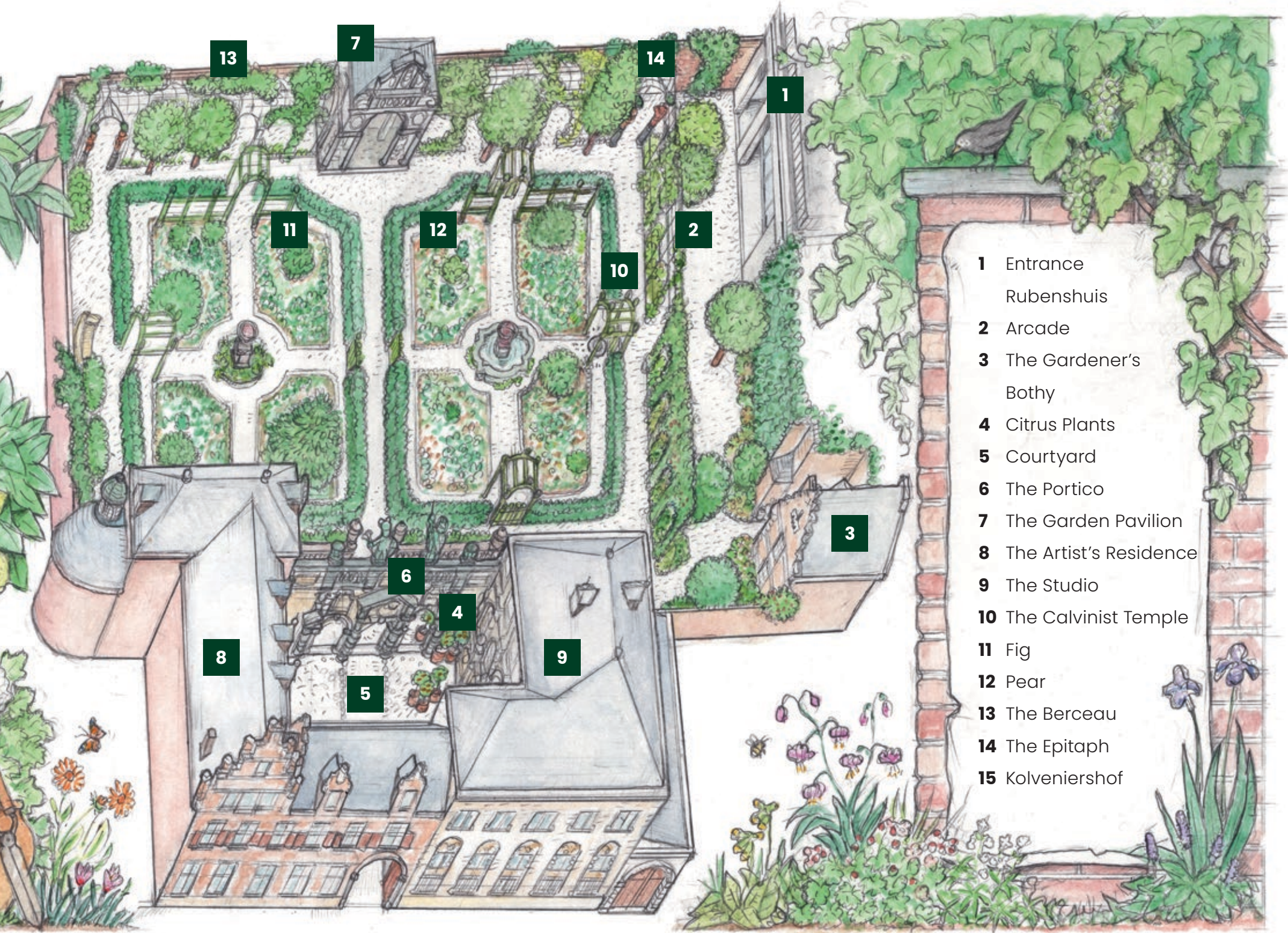


in a painted flower piece. Brueghel and many of his fellow artists painted flowers from different seasons with such precision that enthusiasts and collectors were able to recognise them in a painted flower still life. Even today we can still name the many species in still lifes – relying on our knowledge of plant books and florilegia of that period. We can now pick a bouquet for the Rubens Garden from what was painted then, with great care and meticulous attention.



