The Design of Colonial Gardens

Landscape architects and horticulturists usually extend the colonial period 64 years to 1840. By including the years from 1620 to 1840 we can tell a more complete story even though the period isn't historically correct.

There are several reasons for this. Garden design changed little until about mid-point in the Greek Revival (12) period. Then there was great change with the advent of Victorian architecture and styles.

One reason for such gradual evolution may have been the limited number of books published on the subject. Most of those available until after the Revolutionary War came from England or France. Few were published in the colonies. Similarly, there were few nurseries and seed houses until after the Revolution (17). Another reason may have been the preoccupation with protest against restrictive arts and with independence.

Actually gardens changed very little during this period even in Europe. Except for the development of the so-called “natural style” in the 1700’s, garden design deviated very little from the Tudor style even in England (5). By extending the colonial period to 1840, we are able to include the effects of the “natural style” on the development of American gardens.

The Gardens of Early Plymouth Plantation and Rural New England

The gardens of the pilgrims were purely a functional outgrowth of their needs. The house and barn formed the focus and the site was divided into pens and barnyards near the barn, and the garden was placed near the house. The orchard and fields were planted where soil and exposure seemed best but not always near the “homelot”. The plot was studded with sheds, hayracks, coops, and other necessary appurtenances (20).
The size of garden was proportionate to that of the family. Most of the vegetables needed on a small scale were grown in the fenced-in garden near the house. These included leeks, onions, garlic, melons, English gourds, radishes, carrots, cabbages and artichokes. A variety of herbs were grown among the vegetables, the most aromatic grown to one side so as not to "flavor the soil" (20). Vegetables needed in large quantities like maize, beans, and pumpkins were grown in fields.

The herbs were used in cooking, medicines, and for fragrance. A popular dish was a variety of vegetables in a pot stewed with meat and herbs. Herbs for medicine were harvested and dried for later use. The herbs for fragrance were hung in rooms, sprinkled among linens and clothing, or carried in a pocket (20).

Flowers were grown, too; some just to look at, but most for utilitarian purposes. Rose petals, for example, were dried for fragrance. If the lady of the house liked flowers, she often collected violets and mayflowers from the woods and transplanted them into her garden, for it was she who tended them. Otherwise, only those flowers needed for food, medicine, fragrance or dyes were grown.

There was no garden plan as such. In other words, no conscious effort was made to plan a garden in today's sense. The house and outbuildings were sited according to the topography, exposure, and needed relationship. Areas related to them were fenced or penned, and walkways through the gardens were laid down as direct routes from doorway to outbuilding or as seemed best for tending the plants.

The plants were planted in no particular order. Tall plants obscured short plants, flowers were mixed with vegetables, and among them all were herbs. Some of the vegetables may have been planted in blocks according to the European practice of the time. The beds were often raised by building up the soil and holding it in place by saplings laid on the ground. Great emphasis was placed on drainage.

The walks were usually tamped soil, sometimes gravel and occasionally they were surfaced with crushed clam shells. These walks were just wide enough so a person could walk through the garden or weed one of the beds from it. The main walkway leading to an outbuilding may have been wider.

The walk and bed pattern was not necessarily symmetrical or regularly patterned as in the parterre gardens of the merchants in Boston. Instead, an irregular walk pattern was often the case and the beds varied in size and shape according to what was
grown in them and how they fit between the functional walks (1, 9, 10, 16).

The gardens of the Dutch in New York, on the other hand, were often laid out on a highly symmetrical plan with perfectly balanced beds on either side of a central walkway with a series of balanced secondary walks throughout (21).

The Plymouth-type arrangement prevailed throughout the colonial period and well into the 19th century in agrarian New England (20). Numerous old farms laid out in the later part of the 17th century and during the 18th century reflect this scheme with little variation.

Figure 1 shows one such plan on the Nehemiah Williams Farm in Stonington, Connecticut. This farm was recently sold after having been in the same family, handed down from father to son for nine generations. The plan remained essentially the same throughout that period. Notice how the buildings were sited to the northwest of the house to protect it from the prevailing winter winds. The orchard was so located to perform a similar function and to be handy to the house and sheds.

