In a moving essay entitled ‘In search of our mothers’ gardens’, Alice Walker describes the garden as a space that offered black women an opportunity to express their creativity. Writing of her own mother, she says:

Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms - sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena - and on and on. 
... I notice it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible - except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in the work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of beauty.1

For this disadvantaged black woman, the garden alone offered a place where she could transcend the restrictions of her social position. As her daughter notes, it was only when her mother was working in her garden that she was able to assume the power of the male deity, ordering the universe to her own desire. At the same time, she retained the role traditionally accorded to women as nurturer of her plants. Working with ‘hand and eye’, she embodied both the role of observer and of participant, fusing and confusing normative gender roles to create a more liberating space for herself and thereby acted as an inspiration to her daughter, who discovered that ‘in search of my mother’s garden, I found my own’.2

Reading Alice Walker’s essay made me question whether gardens, as transitional spaces between the natural world associated with women and
domesticity and the cultural world dominated by men, provided for some women a space where they have been able to achieve a blurring of stereotypical gender roles. The question of how particular spaces define and reveal social relationships has become a consideration for historians relatively recently. The inaugural studies of maritime and rural spaces undertaken by *Annales* historians Marc Bloch and Fernand Braudel have influenced other historians such as Michel Foucault, to rethink the interconnections between time and space.³ To Foucault’s mind, historians have been preoccupied since Kant with a problematic of time, with a correlative devaluation of space:

A whole history remains to be written of spaces - which would at the same time be the history of powers (both these terms in the plural) - from the great strategies of geo-politics to the little tactics of the habitat ...⁴

A study of the methods of controlling particular spaces by techniques of surveillance, including internalised techniques of self-control, formed an important part of Foucault’s writings. The control of sexuality was a central issue, but the body under surveillance was the male body, masquerading as a neutral body: Foucault rarely differentiated between the female body and the male body.⁵ We cannot presume that these techniques operate in the same way for male bodies as they do for female bodies. Investigating the specific regimes of power that operate to control female bodies in Western societies and the spaces they occupy, as well as the ways in which these regimes have been resisted, offers the opportunity of reclaiming spaces for women that have previously been defined by men.

It is within this context of investigating the possible differing ways in which a space such as a garden could be occupied that I want to examine the lives of three women for whom the garden was a site of significance: Gertrude Jekyll, Edna Walling and Vita Sackville-West. These three women have in common an English country childhood but their social circumstances differ. Jekyll and Walling became garden designers, the former in Britain and the latter in Australia a generation later. Sackville-West was a contemporary of Walling, but her privileged social position allowed her to garden on a grand scale, as an expression of her creativity, rather than as a profession.

Before expanding upon these women’s biographies in detail in order to show how they used the space of the garden to assume privileges normally confined to men, it would be useful to trace briefly some developments in notions of landscape and the changing meanings of gardens. A starting point might be to ask why women’s gardening activities disappear from the history of gardens during the eighteenth century. Historical records exist of women gardening, growing herbs and cultivating kitchen gardens in medieval and early modern England, but the famous landscape gardeners of the eighteenth century were all male.⁶ It was not that women ceased gardening during this period, although changing standards of acceptable
female behaviour imposed restrictions, but rather that the meaning of the
garden became endowed with more significance as an asset that reflected
social position.7

Noted landscape gardeners William Kent, Charles Bridgeman, John
Vanburgh and Lancelot (Capability) Brown designed landscape parks that
reflected the wealth and power of an eighteenth-century aristocratic
masculinity that was anxious to display the power it held in both the private
and public spheres.8 This was a secular power that celebrated the Whig
ascendancy, and whose gentry and wealthy merchants considered property
as their central concern.9 Landscape parks, created to enhance their
residences, manifested their confidence that their endeavors would benefit
future generations of male heirs who would enjoy the full beauty of the
mature landscape.10 Women were not expected to participate in this scene,
other than in a decorative role, as Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of
Newcastle wrote in the late-seventeenth-century:

Daughters are but branches which by marriage are
broken off from the root and engrafted into the stock
of another family, so that daughters are to be
accounted but as movable goods or furniture that
wear out.11

Daughters were destined for another man’s garden, and had no incentive
to plant their own.

