

Factsheet

The Tender Exotics Collection at Hampton Court Palace

- When William III and Mary II became joint monarchs in 1689, they brought to the English Court a passion for collecting and for displaying collections - from porcelain and rare birds to tender exotic plants. Queen Mary II in particular loved plants from all over world and exotics from the Mediterranean, Virginia, Mauritius and the New World, were brought to Britain by the Dutch East India Company and displayed at Hampton Court Palace.
- Mary II selected an area in the South Gardens, the warmest part of the gardens and formally Henry VIII's pond yard, to set out her collection. A specialist Dutch carpenter, Heindrik Floris, built three glass houses or 'stove houses', believed to be amongst the earliest forms of greenhouse used in England. Henry VIII's stew ponds were landscaped, drained and terraced in order to display the exotics during the summer months.
- Mary's collection comprised 2000 different species and was so vast that she employed her own botanist, Dr Leonard Plukenet, to look after them. Dr Plukenet detailed, catalogued and maintained the exotics. At this point, the collection was one of the largest private collections of tender exotic plants in the world. It contained 1000 orange trees – a symbol of the House of Orange dynasty, to which William III belonged.
- Upon Mary II's death in 1694, William III removed the glass houses and ordered Christopher Wren to construct the Lower Orangery in 1701-2. It was used later to house an art collection, Andrea Mantegna's Triumphs of Caesar, which can still be seen here today.
- Following William III's death in 1702, the collection was maintained throughout the reigns of Queen Anne and the Georgian monarchs. By the time of George III in 1760, the collection of exotics was deemed unfashionable. Remnants of the collection survived however and there is evidence of orange trees being displayed at Hampton Court Palace into the early 20th century.

- The collection died out during the First World War, as the war effort and lack of manpower meant relevant care and attention was not available.
- The re-introduction of tender exotics was inspired by the restoration of the Privy Garden in 1995. Exotics would have been a key element of this particular layout and, since 1987, the Gardens and Estate team, have collected exotic plants through partnerships, both with local nurseries and British and European suppliers.
- Visitors to Hampton Court Palace between June and September can now see the exotics, which include orange trees from the citrus collection, along with aloes, agaves and lanternas, displayed in the Privy Garden as they would have been in the early 18th century.