

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. Luckily, book dealers now post photos of their wares online and as GBC titles are deeply unfashionable, being of our parents' or grandparents' generation, good cheap copies

abound. (It's more difficult to find jackets in very good condition, undamaged and with bright colours, possibly because the owners took them out into the garden and read them with dirty hands.)

GBC spanned the 1940s–70s. Bookseller Foyles licensed titles from the major publishing houses and published them in a modified edition, selling at a considerably lower price. They branched out into book club editions at the beginning of the 1930s, with a scientific book club, a travel book club, a children's book club, and more. Little contemporary information is available about these clubs; all were run out of 121 Charing Cross Road, the address of the huge Foyles bookshop, which the company claimed was the largest in the world.

It must have been an extensive operation to deal with the negotiations with publishers, then re-presenting each book in a revised format for the monthly send-out of a new title. The original printing plates were re-used, but expensive



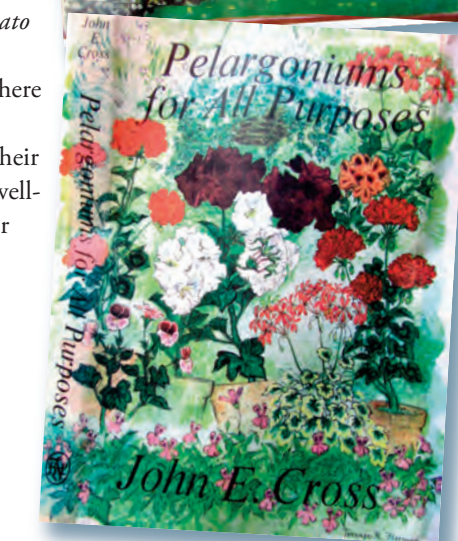
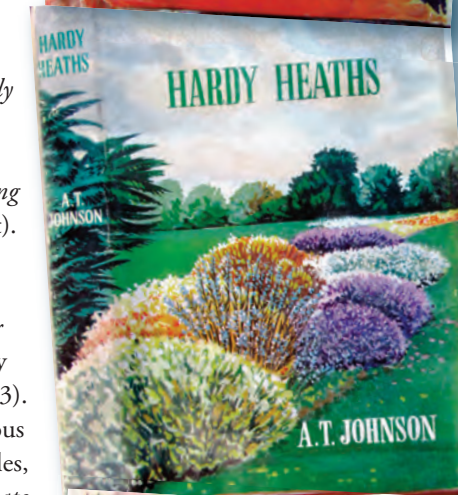
features such as colour photos were omitted. New and attractive jacket artwork was part of the offer, although not all is to my taste and some is downright dull. The bright cover of the GBC *Gourds* replaced the rather dry, but more informative, photographic jacket of a group of assorted gourds used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

The main GBC selling point was that members of the club got a bargain, receiving rebadged 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. Gourlay-Thomas, 1960) and *Compost 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 when 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). Greenhouse gardening was covered in various ways and there were a few titles on vegetables, such as Reuben Dorey's quirkily titled *Tomato Growing by Prescription* (1960) and John Organ on *Rare Vegetables* (1960), though there was little on fruit.

Authors included the biggest names of their day in garden writing, 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 Foyle wrote to the 3,000 members sternly warning them that prices had to increase



from 2s 6d per book to 3s 6d (before decimalisation in 1971, there were 20 shillings to the pound and 12 pence to the shilling) to which postage would be added. Subscriptions would 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 3s 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.

A free current title, such as the *Guinness Book of Records* and *Good Housekeeping's Children's Cook Book*, was offered to existing members who persuaded a friend to sign up.

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, as 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

tantalisingly anonymous, but could perhaps be identified by their unique styles. These artists are more obscure than the Bawdens, Freedmans and Ravilioues 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 Purposes* (1965). Arthur Hackney (1925–2010) illustrated Hadfield's seminal book *Pioneers in Gardening* (1956) with a dense green bosage 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 watercolourist, he became a lecturer at West Surrey College of Art in 1949, and later was Head of Printmaking and Deputy Head of Fine Arts.

Graham Stuart Thomas, as well as being a great plantsman and author, was also a talented botanical artist. He illustrated his own cover for *Colour in the Winter Garden* with customary botanical accuracy, to a degree unique in the series.