The gardens were not in one large block as we plant them today. The south garden, which is on a three to five percent slope was so placed to capture the warmth of the spring sun for early crops like peas, lettuce, radishes, carrots, beets, and onions. The bean garden did not have a southern exposure but it was protected by two walls, out of the path of the northwest winds, so that the soil would warm up in time for bean planting which was later than lettuce and peas. This garden later became a flower garden.

The two gardens in the front lot were for later vegetables and second plantings of some of the early ones. Also fruits such as strawberries, currants, gooseberries and rhubarb were grown in the front lot garden next to the wall.

Flowers were grown in the dooryard garden to the front, or south of the house. This garden was in full view of the two front parlors or chambers, and people approaching these rooms on special occasions would have passed through them (7). Dooryard or parlor gardens were very popular in the 17th and 18th centuries, reaching the height of popularity after the Revolution.

Dooryard gardens were usually enclosed with wooden fences. These fences often started at the corners of the house and came straight forward. In the case of the Williams garden, the fence went to the stone wall. Where a similar house was close to the street, the fence would have gone to its edge.
NEHEMIAH WILLIAMS FARMSTEAD - 1719
STONINGTON - CONN.
APPROXIMATE SCALE: 1" = 100' 0"
This plan persisted well into the 19th century as Figure 1 and the cover indicate.

The Gardens of Merchants and Townsmen

In contrast, the merchants who lived in Boston, New York, Philadelphia or most other colonial cities and towns had gardens quite different from those of their brothers in the country. Their gardens were formal, laid out in a symmetrical pattern with each side of a central walkway reflecting the other. These gardens imitated the formal parterre with which many of the merchants were familiar in their homelands (16, 22).

During the colonial era, great emphasis was placed on siting the house on a high piece of ground (15, 18). Sometimes the foundation was purposely built high and the soil dug from the cellar was mounded around it to form a terrace or a series of them. Occasionally, additional soil was brought in to complete a particular terrace plan, but this was not often done. In fact, it is a characteristic of building in the colonial era to search for just the right, natural site for the house rather than to change the topography as we so often do today (15, 23).

The garden was placed near the house. “Have the garden near the dwelling house because such Beauty and Ornament, the more they are under constant Inspection, the easier and better they entertain those two finer senses, Seeing and Smelling” (15, 18). Some writers of the time suggested an eastern or western slope for the garden in an attempt to benefit from the heat generated from the rays of the sun. Many suggested avoiding a southern slope because the sun would be too hot and the plants would “hang their Heads, to wither away, and die” (15). Other authors of garden books suggested a southern exposure to gain maximum benefit from the sun’s rays (4).

Actually, we find that in northern climates gardens were often sited on a southerly slope, especially vegetable gardens for early crops. Flower gardens were ideally placed on level spots because it wasn’t as important to force perennials into bloom and the annuals couldn’t be planted until late in the spring. In other latitudes we find gardens at all exposures depending on the site and philosophy of the owner.

Fig. 1: This actual plot plan shows a typical layout commonly used throughout New England in the 17th and 18th centuries. In fact, similar plans were used well into the 19th century. The walls and buildings were drawn by the author from aerial photographs supplied by the Tax Assessor’s Office, Stonington, Connecticut.
Fig. 2: — A typical, rural plan showing the layout based on functional needs. Pen and ink, probably Massachusetts or Connecticut, artist unknown — 1840. Photo: courtesy of Old Sturbridge Village, Sturbridge, Massachusetts.
The gardens were usually enclosed. Rarely do we find records of a garden without a fence, wall, or hedge around it. These enclosures were not only to lend privacy to the garden but also to protect it from the winds (15).