On the rare occasions when women were able to live independently,
ythey were capable of creating gardens that reflected their own style. One
example was two Irish women, Sarah Ponsonby and Eleanor Butler, who
chose to ‘elope’ together in 1778 and live a life of seclusion in a Welsh valley.
The ‘Ladies of Llangollen’ as they were known, were famed for their
garden.12 From two and a half acres of ‘turnip ground’ the two women
created a picturesque garden, ‘a fairy palace amid the bowers of Calypso’,
of a style much more akin to the wild gardens Gertrude Jekyll was to create
a hundred years later than the prevailing style of formal landscape design.13
Along with their garden, they managed a small estate with dairy cows and
vegetables to help ensure their continuing independence.14 Their lifestyle
attracted a great deal of attention, making them ‘the most celebrated virgins
in Europe’ in the words of Prince Puckler, Muskau of Silesia, himself a
gardener.15 They were proof that, given control of their lands and an
independent income, women were enthusiastic gardeners equally capable
of designing innovative garden plans, if on a somewhat reduced scale. Or
perhaps the Ladies of Llangollen were just ahead of their time. In their
lifestyle, with its desire for rural seclusion, they were rejecting a society
that was rapidly transforming to an industrialised society, in which men’s
and women’s lives were increasingly regulated in new ways that complied
with the demands of mechanisation. In their wild, but carefully planned
and cultivated garden, set in a rugged Welsh valley, the Ladies’ setting
contained all the qualities that would be held desirable by the romantics of
the nineteenth century.
The changing iconology of landscape was indicative of the struggle to redefine the value of land during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Britain was transforming itself into a capitalist society. Land ceased to be the principle indicator of social status and became just one of many commodities of exchange. To the romantics who were attempting to interpret these changes aesthetically, landscape retained a central significance. Romanticism idealised nature as a symbol of the ‘natural’ moral order that was being corrupted by the new economic order. Wild landscapes were particularly esteemed because they represented the divine nature of a Nature that had not been appropriated by men.

At the same time, nature was being subjected to the close scrutiny of positivist Victorian science, desirous of penetrating all her secrets. This new scientific knowledge could be put to use designing gardens for the suburban homes of the expanding middle class. These more confined spaces required a precise knowledge of horticulture and botany. The resultant style, which was termed ‘gardenesque’, crowded together a large number of species, including exotics. It was replicated in public parks, where the luxurious growth that arose from the clumping together of many species obscured the topography of the landscape, a distinct change from the manicured lawns and carefully constructed contours of the landscape park. Rather than the desire displayed by eighteenth century landscapers to control land, the new style showed a desire to control the very process of nature. The prime example was the Victorian conservatory, which maintained exotic species in an artificial environment in which land was irrelevant.

It is not surprising that the paradoxical responses of worship and control with which the romantics regarded nature, reflected contemporary masculine attitudes to women. Modern Western philosophical thought, at least since the Enlightenment, has been structured around a series of dichotomies: male/female, mind/body, reason/passion, culture/nature, that have privileged the masculine and devalued the feminine. Women were associated with nature because of their reproductive capabilities, and their roles as wives and mothers were regarded as naturalised. In the new political order as defined by Rousseau in the Social Contract, women were denied a political role. Rousseau constructed women as passionate, as opposed to rational, and therefore requiring constraint within the private sphere. This segregation of middle-class women denied them access to knowledge highly valued in the public realm, and the power associated with that knowledge. In order to gain access to that knowledge and power, women had to challenge male control over spaces that reinforced their segregation and its concomitant lack of status. Women could not simply occupy a space formerly denied to them but had to participate in the knowledge generated by that space. Thus, Victorian women who were encouraged to undertake light gardening activities as a means of healthy exercise were not challenging the status quo, whereas those who used the garden as a space that offered them access to status previously denied them were able to subvert male authority, albeit in subtle ways.

