Deeply Unfashionable
By Sarah Rutherford

Artwork for the jackets of a treasure trove of inexpensive gardening books offers a colourful, quirky and striking graphic archive of the mid-20th century.

Gourds. Really? Not an obvious catalyst for a niche interest in book jacket artistry of the 1950s and 60s. As a 1980s Kew Diploma student, I avoided John Organ’s ubiquitous Gourds (1963) as, surely, entirely tedious. Why waste precious student funds on a book about these unlikely and (then) obscure fruits? And yet the design of the jacket remained striking every time I came across it. When eventually I wanted to grow gourds 20 years later at least I knew exactly which book would tell me how.

Even so, the most interesting thing about this book remained the paper dust jacket which covered the binding. The artwork attracted for its quirky style and dazzling colours. As it was published by Foyles’ Garden Book Club (GBC) I thought perhaps other GBC titles might have similarly eye-catching and unconventional covers.

Features such as colour photos were omitted. New and attractive jacket artwork was part of the offer, although not all is to my taste and some is downright dull. The bright cover of the GBC Gourds replaced the rather dry, but more informative, photographic jacket of a group of assorted gourds used for the original edition, published by Faber.

The main GBC selling point was that members of the club got a bargain, receiving rebudgeted titles from the original publishing houses at considerably reduced rates without membership fees or long-term subscriptions. The topic was definitely practical gardening, not garden design or even colour theory.

Subjects ranged from the broadest and simplest, such as Basic Gardening (by Stanley Whitehead, 1968), and the classic Small Shrub Garden (by Judith Beresford, 1961), through technical aspects for the more advanced, such as Simple, Practical Hybridising for Beginners (D. Gourley-Thomas, 1960) and Compact Flower Growing (S.A. Brown, 1960), to many titles on groups of plants, such as Colour Hedges (J.L. Beddall, 1954) and individual genera and types, such as Pelargoniums for All Purposes (John E. Cross, 1965) or Hardy Heaths (A.T. Johnson, 1955).

Garden history made a showing with Miles Hadfield’s 1955 Pioneers in Gardening (the author himself a pioneer in the subject). And where at your wits’ end, beset by pests and diseases or a bad back, on hand were agony uncles W.H. Lewis to advise on Your Garden Problems (1965) and Stuart Dudley on Taking the Ache Out of Gardening (1963).

Jointly owned by the major publishing houses and Foyles, GBC spanned the 1940s–70s. Bookseller Foyles licensed titles from authors including W.E. Shewell Cooper, Beverley Nichols, Eleanour Sinclair Rohde, Roy Hay, Roy Genders, Judith Beresford, Vita Sackville-West and Frank Kingdon-Ward.

After the war, the formidable Christina Kingdon-Ward. wrote to the 3,000 members sternly warning them that prices had to increase from 2s 6d per book to 3s 6d (before de-cration in 1971, there were 20 shillings to the pound and 12 pence to the shilling) to which postage would be added. Subscriptions could cost 24s for six books and 48s for 12. Books published at 8s 6d, 10s 6d and 12s 6d by major publishing houses were supplied for 5s 6d to members. So that this point was never forgotten, the original price and publisher were displayed on the dust jacket flap, while a selection of forthcoming titles on the back featured the original prices. By 1960 the cost to a member of each selection was 4s plus 1s postage.

So I set about acquiring some of the numerous titles that had attractive jackets. There are hundreds of titles. I haven’t counted but producing 12 titles a year for, say, 30 years gives us 360.) My choice was entirely subjective, and the photographic cover images didn’t interest me, only graphic images as works of art and design, and they had to be attractive to my eye or else have an artist’s signature.

Many front cover images wrapped onto the spine or else the spine had a complementary vignette of the subject as another artistic element. Surprisingly for a strong brand there was no graphic or artistic house style, nor consistency of lettering, resulting in a great variety of appearance and none of the unity that might be expected for a ‘club’. Dozens of artists with many styles were commissioned. Some signed their work; many more remain

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J. Willis, with at least four titles in 1959–
60 including *Prospects for Troubled-Free
Gardening* (1960). For *The Modern
Greenhouse* (1955) the enigmatic ‘CES’
chose a gardener in baggy trousers,
pumper and tie, tending and tying in his
vines in a spacious lean-to. The artist of
Mina Smith’s *The Garden in Winter
(1966)* produced a striking composition
of white magnolia and red camellia.