Walls were not used as extensively in America as they were in England, Holland and other European countries. Certainly they were important in some cities, especially in the south of New England (22, 26). But except for a few, it seems that most of the gardens in New England were enclosed by wooden fences or hedges (22). Perhaps they were heeding the advice of John Lawrence who wrote in 1776 that the sun and the wind were the worst enemies of plants and gardens. "Walls are some defense, where they are tall and the garden little; but otherwise they occasion great Reverberations, Whiles, and Currents of wind, so they often do more harm than good. I should therefore choose to have the Flower Garden encompassed [sic] by hedges . . . . which after frequent clipping are not only more ornamental than the best of walls, but by far more useful, and better defences against the merciless Rage we are speaking of, both with Respect to the Flowers themselves or the female Lovers" (15).

In many communities we find early ordinances regulating the height of fences. Mostly, a higher fence was allowed along the sides and back of the property with a lower one specified for across the front. The style and architecture of the fences were endless ranging from the homely picket fence to a solid board fence with a slatted, louvered or latticed top (16).

The garden plan within the enclosure was a variation on a basic theme. It consisted of a central walk usually on axis with a door of the house (16, 18). Secondary walks radiated from the central walk, sometimes at right angles and other times at acute angles. The central walk was terminated by some sort of feature and often some of the secondary walks were also (See Figure 3).

These terminal features might have been one or many. Summerhouses, arbors, specimen plants and gates were quite common while statues, sundials and steps were also popular (13, 16). Sometimes the focus was merely an opening in a fence, wall or hedge, framing a spectacular or pastoral vista (5).

The length of the garden, its central walk and the complexity of the secondary walks was directly proportional to the extent of financial resources of the owner and his love of gardening.

On either side of the central walk and between the secondary paths were the flower or garden beds. Some were square, others
were rectangular, triangular, or round, depending on the design of the secondary walk system. It was not at all unusual to find all of these forms within one garden, especially if it was a large one (3, 7, 9, 10, 15, 16). The form would “vary according to a Person’s different Fancies; yet ought to throw the whole into Variety within Uniformity . . . . but care must be taken to contrive it so that it may be easily seen, that the curious Artist may find Admittance to the Beds in every Part, either by the large or by lesser Gravel Walks or Paths; so as by the reach of the Arm every Operation may be performed with Ease” (15).

Oftentimes the wide central walk had one round bed in the center “filled with some curious Ever-green plant cut pyramidal or fluted” (15). Sometimes there were a series of circular, triangular, square or rectangular beds down a very wide central walk.

Around the outside of the garden and just inside the enclosure there was often a large bed or border encircling the entire garden. One description of an early garden (2) states that there were eight square beds in the center with two wide borders running along the fence, all tied together by a series of gravel walks between beds “raised by boards.”

This typical pattern, used almost without exception, was imposed on every type of site, regardless of the topography. There are numerous descriptions, drawings, and plans of colonial gardens where the central axis walk plan was imposed on a sloping site (6, 24, 26, 27). Most of the gardens on old Pemberton Hill in Boston had this arrangement going up hill from the house, and the beds were on a series of terraces (24). Philadelphia had its classic examples, and one of the best garden examples using this arrangement is on the grounds of the Moffatt-Ladd House in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. This garden was restored according to an old record made by the Ladds who came to the house in 1819. It is unique for the set of grass steps which (combined with an arbor as background) is the focus for the central path (6).

The arrangement of plants within the garden varied with the whim of the owner. Sometimes the gardens we have described were devoted entirely to flowers. Others combined herbs with flowers. “In our garden, according to custom of the time, four beds (of eight) were given to herbs useful in cooking or for household remedies” (3). Some of the beds were even given over to vegetables, depending on whether or not the owner had a special kitchen or vegetable garden elsewhere on the property (7).
Fig. 3: A typical formal garden design of the 17th and 18th centuries. Note the central axis walk with the secondary walks radiating from it. Also, the feature in the center of the main walk and the outbuilding as a terminus to one of the secondary walks. Photo of an oil painting entitled “View of the Seat of Colonel Boyd, Portsmouth, New Hampshire” — 1774. By permission of the Trustees of The Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, New Hampshire.