Gertrude Jekyll, as a daughter of an upper middle-class family, was to experience the tensions between aesthetic standards and societal
expectations of women in her own life. Born in 1843, she was educated at the family home in Surrey and spent hours exploring the gardens. Jekyll was fortunate that her parents encouraged her interest in art so that she became one of the first female students at the School of Art in South Kensington in 1861, and was there exposed to the influence of William Morris and John Ruskin. In the manner of the Arts and Crafts movement that these men initiated, Jekyll expanded her talent at drawing to include ‘carving, modelling, house-painting, carpentry, smith’s work, repousse work, gilding, wood-inlaying, embroidery, gardening and all manner of herb and flower knowledge and culture’. 24 However, Jekyll’s name is not associated with these founders of the Arts and Crafts movement because she had to contend with the constraints of being both a woman and an amateur. As a woman, Jekyll was expected to pursue her art as a pastime; a useful means of passing time not required for domestic duties. As a ‘lady’ of independent means, she would never be taken seriously by those for whom art meant earning a living. 25 For example, Lord Leighton wrote to Jekyll’s cousin some time in 1870:

I have seen today in the galleries of the International some embroideries on linen and serge by Miss Jekyll of such remarkable merit in point of colour and arrangement that I cannot refrain from writing to ask you more about them. I should add that one of them, a design with scrolls of fishes, is so good as decorative invention, that I hesitate to attribute it to an amateur and presume it must have been borrowed. 26

Jekyll’s talents were also constrained by myopia, which grew worse as she aged and made fine work increasingly difficult to undertake. These frustrations turned her to gardening, where she could work on a larger scale the intricate patterns and close attention to colour that had enhanced her needlework and metalwork.

The record of her gardens and her productive partnership with architect Edwin Lutyens has been well documented, supplemented by photographs and plans of her gardens. 27 A description that does not include this visual element does them an injustice. Rather, I would concentrate on the way in which the garden allowed her a space to achieve what she could not achieve elsewhere: the acclaim and financial rewards that were denied her as an amateur female artist. Her authority in her area of specialisation enabled her to reach a wide audience through her contributions to The Garden magazine and the books she wrote, alone and with William Robinson, acerbic critic of the prevailing style of Victorian gardening obsessed with monkey puzzle trees and hothouses. 28 Jekyll’s style of gardening combined knowledge of plants with an artist’s eye for colour. Her plantings took account of the colour, height and texture of the individual plants and their times of flowering, so that their grouping would always present an interesting and harmonious effect. Her approach favoured naturalistic garden design and it has not dated because it was adaptable to whatever scale the garden in question required. 29
Many elements of Jekyll’s style of gardening are echoed in the work of Edna Walling, although they never met. Walling was also influenced by her childhood in rural England and remembered long walks on the moors, where she admired the dry-stone walls and low growing plants that she was later to use with such effect. Emigrating to Australia in 1912, Walling enrolled in the Burnley Horticultural College in 1916. A photograph of the students reveals that of the seventeen, twelve were women. This is not unusual, given that it was wartime; what was unusual was that Walling was able to continue her interest in both designing and planting gardens as a profession, which allowed her a freedom of dress and lifestyle that was atypical of the times.

It was the design, the structural features of the garden that most attracted Walling. She liked to be able to advise how a house should be placed in order to gain the best advantage from the site and then design a garden that complemented the house so that the overall effect was harmonious. The best example was her own house, which she built herself on several acres at Mooroolbark, outside Melbourne:

In blissful ignorance I commenced to build myself a house. It did not even occur to me that I knew nothing about it. My father was a most practical man, but he did not remark that I was embarking upon something about which one needs a little experience, to say the least; neither did he remind me I had no money.

