'GREENFINGERS' - UNCONVENTIONAL INSIGHT INTO THE ENGLISH HORTICULTURAL PHRASEOLOGY

"GREENFINGERS" - O PRIVIRE NECONVENTIONALA ASUPRA VOCABULARULUI ENGLEZ HORTICOL

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Abstract. *A passion for more than five hundred years, gardening has totally and definitively subjugated the British spirit that has it currently encoded in its DNA core structure. It is but natural for the English linguistic heritage to enrich its patrimony with words and phrases that reflect the very intense relationship between gardener and plants, a unique bondage that casts a peculiar light on a life-to-life basis. The paper presents some of the most frequently used, witty, neatly-phrased and most special words and expressions that cast spots of colour on the horticultural linguistic canvas.*

Rezumat. *O pasiune de mai bine de cincisute de ani, gradinaritul a subjugat total si definitiv sufletul britanic, de altfel de neconceput fara aceasta componenta a sa. Era, astfel, firesc ca si spatiul lingvistic sa inceapa sa creeze si sa gazduiasca expresii idiomatice care sa surprinda relatia atat de speciala dintre gradinar si obiectul adoratiei sale, si acesta este firul pe care se organizeaza lucrarea noastra, in incercarea de a prezenta cele mai recurente, inspirate si sugestive expresii pe care limba engleza le-a dedicat exclusiv lumii horticole.*

Britain has some of the most beautiful gardens of the world alluring visitors into an enchanted realm of colour, perfume and craftsmanship. Down through the centuries, inspired plantsmen and designers have taken advantage of the temperate climate of the island to create a unique and amazing variety of gardens -from grand landscaped parks and woodlands, to intimate rose gardens and small, flowery cottage gardens. Be them large or small, open or walled, public or secluded, most British gardens are filled with scented and shapely roses, which, at their best in high summer, will majestically stand out. Gardening has a special bond with architecture, and it is but natural to witness symbiosis between the two. Thus, we talk of *green roof* also known as *eco roof* or *living roof.* A green roof is a wild garden of grasses and herbs planted on a suitable surface, usually on an urban house. It traps rainfall and releases it slowly, so it helps to prevent the flooding that can happen after a storm in a built-up area. But its principal virtue is that it is a haven for wildlife, especially beetles and spiders. In turn these provide food for birds — for instance, the black redstart has been encouraged to nest in one part of London as a result of green-roof construction. A recent survey for English Nature found over a hundred species of bugs, some of them rare, in a

mixture not found in nature. Strange as it may seem, it is man's creation now that offers a hand to God's work in its attempt to preserve and foster it.

British gardens are treasure-troves of jewel-like roses and herbaceous plant gems brought by explorers who roamed the world to find new plants to enrich the botanical heritage of their gardens. The 'green' world has undoubtedly left its marks in what the biological patrimony is concerned but it has also, how else, permeated the linguistic area as well, touching it with the delicacy and expressiveness for which it stands for.

When it comes to gardeners, and gardening skills, one may refer to the exquisite skills required by anyone who indulges into such a pastime of profession with the phrase 'to have green fingers' or 'to have a green thumb', recorded for the first time as a title in 1934, as an old expression which describes the art of communicating the subtle energies of love to prosper a living plant. '*Some men have green fingers. Plants like them. They can make things grow because they love them*', states an article appeared in the Nature magazine on the 28th of December 1946.

Even if this is by far the best known and used phrase that refers to someone's very special skills and 'communication' abilities with the plant kingdom, there are other idiomatic expressions that owe their existence to the semantic core of a horticultural-based lexical register. Most of these idioms fit the following structural pattern – ***Verb*** + ***Adjective/Article/Preposition*** + ***Noun*** and manage to plastically capture the plasma of the linguistic matter, touching it with either the colour, or the suggestiveness of the 'natural' ingredient that appears in it.

Gild the lily – is an idiomatic phrase whose meaning is 'to apply unnecessary ornament', namely 'to over embellish', a very compelling image, since lilies are so delicate and lovely that gilding them would be not only a redundant act, but also one that could jeopardise the exquisite beauty of the flower. Its origin goes way back in time, in 1595, to Shakespeare's *King John*:

'Therefore, to be possess'd with double pomp, / To guard a title that was rich before, / *To gild refined gold, to paint the lily*, / To throw a perfume on the violet, / To smooth the ice, or add another hue / Unto the rainbow, or with taper-light / To seek the beauteous eye of heaven to garnish, / Is wasteful and ridiculous excess.'

One may rightfully note that *gild the lily* is not at all the correct quotation, but, unfortunately, remembering lines from Shakespeare isn't everyone's forte and this account for the alteration of the text. The term *paint the lily* was used in the 20th century, with the same meaning we now apply to *gild the lily*, which, clearly, is the correct quotation. The two versions coexisted for a time, although *paint the lily* is now hardly ever used. The first reference to *gild the lily* comes from the USA, in the Newark Daily Advocate, 1895, in what appears to be a half-remembered version of Shakespeare: '*One may **gild the lily** and paint the rose, but to convey by words only an adequate idea of the hats and bonnets now exhibited absolutely passes human ability*.'

