The Encyclopedia Britannica defines a gnome as a mythological spirit said to live underground and guard treasures hidden in the earth. So how did this creature of folklore come to be the rosy-cheeked denizen found in gardens across the world?

**Gnome, Sweet Gnome**

Small engraved statues of gnomes started to make an appearance in Germany and Austria in the 18th century. These later inspired diminutive porcelain figures of gnomes in England which were popular throughout the 19th century and featured in many Victorian-era homes as table decorations. Eventually these figures made their way into the garden as good luck charms for the house. Sir Charles Isham is credited with importing the first garden gnomes to his English estate in the 1840s.

The origins of the first ceramic garden gnome are unclear but many manufacturers in Germany became well known for their gnome designs. By the late 19th century there were over a dozen German manufacturers alone; of these, Griebel and Hiessner are still making gnomes today. Because gnomes held a strong association with Germany, they fell out of favor after World War I.

With the release of Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937, gnomes saw a rise in popularity once again. Once they started to be mass-produced in cheap plastic, however, they were marked as a low-class tchotchke and mostly found in over-the-top whimsy gardens.

Gnomes became wildly popular again in the late 1970s thanks to *The Secret Book of Gnomes* series (released in the U.S. by publishing exec Andrew Stewart, Martha Stewart’s husband at the time.) While writers on garden ornamentation urged people not to feature gnomes in their gardens, these cautionary words gave rise to a new generation of gnomes that found instant popularity throughout Europe and America. Thanks to popular culture such as the 1997 film *The Full Monty* and the widespread Travelocity campaign, gnomes have made yet another comeback and can be found in all sorts of gardens (though not the Chelsea Flower Show where they have been banned). Love ‘em or hate ‘em, garden gnomes will no doubt be around forever.

*Retired Lawn image from the Garden Club of America Collection at the Archives of American Gardens*

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