Fig. 4: The VonGlummer reproduction of the original Vaughan plan of Mount Vernon. This plan shows the formal design of the Flower Garden (left) and the Kitchen Garden (right) on either side of the park-like bowling green and serpentine avenues surrounded by trees. Photo: courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union, Mount Vernon, Virginia.
Fruit trees were often found in the garden and trees in general were included. Shrubs and roses were placed in the border beds that encircled the garden (3), but sometimes they were placed in the beds themselves as shown in Figure 3.

There was no special massing of flowers and herbs for effect. "In those days a garden was not usually arranged for the effect as a whole . . . . each plant was cherished for itself, and was put where it seemed best for it individually, or often, of course, where it was most convenient . . . . four corners of one bed were filled with fleur-de-lis (iris) white and blue . . . . and the corners of another with Sweet Williams" (3). The taller flowers were often planted in the borders around the outside, but sometimes they were planted in the center of the beds with shorter plants surrounding them.

The massing of plants and the repetition of these masses to give continuity of design was not a 17th and 18th century principle of garden planning. Gardens during that period were tied together by the system of walks, beds edged with boxwood, ribbon grass, moss pink (3), pinks (Dianthus), lavender (Santolina) and germander, or by the enclosure around the whole garden.

Today some think of the colonial garden plan as being intricate and involved for no real purpose, but as we study it we find that it was an outgrowth of the times. The involved walk system was laid down to divide tall flowers from short flowers, culinary herbs from flowers, and medicinal herbs from vegetables. These walks made the beds accessible for cultivation, admiration and harvesting. And, they felt, why not arrange the walks and beds in an interesting pattern if you have to have them? Then the whole had to be fenced for protection against the unwanted glances, wind and roving animals. What a good place to grow tall plants — the fence gave them background and support if needed and the plants softened the high, harsh fence or wall. A perfect solution for the times!

Fig. 5: This reproduction of a 1792 painting of Mount Vernon shows the planting of trees on either side of the approach avenues and the Mansion. Note also the design of the courtyard immediately in front of the Mansion. Photo. courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union, Mount Vernon, Virginia.

Fig. 6: This companion 1792 painting of Mount Vernon, East Front, shows the barely visible forms of deer (foreground) and the fence built to confine them. Photo: courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union, Mount Vernon, Virginia.
What about herb gardens? Some twentieth century gardeners think of colonial gardens only in terms of herbs, probably because herbs are so popular in culinary art today and we are generally familiar with them. But, during the colonial period, unless one was engaged in the growing of herbs for sale, as the Shakers (1) and some others were, most people did not have a garden set aside especially for them. These plants, as previously mentioned, were grown among the flowers and vegetables or in a portion of the kitchen garden (7, 16, 20).

Country Estates on the Outskirts of Town

The gardens described were laid out on the smaller, tighter sites along the streets of cities and towns. This does not imply that all city lots were small for some were of several acres (26). But they were often narrow and the parterre plan lent itself well to this shape of lot. Even people of limited financial resources used a similar but small version of either the Plymouth type or (more often) the parterre type of garden plan (23).

In the early 18th century, Joseph Addison, Alexander Pope, and Sir Richard Steele wrote satire about the rigid, formal garden filled with topiary and enclosed by a wall. Addison revised his own planting to “run into as great a wilderness as their natures will permit” (25). Bridgeman, a leading landscape architect of the period, was greatly influenced by their satire, banishing sculpture and elaborate design in favor of bits of woodland in the landscape (10). William Kent emerged to fame eliminating walled enclosures and substituting ha-ha walls to separate areas inconspicuously.

This so-called “natural style” was carried to its heights by Lancelot “Capability” Brown and others in the 18th century (14). In fact, Brown’s gardens are often characterized as “a round lake, an open lawn, and a copse of trees”. This influence was felt in the colonies by the wealthy plantation and estate owners. By the late 1700’s, most wealthy properties covering vast acreage, whether in Virginia, Philadelphia, along the Hudson River, or in New England, were designed or “layed out in the natural style”.