Walling called her cottage ‘Sonning’ after a village she remembered on the river Thames, without being aware perhaps that Sonning was the site of what is regarded the most successful partnership of Jekyll and Luytens: the Deanery in Sonning, built for Edward Hudson, proprietor of Country Life, in 1901. Not content with just building her own cottage, Walling purchased another eighteen acres next to her and subdivided it, only selling to people on the condition that their houses would be in harmony with hers, and that she could design their gardens. Walling wanted to demonstrate that it was possible, both economically and practically, to build imaginatively designed houses. In her planned development of Bickleigh Vale, Walling created a garden suburb on a small scale more successfully than attempts by architects like Walter Burley Griffiths at Castlecrag.

As well as designing gardens, Walling wrote regular articles for Australia Home Beautiful from 1926 to 1934 and several books, thus passing on her gardening philosophy to a wide audience. As she grew older, she became increasingly interested in Australian native plants, using them in her designs, and she became a keen supporter of conservation. She wrote a book entitled The Australian Roadside in 1951, pleading the case for conservation of native plants along the margins of country roads. Walling was also an enthusiastic photographer and her photographs illustrate several of her books, including Edna Walling’s Year: Ideas and Images from all Seasons. Walling’s photography is also featured in Australian Women Photographers 1840-1960 and a self-portrait of Walling figures on the cover.
Walling was an unconventional figure in her jodhpurs and jacket, and friends report that her male clients and their gardeners were unsure of how to react to her. Her assistants were usually women although she had a long working association with Eric Hammond and Ellis Stone, who both did construction work for her commissions. Walling’s style of gardening, like Jekyll, was naturalistic, combining aesthetic appreciation with scientific knowledge to produce a garden that resembled nature. Encouraging the readers of her gardening column to be a little less rigid in their approach to planting, she queried ‘have you ever noticed how a garden that needs very little attention is often so much more charming and restful than one in which much labour is expended in its upkeep’.40

Gardening was not Walling’s first love, but the garden gave her scope to indulge her love of designing and building the structural features, which then could be softened by her planting. It gave her a profession and financial independence, and a reason to be out of doors, where she was happiest. Few other spaces could have offered such freedom at a time when the role of women was interpreted narrowly. As recent research shows, even women who inherited farms in Australia during this period and managed them themselves, faced hostility and denigration from men around them.41 The garden gave Walling a space where she could put to use her considerable talents to achieve recognition in roles that were usually reserved for men in Australia during the 1920s and 1930s.

Unlike Edna Walling or Gertrude Jekyll, Vita Sackville-West did not use the garden as a space whereby she could access the status normally accorded to men. Her social position gave her considerable social status in her own right. Instead, the garden offered Sackville-West a space where she felt free to celebrate the values of beauty and passion in a manner frowned upon by society in general. Sackville-West’s private vision has, nevertheless, caught the imagination of succeeding generations of English gardeners and romantics, and her garden has been a source of inspiration to its visitors, to the extent that it has been maintained after her death by the National Trust and is the most visited garden in the United Kingdom.

Born into an aristocratic family, Sackville-West was unable to inherit her beloved family home, ‘Knole’ because a court case regarding the Sackville inheritance entailed ‘Knole’ away from her: it was only to belong to male members of the family.42 Perhaps the loss of ‘Knole’ underlay her desire to create a garden of her own. First at ‘Long Barn’, then more ambitiously at ‘Sissinghurst Castle’, which was in a state of ruin when she bought it in 1930, she created gardens of great beauty.

