

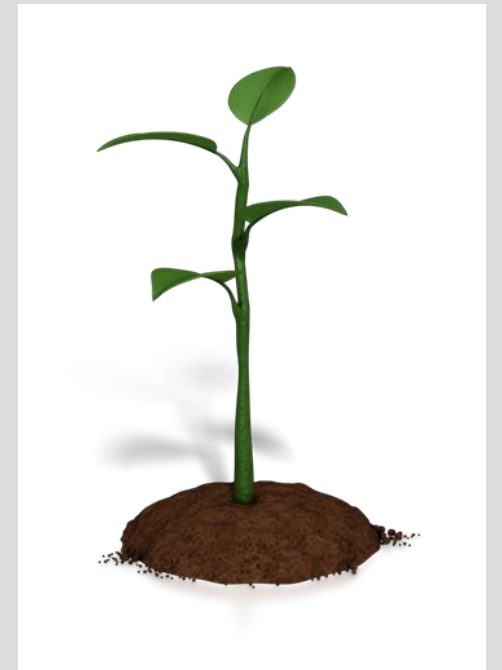
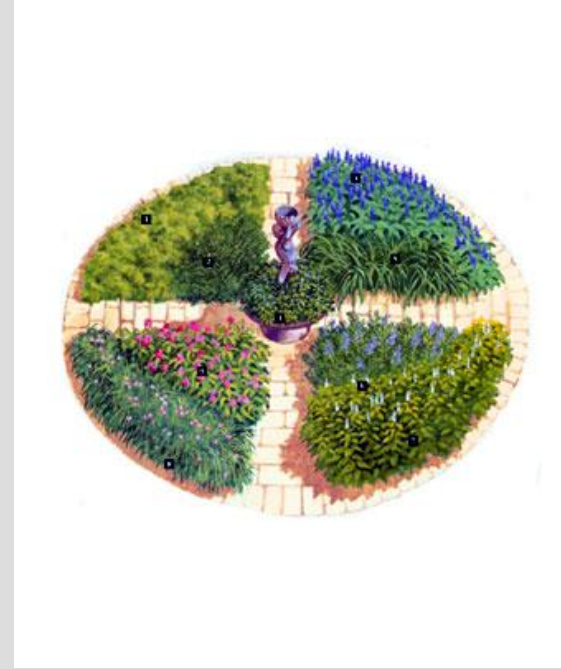


THE HERB GARDEN

Stephen Gray

Themes

1. Memory and Legacy
2. Mother-Son Relationship
3. Cultural Displacement and Identity
4. The Passage of Time and Maturity
5. Nature and Nurture
6. The Mundane as Sacred
7. Grief and Acceptance
8. Gender and Domesticity
9. Physical Labor as Spiritual Practice
10. Transience and Permanence



Structure and Form

- **Four-Stanza Structure**
- **Stanza 1 and 2 (12 lines):** The Past - Mother planting the garden before death
Stanza 2 (6 lines): The Death - Her passing while still tending gardens
Stanza 4 (6 lines): The Present - Son finally understanding through his own gardening



Effect:

Temporal structure moves from past → death → present

Longest stanza = the memory, most detail

Shorter stanzas = compression of grief and revelation

Mirrors process of grief: long remembering, sharp loss, gradual acceptance/understanding

...there are two traditions that come together here, in a rather relevant and interesting way. One is the lyric poetry tradition of Europe and the other, a special interest of mine, is the praise poetry tradition of Africa.



Stephen Gray in an interview

Structure and Form

- **Lyric poem and praise poetry**
- **Free Verse**
- No regular rhyme scheme or meter
- Natural speech patterns
- Allows for conversational, memoir-like tone
- Reflects organic growth (like a garden)
- Flexible form suits meditation and memory



Structure and Form

Enjambment

Used extensively throughout:

"My mother before she died insisted / I should have a herb garden"

"Always finding the sun too hot the soil / Far too dry"

Creates flowing, continuous memory

Mirrors growth of plants spreading

Sometimes creates awkwardness (mirroring struggle with harsh environment)





Structure and Form

Line Lengths

Irregular line lengths reflect:

Natural thought patterns

Organic growth (not rigid)

Emotional intensity varies



Tone

Tone Shift

Stanza 1: Nostalgic, descriptive, slightly bemused

Stanza 2: “

Stanza 3: Elegiac, tender, mournful

Stanza 4: Revelation, understanding, acceptance, gratitude



Overall Tone:

- Reflective and elegiac (mourning)
- Tender and loving
- Regretful (wasn't ready)
- Finally appreciative and understanding

Tone

Mood (Reader's Emotional Response):

Poignant: Touching, emotionally moving

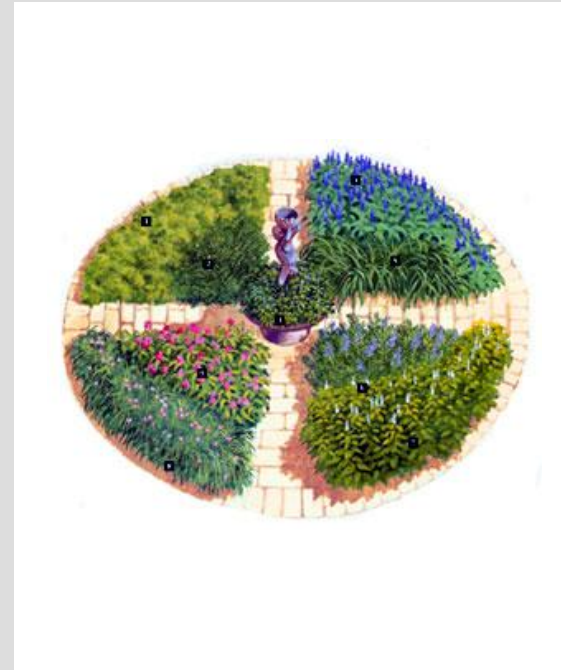
Nostalgic: Longing for past, for lost person

