



# down in the city

In the run-down inner city area of Southwark there lies an oasis of Oriental charm. Richard Hill reports...

Is it a shower of rain?  
I thought as I listened.  
From my bed, just awake.  
But it was falling leaves  
which could not stand the wind.

In a city, the wind carries not only the falling leaves. It seems that every gust bears the wail of yet another emergency vehicle siren. Such are the sounds of the city; such are the sounds of Southwark in the heart of London. We found this inner-city oasis on the very day that Prime Minister Tony Blair announced the government regeneration plans for Southwark and other run-down city boroughs.

Residents in Southwark come from a multi-cultural background. In 1993, following a study of local opinion about the development of Burgess Park, Southwark Council found that there was universal hope for more ornamental areas in the park. It was proposed that a garden be cultivated which embodied elements reflecting the multi-cultural character of the neighbourhood. As a result, Chumleigh Multi-Cultural Gardens were born. The complex includes English, African, Islamic, Mediterranean and Oriental gardens.

The gardens are surrounded by Almshouses, originally built by the Friendly Female Society in 1821, and the gardens sit right at the core of Burgess Park, as far away as is possible from the traffic of Southwark City life.

Christine Wildhaber, Gardens and Education Officer



All photos supplied by the author

Loquat (Eriobotrya japonica)







Himalayan Honeysuckle (*Leycesteria formosa*)



Chinese Rice Paper (*Tetrapanax papyrifera*)

In charge of the garden is Christine Wildhaber, Gardens and Education Officer of the Parks Ranger Service of Southwark Council. "It's really been designed just to reflect the nature of Japanese Gardens," she says, "so we've got the rocks and water, to try and provide a sense of tranquillity."

"Most of the plants in the garden are either from Japan, China or Korea. A lot of them have come in from different plant collections at different times. They're quite easily adaptable to planting in English gardens. A lot of them are shrubs, so the interest is more from the foliage perspective or autumn colour."

Christine describes a number of the plantings within the garden, starting with the Loquat (*Eriobotrya japonica*). "It's used a lot in Japan for things like stewing and as a popular fruit. It's quite unusual in that it will fruit here and we've had people come and taste the fruit. It tastes nice, it's a sort of fleshy fruit that's not too acidic, just fairly sweetish, similar to possibly a plum."

The Loquat is an ancient fruit grown in Japan for the past 1,000 years. It is probably native to the cooler hill regions of China. The fruits are ovoid, with a thin orange-yellow skin. The flesh has a slightly acidic juice, and there are a few large, brown shiny seeds. They are delicious to eat fresh from the tree and can be frozen for later use but must be ripened on the tree for best flavour. They also make excellent jelly, jam, preserves and pies. In the correct climate it is estimated that a tree five years old may be expected to bear 100 lbs of fruit in a normal year.

Christine then introduced the Chinese Rice Paper

**The plants come from Japan, China or Korea**

(*Tetrapanax papyrifera*). "It's coppiced to keep it as a renewable resource," she explained. "It's fantastic, especially when it's young, because it's texturally good — felty and furry."

Although many of us are familiar with the term 'rice paper', the correct word for Japanese paper is *Washi*. It refers to all types of paper, including rice paper, which is a delicate material made from the pith of the *Tetrapanax papyrifera*. The pith is cut into a thin layer of ivory-like texture by means of a sharp knife. Another plant that is used for papermaking is the Paper Mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*). "It's been used for making paper in Japan and China for probably over a thousand years," says Christine, "I think some people are quite surprised that it's so easy to grow and it's so unusual."

The fibres of the *Broussonetia papyrifera* are slender, long, soft and strong. They are intertwined during the papermaking process to produce a sheet that is durable and tough yet possesses a warm, soft texture. The paper is still used for various purposes including industrial arts, calligraphy, cultural treasures, painting and printmaking.

Another interesting resident in the garden is the Chinese Persimmon (*Kaki*). In oriental homes, fruit from the Persimmon tree are peeled, strung or skewered, then hung to dry. Dried fruit are sweet and delicious with the sugar often crystallised on the fruit surface, making the product white and attractive. The dried peel is used as a dyeing agent.

This is yet another garden not designed in the true sense of the traditional style, but it certainly plays an important part in reflecting the cultural diversity and values of our ►





community. For Christine, the analogy is quite simple; "It's really just finding the equivalents to our staple foods like apples or pears. It's about people being aware of other cultures. We've all got the same basic needs like food and shelter."

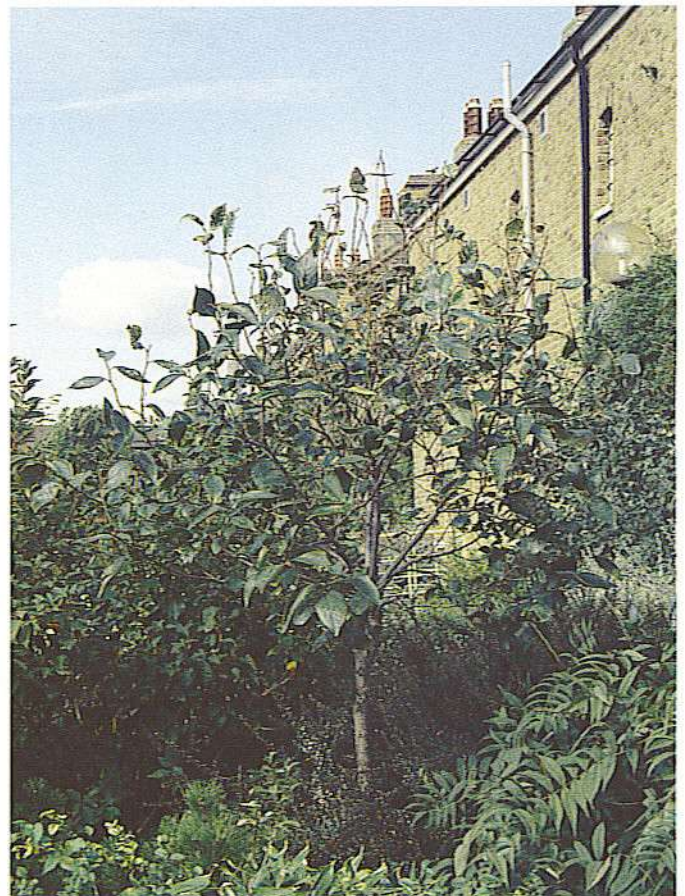
The diversity extends to the visitors too, as Christine explained; "We've got schools that come and visit, people from around local estates, and we get quite a few international visitors as well. Sometimes local people bring friends. It's quite a range of people. We open the garden once a year as part of the National Garden Scheme and I think that's drawn a lot of different sort of people. We charge an entrance on that day, which goes to charity."

Gardens are a vital ingredient in the heart of any city. It is exiting to see such a thriving and thrilling gardening experience that essentially grew out of the needs of a community and its council. A visit is highly recommended.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

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The author would like to thank Christine Wildhaber  
and Simon Hawthorn for their assistance in  
researching this article.



Paper Mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*)

Fountain showing Paper Mulberry in background



View of the Oriental garden with flats in background







The pool in the Oriental garden at Chumleigh