New England, while not entirely so, was most conservative with this style, probably because the various skills necessary to run the household were housed under one roof because of climate, rather than strung out as they were at Mt. Vernon, Monticello, and in other southern estates. For this reason, an arrangement of buildings pulled close together lent itself better to the formal plan than to the “natural style” (23).
New England was not without its “natural” gardens, however. Numerous estates surrounding Boston, for example, were laid out in this manner (24). And Samuel McIntyre suggested such a plan for the Elias Hasket Derby Mansion in Salem, Massachusetts (16). Theodore Lyman’s “Waltham House” purchased in 1795 “arranged the grounds with . . . noble trees, lake, gardens, terraces, lawns and a deer park” (24).

In fact, at least one garden in New England was revamped according to the style of the day. Miss Susan Quincy, in her Memoirs, tells how President Quincy changed the plan on the Quincy Estate, “being a great lover of nature. Obstructions to views were removed; walls and fences leveled; lawns with trees and shrubs judiciously disposed, replaced the court-yard and gardens; and the approach to the house turned through an avenue of elms, a third of a mile in length . . . .” (24).

Mount Vernon is one of the best authentic examples of an estate that combined both the “natural style” and the parterre plan (See Figure 4). Approaching the Mansion is the Serpentine Avenue encircling the bowling green. Note how the avenue is heavily planted with trees (See also Figure 5). Some of the original trees are still growing along this approach (11).

On either side of the tree-lined avenue and bowling green are the parterred flower and kitchen gardens (6), both the same size and shape, differing only in detailed interior arrangement. Actually, the whole plan approaching the Mansion is symmetrical in design, though informally planted.

Between the Mansion and the Potomac River, however, is a broad expanse of lawn, a ha-ha wall (see upper right of plan in Figure 4) and a copse of trees on the east front of the Mansion (see Figure 6). This illustration shows that George Washington even included a “Deer Park” like so many of the estates in England. Washington wrote in 1792, “I have about a dozen deer (some of which are the common sort) which are no longer confined in the Paddock which was made for them but range in all my woods and often pass my exterior fence” (2). Several early gardens in this country had deer parks, among them the “Waltham House” Estate of Theodore Lyman (24) and the Robinson Estate, built in 1750, and opposite the present West Point Academy on the Hudson River (21). Deer in the landscape made these seats more “natural”.

Thomas Jefferson’s plan also gets away from the formal, parterre layout, but it, too, is symmetrical immediately in front of the house (see Figures 7 and 8). His plan has an informal walkway which he called the “Round-about” and it was bounded
by flower borders. These have been restored according to his plan (See Figure 8). Near the house are circular beds which were planted in 1807 (19).

The plan for “Solitude”, the seat of John Penn in the Philadelphia area, shows an arrangement that would have pleased William Kent and Capability Brown. On this estate were a ha-ha wall, irregular flower gardens, a vista south of the house, and a clump of trees to the east (26).

Along the Hudson River there were many estates (Philipse Manor, Van Cortlandt Manor, and the estates of the Livingstons and the Van Rensselaers, among others) landscaped in the “natural style” and less symmetrical than Mount Vernon, probably because of the more varied topography, but still with the parterre garden near the formal Mansion House (21).

**Conclusion**

It is safe to say that the gardens of the colonial period were planned according to the way of life of the owners. In rural agricultural areas the gardens were of the Plymouth type, laid out between functional walks and paths, but not rigidly formal in pattern as the parterres of the city merchants, tradesmen, and professionals.

When the influence of the natural style, carried to its height by Capability Brown, reached this continent, the owners of the large estates and plantations were affected by it, but they retained the formal parterre plan for gardens near the house.

On the smaller city sites that did not lend themselves to the development of lakes, copses of trees and expanses of lawns laid out to imitate nature, the rigid parterre plan remained until well into the 19th century.
Fig. 8: The restored flower beds and borders at Monticello as they look today. Photo: courtesy of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation.