Flowers in Winter (1948) by Patrick
M. Syne has a spiky group of yellow-
flowered bulbs inked onto a white and
green ground; the multi-coloured
*Colours in Winter* (1965) and
*Handy Heath* (c. 1959) set their subjects in
gardens, as do Hyams’s *Ornamental
Shrubs* March and April Flowering
(1965), and *Ornamental Shrubs June
Flowering* (1966) with its brightly
coloured shrub border flanking a bilious
green grass path leading to an ornate
gateway.

Groups of flowers of a single variety
decorate *Dahlias* (1961) and
*Ballots* (1960). Most spare of all is
*Rare Vegetables for Garden and Table* (1960), another book
by John Organ, with the image depicting
mere silhouettes of three vegetables,
including the then unusual kohlrabi and
subengrige, brightly contrasting with a red
ground. Perhaps the artist had to do it as
a rush job and kept it simple and quick.

The late 1960s embraced the brighter
shade of perennials for Trouble-Free
Gardening: *Taking the Ache Out of Gardening*
(1963), with stylised fork, rake, barrow and hose water jets.

Your Garden Problems (1965) has cartoon vignettes of
pests and problems; a determined little bird attacks pimrose
flowers, a jaunty terrier’s ball lands in a row of seedlings, a
dandelion seeds clocks copiously, and carrot flies attack
carrots with positive mischief. This book was “aimed at those
with established gardens, especially in town or suburbs,
where all the work, or most of it, is done by husband and
wife”. It was intended to “lessen the hard work”.

Tantalisingly anonymous, but perhaps be identified by their unique
styles. These artists are more obscure than the Bawdens, Freedmans and Ravilious
of the day, who themselves languished for
decades, overlooked in popular awareness until recently — but they also deserve to be
better recognised and appreciated. As a
collection of art their work is extensive, high
quality and uniquely varied.

The most prolific GBC cover artist was
Elizabeth Sorrell (1916–1991), a versatile
British water-colourist trained at the
Royal College of Art. At the RCA she
came across, and was encouraged by, Paul
Nash. Her husband Alan is also
acknowledged as a notable artist of this
period (both have Wiki entries). From
the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, her
conventional and highly attractive
realistic romantic style for GBC was
usually based on a group of the subject
plants in a garden setting.

Terence Freeman (b. 1909) used a
similar style for *Pelargoniums for all
(1925–2010) illustrated Hadfield’s
seminal book *Pioneers in Gardening*
(1956) with a dense green boscage of
roses, ferns and Michaelmas daisies
punctuated with small points of colour
in pinky flowers. Hackney was another
product of the RCA: an engraver and
workaday and graphic treatment from
those wrapping around Organ’s *Gardens* but
is no less attractive. Technical subjects received a more
workaday and graphic treatment from
an anonymous artists, with a tendency to grab colours:
*Background to Gardening* has a varied selection of motifs
on a dark-green ground, from Brussels sprout stalks to
mulligepes; the rather green and brown cover for
*Introduction to Greenhouse Gardening* (1965) has the
equipment to kit out a greenhouse; more interesting and
colourful is *Takings the Ache Out of Gardening* (1963), with
stylised fork, rake, barrow and hose water jets.

And I certainly have not read each book! But I am better
colourful is
educed about the range of books and the more shadowy
jobbing artists of the period and have greatly enjoyed their
works. Where did all the original artwork go? One day I will
contract Foyles and ask if they have an archive on GBC, and
maybe hit gold. The difficulty, as with my collection of 1960s
National Trust tea towels, is finding the space to display these
works of art to their best advantage. Ideas anyone?  

Dr Sarah Rutherford was Head of the English Heritage
Parks and Gardens Register and is now an author and
independent historic environment consultant.

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