For the new design of the Rubens Garden, all species in 15 flower pieces from the period between 1605 and 1660 were carefully determined by still life specialist and biologist Sam Segal. Moreover, these flower still lifes were created by painters who collaborated with Rubens, such as Jan Brueghel I and Osias Beert. We also looked at flowers that were painted by Antwerp-based contemporaries of Rubens, such as Andries Snellinck and Clara Peeters, and works by painters whose work Rubens collected. By the end of his life, he owned at least eight Antwerp flower pieces and other still lifes with flowers: six were by Frans Ykens, one by Frans Snyders, and one by Daniël Seghers.





- 1** Entrance
Rubenshuis
- 2** Arcade
- 3** The Gardener's
Bothy
- 4** Citrus Plants
- 5** Courtyard
- 6** The Portico
- 7** The Garden Pavilion
- 8** The Artist's Residence
- 9** The Studio
- 10** The Calvinist Temple
- 11** Fig
- 12** Pear
- 13** The Berceau
- 14** The Epitaph
- 15** Kolveniershof



**A SMALL
FLORILEGIUM
OF THE
RUBENS
GARDEN**

Aquilegia vulgaris

Columbine



The graceful *Aquilegia vulgaris* or common columbine flowered in Rubens's garden in early summer. In *Den kleynen herbarius ofte kruydt boecxken* (Antwerp, 1640), columbines are described as 'very pretty flowers'. These elegant perennials were therefore often included in 17th-century flower still lifes. The seed of aquilegia was used as a cooking ingredient and against certain ailments. Aquilegia were praised for the diversity of their colour and form in the botanical works and gardening manuals of that period. 'For one can think of almost no colour that this flower does not come in, except perhaps yellow', according to Rembert Dodoens in his *Cruydt-boeck* of 1644.

According to Lobelius, this plant thrived in cool southern climes and regions. In France and England, they were found in meadows, ‘but the flowers are neither as beautiful nor as bright as those that grow in gardens: for they have two, three or four doubled flowers and thicker and brighter stems, with flowers in many colours, or each flower in one colour, or all three colours in one flower: namely white, purple and blue’. According to Lobelius, the flower was also perfect for flower posies ‘for its flowers are a very nice purplish-blue, made of hollow spurs, with a shape that is very similar to the neck and beak of a dove, which is why it is also called columbine in English’. *Den verstandighen hovenier over de twaelf maenden van 't jaer* – the Flemish version of the gardeners’ handbook that was published in Amsterdam in 1669 and was printed in 1672 by Reynier Slegghers on Kammenstraat in Antwerp – describes some of the differences in these bell-shaped flowers: ‘they can have single or double flowers, red and white, blue and speckled, like hanging bells, for your pleasure in the garden’. A motley collection of aquilegia is depicted in Besler’s *Hortus Eystettensis* of 1613, of which Rubens owned a copy, but also in other (trade) catalogues, including Emanuel Sweerts’s *Florilegium* of 1614.

Den kleynen herbarius of 1640 describes how ‘when these flowers have faded, they produce black seeds in elongated seed pods’. Columbine seed was sometimes added to sugar or candied for use as confectionery sugar in those days. Lobelius described how the seed was widely used ‘to get rid of spots and freckles in one’s face’. According to Dodoens, columbine seeds could help against congested gallbladder and liver and also remediate dizziness and fainting.



Franciscus de Geest, *Borago* in the *Hortus Amoenissimus*, 1668, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Rome

Borago officinalis

Borage

In summer, the bulbs in the beds of the garden of the Rubenshuis make way for annuals, including borage. The striking flowers of this plant, which is native to Europe and the Mediterranean, were described by Lobelius in 1581 as 'a star-shaped bloom with five very pretty purple-blue and sometimes white petals, with a small brown sepal'. The plant is edible and was said to lighten the mood.

Cyclamen hederifolium

Sowbread

This plant, which flowers low to the ground, is a real show-stopper from late summer until the first frosts, with its foliage with a serrated edge, silver-spotted and speckled leaf pattern, and the elegant petal structure of the exquisite pink flower. After flowering, the most wonderful foliage appears that stays green all winter long. Cyclamen were a coveted species in early 17th-century flower still lifes, where they often appear at the bottom of the bouquet. The flower had several medicinal uses. The tuber was deemed dangerous for pregnant women.

Colchicum Aquilegine Tomo dactylis
Naxi magis fl. variegato.