Used mainly as a typical spatial delineating technique, laying its mark on the British garden architectural style, the hedge has also inspired the creation of an idiom, ***Hedge your bets,*** whose meaning is 'to avoid committing oneself; to leave a means of retreat open'. 'Hedge' has been used as a verb in English since at least the 16th century, with the meaning of 'equivocate; avoid commitment', value that is perfectly illustrated by one of Shakespeare's most appreciated comedies, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*: 'I, I, I my selfe sometimes, leauing the feare of heauen on the left hand... am faine to shuffle: ***to hedge***, and to lurch.'(1598)

It has been speculated that the verb 'to hedge' derives from the noun hedge, which was normally made from the impenetrable spiny tree hawthorn. The theory goes that to hedge a piece of land was a cautious, safety-first act and that this gave rise to the 'secure, non-committed' meaning. 'Hedging one's bets' was coined later in that century. It referred to the laying off of a bet by taking out smaller bets with other lenders. The purpose of this was to avoid being unable to pay out on the original larger bet. George Villiers, the second Duke of Buckingham, in his satirical play *The Rehearsal*, first used the phrase: 'Now, Criticks, do your worst, that here are met; For, like a Rook, I have ***hedg'd in my Bet.***' (1672)

A distinct story comes with the ***Know your onions*** idiom, whose origin (debatable as it may be), apparently lies not in the common noun, as one may suspect, but in the common noun that transferred itself into the category of the proper nouns, for here we talk about *Onions* (surname), and not of *onions* as mere common noun. In itself, the idiom means 'to be experienced in or knowledgeable about a subject'. The English grammarian and lexicographer Charles Talbut Onions (1873-1965) was an editor of the Oxford English Dictionary from 1895 and continued to write reference works throughout a long and distinguished career, that reached its peak with The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology (1966), published a year after his death. While it is true that 'know your onions' was coined at a time when C. T. Onions had established a reputation (i.e. during the 1920s), the match between the phrase and his name is just a coincidence. 'Know your onions' is in fact an American phrase, with many references in print from the 1920s onward, but none in the United Kingdom or elsewhere until the middle of the century.

Laid out in lavender is one of the most 'scented idioms' of the English language that bursts in any context it may appear with the delicate but persistent fragrance of one of Britain's most delicate flowers, in fact one of the horticultural icons of the island. Although its meaning is far from conveying a positive connotation ('preparing for burial'), this does not affect the olfactory dimension entangled. The allusion is clearly to the practice of strewing lavender or other strong smelling herbs near dead bodies to mask their smell. The term was preceded by the much earlier phrase 'laid up in lavender'. This refers to the storage of clothes with lavender to keep them fresh and free from insect damage - a precursor to mothballs. The practise was referred to in Robert Greene's, *A Quip for an Upstart Courtier*, 1592. The phrase was first printed in *A New Dictionary*

Of The Terms Ancient And Modern Of The Canting Crew, 1690: '***Layd-up-in Lavender***, when any Cloaths or other Moveables are pawn'd or dipt for present Money.'

Another pattern that may describe mould for almost all English similes that act as comparatives of equality is ***As + Adjective + As + (Determiner) + Noun***.

As cool as a cucumber means 'calm, unruffled', connotation originated by the fact that cucumbers are cool to the touch. This simile was first recorded in John Gay's poems, *New Song on New Similies*, 1732: 'I ... ***cool as a cucumber*** could see the rest of womankind.'

As alike as two peas in a pod is an idiomatic phrase that, suggestively enough, refers to two identical items or people. This simile, of course, derives from the fact that two peas from the same pod are virtually indistinguishable. The phrase, which is sometimes given as 'like as two peas', is quite old and versions of it date from the 16th century. John Lyly, for instance, used the phrase in *Euphues and his England*: 'Wherin I am not unlike unto the unskilfull Painter, who having drawen the Twinnes of Hippocrates, (who wer ***as lyke as one pease*** is to an other).' (1580). Lyly's use of 'pease' as the singular form was the norm in Tudor England. The word 'pea' came into use as the singular in the 17th century, with 'peas' as its plural form; this avoided 'peases', while the transition left 'pease' out in the cold and nowadays people hardly use that form, except in the name of the dish of dried peas, cooked to a mush - 'pease pudding'. The pudding is itself now becoming less common as 'mushy peas' have largely superseded it, which is basically the same thing. Once that process is complete, 'pease' will be gone from the everyday language.

If we have started our virtual journey through the world of those idioms that enjoy life from a double perspective, one of the words themselves, as the other one coming from the 'biological' dimension intimately interwoven with the lexical content with a quotation from William Shakespeare, let us end it in the same way. May all our lives be like a ***primrose path***, may it be joyful, colourful and rewarding. Used by the Great Will in both Hamlet and Macbeth, this idiom is simply a vivid allusion to a path strewn with flowers:

'I shall the effect of this good lesson keep,
As watchman to my heart. But, good my brother,
Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven;
Whiles, like a puff'd and reckless libertine,
Himself ***the primrose path*** of dalliance treads,
And recks not his own rede.' (Ophelia, *Hamlet*, 1603)

REFERENCES

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2. *** - *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Academic Edition.