Bittersweet: Sad loss but beautiful legacy

Contemplative: Thoughtful, meditative

Hopeful: Garden flourishes, memory lives on

Peaceful: Acceptance achieved



Allusions

Biblical/Religious

Garden imagery:

Eden (paradise lost)

Gethsemane (suffering)

Song of Solomon ("garden enclosed")

Burial gardens (tomb of Christ)

Spices:

Used to anoint Christ's body

Valuable, precious

Aromatic preservation



Allusions

Shakespeare

"Rosemary for remembrance":

Ophelia in *Hamlet* (Act 4, Scene 5)

Traditional association of herb with memory

Funeral customs

"There's rue for you":

Also Ophelia - herb for regret

Herb language tradition

Literary Gardens

Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911): Garden as healing, transformation

T.S. Eliot: "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land"

Andrew Marvell: "The Garden" (retreat, contemplation)



At time of writing (in the 1980s)
South Africa was in the grips of
Apartheid and the idea of racial
purity was a topic of debate in many
circles.

the poem is about heritage and identity, but it
is about *mixed* heritage and that's the point.
My mother was English and 'foreign' here, but
the idea that any one of us is somehow
'racially pure' is hopeless.



Stephan Gray in an interview with *The English Experience*

“ENGLISH SOUL” VERSUS “ROUGH SOUTH AFRICANS”



Opening line is unusual

Subject – this becomes a praise poem

My mother **before she died** insisted

Implies that she feels compelled/forced.
Emphatic

Past tense establishes elegiac tone

I should have a herb garden

Simple statement of gift/legacy.

Herbs = practical yet symbolic.

"Should" = obligation, duty, love

Something in her English soul

→ Cultural identity. Herbs associated with English gardens, homeland, tradition.
Nostalgia

Amid rough South Africans

Called for the tenderness of mint

→ Cooling and soothing

gentleness, care, softness
Contrasts with 'rough'

The old scent of lavender and sage

SENSORY IMAGERY: smell. "Old scent" = memory, tradition, past. Lavender = English countryside. Sage = wisdom (double meaning)



*Physical detail showing her frailty.
Determination despite physical limitations*

They arrived in soggy pages of *The Star*

With a spade taller than herself

She dug them into my backyard

Before I was ready for
them

He wasn't prepared—emotionally, practically. Didn't understand the gift's significance. Youth's unreadiness

A cigarette tightly in her lips

"Tightly" = determination, defiance, working-class habit. Rebellious spirit

E: *Philosophy through herbs. "Made life worthwhile" = finding meaning in small things. Beauty in ordinary. Mother's wisdom*



Visual details: name of a newspaper – this time the newspaper is bringing “good news”, live plants

"My backyard" = his space, she's giving him something. Maternal care

Child-sized tools = full circle of life. She's diminished to child-like size/strength. Poignant

"That is how" = this characteristic way.
"Her own" = she created/claimed this space

That is how she died in her own Garden of **sweet** remembrance

Very frail then with a bucket and spade

The size we children used for play
Always finding the sun too hot the soil

Far too dry for the gentler herbs

She stayed but struggled to adapt to the climate/conditions.

Garden of sweet remembrance

METAPHOR: Garden becomes memorial. "Sweet remembrance" = positive memories. Biblical allusion

She create a space where she felt safe, a refuge. A place where she could maintain her identity and where she will be remembered.

PATHOS: aging but still gardening. Child's tools ("bucket and spade" = beach toys). Diminishment yet dignity

"Gentler herbs" = her own nature?
England's climate? What doesn't thrive in harsh South Africa





"Bed" = garden bed (double meaning: death bed). "Lost spices" = she's gone; also herbs seemed lost/unattended/forgotten.

*TIME SHIFT to present.
"Heart-stopping" = intense, life-threatening. METAPHOR: emotional drought of grief*

Physical drought and the period of grieving and healing following his mother's death.

Today after the long heart-stopping drought

My mother's bed of lost spices

Has so flourished I have cut it back

And the mint is in the crevices of fingers

The sage under my very nails

And I remember her every gesture.

To grow abundantly – the herb garden grows on after her death.
IRONY: What she couldn't make thrive, now thrives. "Cut it back" = pruning, controlling growth. He's now the gardener

Full stop at the end of the poem is the only punctuation mark in the poem – indicating the finality of death, the end of the grieving?

SENSORY: tactile and olfactory. "Crevices" = intimate detail. Herb's essence has penetrated his body. Physical connection

His mother's legacy has survived and become a part of the speaker. She cannot be forgotten

*Physical embedding.
"Sage" = wisdom now part of him.
"Under...nails" = Internalised*