

Architectural & Garden Antiques:

The Joy of Old Iron

By Roland Head

One of the best things about furnishing your home with antiques is the way that older items can bring out the character in a property, and very often have a story of their own to tell. It's the same story outside your home - while standard issue new garden furniture from your local DIY store will do the job, it lacks character, and is often surprisingly expensive, and ill-suited to a life outdoors. It's far better, in my view, to invest a little extra time and effort in finding older pieces that will give your garden the kind of careworn, homely and personal feel that only a hand-picked selection of antique objects can provide. This article will form the first part of a series looking at architectural and garden antiques. I'm going to start with a look at objects made from one of the most tactile, durable and adaptable of materials, iron.

In the garden

The most obvious choices are cast or wrought iron tables, chairs and garden benches. Tables may be completely made from iron, or may be topped with varnished hardwood, or even marble, a luxury and durable touch that gives an authentic café feel. Although the weight of iron furniture can make it difficult to move compared to modern lightweight alloy furniture, this weight also means that iron furniture stays where it's put, and doesn't fall over or get blown around when it's windy. This makes it far more practical for permanent outdoor use, and less prone to accidental damage. Other iron ware, such as rose arches, bird baths and water pumps, can all add function and character to a garden, and can often be picked up at auction surprisingly cheaply. One of the simplest and most useful antique iron items you'll find is a Victorian boot scraper. Of either cast iron or wrought iron, these usually have heavy bases, and are virtually indestructible.

A slightly more ambitious choice is antique lighting. Wall-mounted lamps and even lamp posts can work well in gardens and as external lighting for your driveway, path or patio. I once bought a rusty old wall-mounted lamp with a pane of glass missing at Wetherby antiques fair, for just a few pounds. Having rubbed it down, painted it with black Hammerite, and cut a new pane of glass, I wired it up with a new light fitting, and it has now provided several years' trouble-free service on the outside of my father-in-law's conservatory. A well placed antique iron lamp in your garden could be a terrific feature, and if you are willing to do the restoration work or at least the rubbing down and painting, then the cost may be quite modest.

Town houses too

Architectural ironwork isn't just for country gardens, either. One of the features that gives cities such as Cambridge, Oxford and York their appealing historic character is the rich selection of well-preserved original ironwork they contain in the form of bridges, railings, gates and sometimes lamp posts. Authentic period gates come in shapes and sizes that will suit most properties, from wide country field gates to ornate Victorian pedestrian gates. Adding such a gate to your property can look fantastic, and is not necessarily more expensive than buying new, especially if a new gate would have to be made to order.

Restoration and maintenance tips

Iron is very durable if it has been regularly painted throughout its life and is not already damaged, and should generally only need repainting occasionally to ensure it remains in good, usable condition. Surface rust is not a big problem, as long as you are willing to apply elbow grease to remove it, but unless you happen to know a skilled blacksmith or metalworker, it is probably easier to avoid buying items with structural damage; it is far easier to buy in a condition that you can use, or which only requires straightforward tasks such as rubbing down and repainting.

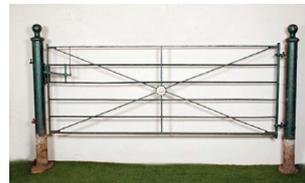
Although the biggest safety risk with iron is probably its weight, there are a couple of other things to remember. Lead-based paint was widely used until the 1960s, and although the simplest way to make this safe is to paint over it, if you need to remove it, then health and safety advice is to use paint stripper to remove it, rather than rubbing it down, so that you don't create a lot of dust. If in doubt, get professional assistance; similarly, it goes without saying that you should have any electrical work checked by an electrician if you are not suitably experienced, especially if it is to be used outdoors.



This selection of pumps and pump handles sold for just £36 at auction in October last year, but could make a fantastic addition to a garden, especially alongside a water feature or pond.



This Victorian cast iron table base looks in good condition and wants only a table top to bring it back into use. Sold for £96 in October, it could be an affordable and rewarding project.



This 9ft Victorian six-bar field gate has a Yorkshire rose at the centre of its cross brace and came complete with gate posts. The £1,180 price suggests that it was in ready-to-use condition, too.



At the upper end of the market, this Victorian cast iron garden seat is in the Coalbrookdale Fern and Blackberry design, and has recently renewed hardwood slats on the seat. The buyer was happy to pay £1,003 for this restored and ready-to-use example.



A 6ft Victorian wrought iron garden bench with wooden slats and a comfortably-shaped scroll back, cost £319 at Hartleys in Ilkley last June, and barring the occasional lick of paint, should provide many more years' service.



This nineteenth century cast iron signal cannon might not deter intruders, but it would make an attractive feature for a nautically-themed property, and cost its buyers £212 when it was sold in 2011.



Items such as this cast iron Victorian grass roller are unlikely to be used in anger, but are highly decorative and add character and shape to a garden. They can also be used to train climbing plants. Sold for £106, this came from a well-known estate in the Peterborough area.