Other artists' signatures include Robert Dumont-Smith (*Modern Rhododendrons*, 1955), Marie Pashley (*The Book of the Garden Pond*, 1958; *The Cool Greenhouse*, 1959), Bunty Miller (*Tomato Growing by Prescription*, 1960), and



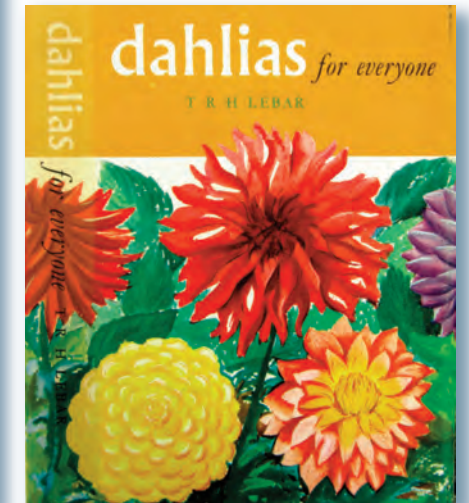
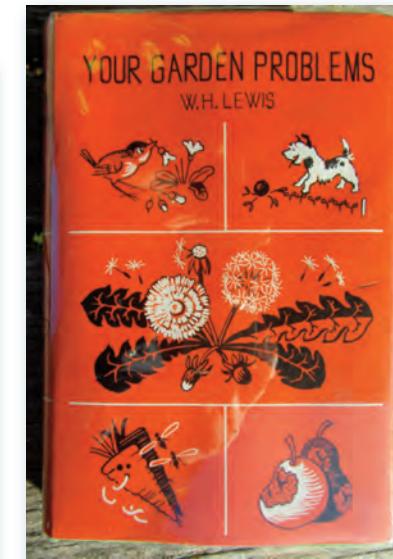
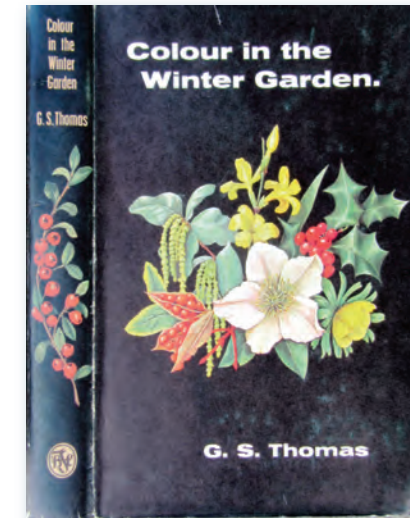
B. Willis, with at least four titles in 1959–60 including *Perennials for Trouble-Free Gardening* (1960). For *The Modern Greenhouse* (1955) the enigmatic 'CES' chose a gardener in baggy trousers, jumper and tie, tending and tying in his vines in a spacious lean-to. The artist of Mina Smith's *The Garden in Winter* (1966) produced a striking composition of white magnolia and red camellia flowers – the signature is tantalisingly unreadable on my copy.

Alongside the realistic artistry, a stylised approach spans the decades. These artists tend to be anonymous. *Flowers in Winter* (1948) by Patrick M. Synge has a spiky group of yellow-flowered bulbs inked onto a white and green ground; the multi-coloured *Colour Hedges* (1954) and *Hardy Heaths* (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 *Bulbs* (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 aubergine, 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 style of the time with *Town and Roof Gardens* (X. Field, 1967) and *Gardening in Window Boxes* (H.L.V. Fletcher, 1969). These contrast with the work of Elizabeth Sorrell who was still turning out her own romantic style of cover art into the 1970s. Her group of gourds for *Cool Greenhouse Plants* (K. Lemmon, 1967) contrasts with those wrapping around Organ's *Gourds* but is no less attractive.

Technical subjects received a more workaday and graphic treatment from



anonymous artists, with a tendency to drab colours: *Background to Gardening* has a varied selection of motifs on a dark-green ground, from Brussels sprout stalks to millipedes; 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 *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 primrose 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".

Sadly I never found anything to match the colourful and slightly abstract quality of the *Gourds* cover (I love it so much I have two copies) and the artist remains a mystery. I have found nothing else in similar style for GBC.

And I certainly have not read each book! But I am better educated 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 contact 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? 🌿

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