Sackville-West’s garden at ‘Sissinghurst’ was planned in conjunction with her husband, Harold Nicholson. Their unusual marriage, which was based on trust and affection that allowed each of them to have affairs with partners of the same sex, was revealed in Portrait of a Marriage, based on her diary, with commentary from her son.43 Nigel Nicholson writes:

One day perhaps a book may be written about the making of the garden at Sissinghurst, and it could well bear the same title as this book, for the garden is
a portrait of their marriage. Harold made the design, Vita did the planting.\textsuperscript{44}

The division of roles was never as clear cut as that, however, with Sackville-West claiming the credit for the courtyard, the Rondel rose garden and the orchard, and Nicholson the Lime Walk, the Nuttery and the Yew Walk.\textsuperscript{45}

The garden was a shared obsession which combined her romanticism with his more classical taste, but it was overwhelmingly Sackville-West’s place. The garden offered Sackville-West a space where she felt free of constraints that circumscribed acceptable standards of sexual behaviour in wider society. Sackville-West remained in residence at ‘Sissinghurst’ year round and entertained her friends there, while Nicholson commuted from London on week-ends.

Sackville-West, like Jekyll, found that gardening absorbed her creative talents in her later years, after early success as a novelist and poet. In 1946, Sackville-West began writing her weekly gardening column in the Observer. The garden at ‘Sissinghurst’ also attracted an ever increasing stream of visitors, whose entry fees helped finance the upkeep which was a constant drain on her finances. It is ironic that Sackville-West is remembered now more for her writing on gardening and for her garden by the bedint,\textsuperscript{46} as she condescendingly called the middle-class visitors who came to admire her garden, than she is for her fiction, on which she placed a higher value. The garden became her blank page, on which this creative woman could inscribe her personality, for although she was highly privileged, Sackville-West was still stifled by the social and sexual mores of her time.

The limitations placed on middle-class women by societal expectations during the Victorian era and beyond, provoked many responses from women themselves. Some responses were more overt, such as the political movement to gain the vote or campaigns by women to ensure access to education and health care. Other struggles were more private: individual women seeking to fulfil their potential in roles beyond the narrow ones prescribed for them by the customs of the time. Each of these struggles helped to re-define the spaces that women could occupy, and encouraged greater acceptance of the range of roles available to women and to men. Virginia Woolf, Sackville-West’s most famous lover, once wrote that in order to be creative, women needed to be financially independent and have a room of one’s own. Sackville-West would have agreed with the sentiment, but she, along with Walling and Jekyll might well have suggested that a garden of one’s own would do just as well.

\textbf{Notes}

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textit{Ibid.}, p.243.
\item Michel Foucault, ‘The Eye of Power’ in Colin Gordon (ed.), \textit{Power/Knowledge; Selected Interviews}
\end{enumerate}
4 Ibid., pp.149-50.
8 Ibid., p.472.
10 Groag Bell, p.473.
11 Margaret Cavendish, quoted in ibid., p.473.
13 A description by Anna Seward in a letter she wrote in 1795, quoted in ibid., p.104.
14 Ibid., p.132.
15 Ibid., p.140.
16 Cosgrove, p.236.
17 Ibid., p.232.
18 Ibid., p.235.
19 Ibid., p.236
20 Ibid., p.236.
22 Ibid., p.21.
23 Gender segregation may be less evident in working class society when both sexes have limited access to resources. See, for example, Daphne Spain, Gendered Spaces, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1992, p.234.
25 Ibid., p.23.
26 Ibid., p.24.
28 Bisgrove, p.12.
29 Ibid., p.19.
30 Peter Watts, Edna Walling and her Gardens, Balmain, Florilegium, 1991, p.17.
31 Ibid., p.21.
32 Edna Walling, quoted in ibid, p.22.
33 Bisgrove, p.16.
34 Watts, pp.25-30.
36 Trisha Dixon and Jennie Churchill, Gardens in Time: In the footsteps of Edna Walling, North Ryde, Angus and Robertson, 1988, p.4.
37 South Yarra, Anne O’Donovan, 1990.
38 Barbara Hall and Jenni Mather (eds), Melbourne, Gennhouse Publications, 1986.
39 Joan Law-Smith, in Watts, p.9.
42 Brown, The English Garden in our Time, p.137.
44 Ibid., p.203.