Cyclamen fl. Alb. *Cyclamen,* *Cyclamen,*
Obcordata Boiss.



Colchicum Aquilegine *Colchicum* *Colchicum*
fl. Pallid. P. m. *fl. Alba semper* *fl. ampl.*
Agrostis *Agrostis* *Agrostis*



Franciscus de Geest, *Cyclamen hederifolium* in the *Hortus Amoensissimus*, 1668, Bibliotheca Nazionale Centrale, Rome



According to Dodoens's *Cruydt-boeck* of 1644, the flowers 'bloom on very slender stems, arching down, although the petals point up, with the purplish colour of blue violets, but not very dark, shiny, with almost no scent'. According to the *Cruydt-boeck*, this species of cyclamen grew in the Netherlands and on farmland in the border region of France, Flanders, and Artois. Sowbread was a wreath herb, used to decorate posies.

Sowbread had many uses in Rubens's day, from curing haemorrhoids and cataracts to improving bowel movements and

preventing hair loss. Pharmacists called the flower with the imposing, round and flat root tuber *Panis porcinus*, while it was colloquially known as *verckens-broot* or *seugen-broot* (sowbread). The tuber of sowbread is also depicted in botanical handbooks and early florilegia, including Besler's *Hortus Eystettensis* (see elsewhere in this book on pages 58–59). It could be used as an ingredient in biscuits to render love potions harmless, and in ointment to heal the scars of smallpox and measles. The tuber was deemed dangerous for pregnant women. They were not allowed to ingest it or even touch it. According to Dodoens, even stepping on the root was enough to cause severe problems. The English herbalist John Gerard reportedly even fenced off the plants in his garden to avoid premature births. In the garden of Charles de Tassis in Antwerp, a bed with '*dobbelen apatica ende folio hedre*' had been laid out in 1641. So the unassuming cyclamen were paired with *Hepatica* or refined double liverworts. In the Brussels garden of a painter, '*Folhederen witt de blomme*', '*Folhederen met Incarnaete blomkens*' and '*Pannis porzinons*' bloomed in 1609 (ivy-leaved cyclamen with red and white flowers and sowbread). Franciscus de Geest drew sowbread in different colours in the *Hortus Amoenissimus*.

Carionulleus flos maior, speciosus & blanda Belli Belle



des Hortensies

des Bourges & Marmelades

Engelred & Marmelades



Belongois

La Blanche Margot

des Bourges & Marmelades



Franciscus de Geest, *Dianthus* in the *Hortus Amoennisimus*, 1668, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Rome

Dianthus

Carnation

Carnations or pinks were among the most popular garden flowers in Rubens's time, because of their beauty and scent. Both the Carthusian pink (*Dianthus carthusianorum*) and the maiden pink (*Dianthus deltoides*) were given a place in the beds of the new Rubens Garden. The 1672 edition of *Den verstandighen hovenier over de twaelf maenden van 't jaer*, published in Antwerp, describes how the juice of the flowers has analgesic properties when used for head wounds, and how preserves of carnation flowers strengthen the heart. Carnations were kept indoors in pots or tubs in winter to protect them against the cold. This explains why they are often listed in estate inventories, which traditionally focused on household effects rather than plants in gardens.

This book was published on the occasion of the redevelopment of the garden of the Rubenshuis in 2024, designed by Ars Horti.

Text

Klara Alen

Translation

Sandy Logan

Copy-editing

Derek Scoins

Project management

Sara Colson

Design

doublebill.design

Retouching

Tine Deriemaeker (die Keure)

Printing and binding

die Keure, Bruges

Publisher

Gautier Platteau

ISBN 978 94 6494 159 3

D/2024/11922/66

NUR 654

© Hannibal Books,
Rubenshuis, 2024

www.hannibalbooks.be

www.rubenshuis.be

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any other information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders for all texts, photographs and reproductions. If, however, you feel that you have inadvertently been overlooked, please contact the publisher.

Cover

Jan Brueghel I and Peter Paul Rubens, *Allegory of Smell* (detail), c. 1617, Museo nacional del Prado, Madrid

The American Women's Club of Antwerp is a social, cultural and philanthropic club of international English-speaking women from all over the world. The club celebrated its 95th anniversary in 2024, a rich history of bringing English speaking women in the Antwerp area a place and purpose in a country that, for many, is not their own.