Fig. 7: Thomas Jefferson's plan of the "Round-about Walk", flower borders (dotted lines) and beds (circles). The flower beds were laid out and planted in 1807 and the winding walk and flower borders in 1808. Courtesy of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation.
II  How to Create or Restore
a Colonial Garden

In historic preservation, the creation or restoration of early gardens should be a subject of major concern. Often the grounds and gardens are overlooked, but fortunately this is becoming less true as we progress through the century.

For many it is hard to know what type of garden plan to use, where to put the garden, how to enclose it, how large it should be, whether to include vegetables and herbs as well as flowers, and how to go about installing the garden generally. It is best to hire professional assistance in the person of a landscape architect who is sympathetic towards the area of historic preservation and restoration. But sometimes funds do not permit this type of consultation and an individual or committee is appointed to develop the plans.

Naturally, the first thing to do is research the site, the people who lived there, and the records. Leave no stones unturned because the more you can find the better and more individualistic the garden will be.

It matters not what area you research first. Let us start with the people who lived in the house: what they did; when they did it; if there were several families, find data on each and determine which one or which period you will represent. An example of this is the research that went into the garden the author designed for the Noah Webster House. Naturally we knew about the famous linguist, but he didn't live there after he became famous. So the obvious question was: what did his parents do? They were farmers, not wealthy, but of moderate means. The architecture of the house was simple, not elegant, further pointing to the fact that the garden should be small and simple and not contain unusual plants such as a vast array of tulips that had to be imported. Instead, the garden should contain plants needed for everyday sustenance.

Sometimes in researching the people who live in a house, you find facts that pertain directly to gardens. The garden at the Salem Towne House at Old Sturbridge Village contains many fruit trees because Mr. Towne experimented with fruit and actually developed a new variety of apple called the "Porter". These details lend interest and individuality to a garden.

Garden of the Standish House at Plimouth Plantation with Pot Marigold, cabbage, carrots, red kidney beans, watermelons and muskmelons. Photo: courtesy of Plimoth Plantation.
Written and published records could shed much light on the gardens of a particular site. Probate inventories often mention orchards, walls and gardens, and some have been known to have plans attached. Some probate records name fruit trees by variety. But even if the inventories or wills contain no mention of gardens, they give you an idea of the relative worth of the person. This is invaluable information because it offers guidelines concerning a size for the garden and the elegance of the proposed plan.

Deeds can offer garden information. The author recently came across one deed that mentions “the southwest corner of the garden west of the dwelling house” as the beginning of a boundary. Upon investigating the site, the exact dimensions of the garden were determined with relative ease.

Diaries, journals, letters and personal documents usually contain a wealth of information. One has only to read the diaries of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson to get a clear picture of gardening and agriculture. Lesser known men and women kept records, too, on such facts as when flowers came into bloom, when seeds were planted, and how and when walks were laid. Account books, while they contain only facts and figures, are invaluable because in them are such items as listings of seeds bought, crops harvested, tools purchased, and materials bought to combine with herbs for household remedies.

Personal letters written from husband to wife, sister to sister, brother to brother, reveal much because it was the custom of the day to speak of plants in bloom in the garden, the change of season and its effect on the garden, what was harvested, and much more.

Town histories sometimes have descriptions of a garden or a site, but quite often contain sketches of houses showing their gardens and fences. It was in Caulkins’ History of Norwich, Connecticut that we learned about some ordinances controlling the height of fences during the colonial period. John Warner Barber wrote “Historical Collections of Every Town . . . .” on many states in the early 19th century. His engravings of each town show gardens in some cases, fence styles, street tree arrangements, and many other details.

News articles and advertisements are helpful, especially in developing a list of plants. Many state and local historical societies have collections of early newspapers and broadsides. Articles sometimes appear commemorating a particular individual and sometimes his house and grounds are mentioned.

Old essays, speeches, and pamphlets are invaluable. The archives of horticultural societies are full of this type of information.

The author relies heavily on paintings for information on the design of gardens. These works often suggest a fence style or garden arrangement typical of a particular town or region. We are aware of some murals that show village scenes that can be identified and many of these illustrate gardens.

One is not often lucky enough to find a plan. How many people make a plan today? Not many. The same was true in early times and many of the plans that were made have been lost. But do not overlook this aspect of research; sometimes the files of historical societies contain them. Even if it is not the plan of the site in question, if it is in the same region or area you might get some ideas.

While word of mouth is not considered as reliable a source as the written word, you should consider it. On asking a member of the ninth generation of the Nehemiah Williams family if there ever had been a garden in front of the old house and if there were had it been fenced as most of them had been, he responded in the affirmative. Upon probing the site, we found the stub of a stone fence post that had broken off, proving that there was a fence there.

Probing the site itself often reveals much information. It is good to do this late in the fall when the tall grass has died down or early in the spring before it starts to grow. Then you can see the lay of the land. Sometimes you will find the remains of an old walk, and depressions on either side will suggest that there were beds there. Sometimes there are mounds instead of depressions suggesting that the beds were raised.

Areas enclosed by walls or plants suggest that the enclosure was either a pen or a garden of some sort. One walled enclosure we found, family tradition says, was a children’s play yard laid out to confine toddlers so they wouldn’t stray into the woods.

An odd arrangement of trees or shrubs, having no meaning today, with careful study might suggest a garden plan. Large shrubs and small trees around the outside of an area with a depressed or raised spot in the central portion most certainly suggests a garden.

Sometimes removing soil from these depressed or raised areas, or from around walls or house foundations will bring plants to life. Many times seeds that haven’t been planted in years will germinate because they have been preserved in the depths of the soil. These may not necessarily date to the colonial period, but they might suggest how a present-day garden evolved.
Should There Be a Garden?

Sometimes there were no flower gardens because only vegetable gardens were planted, and flowers and herbs needed for food, fragrance and medicine were grown among them. Maybe there were a few flowers by the front door and some herbs by the kitchen, and that is all. This is where research about the people who occupied a given house may cast light on whether or not there should be a garden and what type.

If you are thinking of a garden for your own home, there are two ways to approach the problem. If you are a purist and want things just as they were then, proceed as suggested. But if you do not really like to garden and cannot afford to hire a gardener, then perhaps just some fruit trees surrounding the property, some shade trees along the road, some lilacs at the corner of the house and near the shed, and some herbs by the back door will suffice, preserving the character of the site and yet not creating a burden on you.

If you have reproduced a site, or even if you have an old one and are not a purist, why not plan as our forefathers did — basing the plan on function: a dooryard garden near the front door to create an interesting entrance space, some trees to provide shade and define the front yard, some herbs by the back door and a little lawn for recreation, with a vegetable garden (if you want one) to the rear. This will satisfy your needs and, after all, that's how they planned in the colonial era.
Examples of Authentic
Colonial Gardens in New England

Connecticut
Henry Witfield House (17th century), Guilford
Welles-Shipman House, Glastonbury
Isaac Stevens House, Wethersfield
Joseph Webb House, Wethersfield
Hatheway House, Suffield
Tappan Reeves Law Office, Litchfield
Noah Webster House, West Hartford

Maine
Longfellow House, Portland

Massachusetts
Whipple House, Ipswich
Pliny Freeman Farm, Old Sturbridge Village, Sturbridge
Salem Towne House, Old Sturbridge Village, Sturbridge
Fitch House, Old Sturbridge Village, Sturbridge
Gardens at Plimoth Plantation, Plymouth
Mission House, Stockbridge
Coffin House, Nantucket

New Hampshire
Moffatt-Ladd House, Portsmouth

Rhode Island
The Garden at Shakespear’s Head, College Hill, off of Benefit Street, Providence
Governor Stephan Hopkins House, Benefit Street, College Hill, Providence
Smith’s Castle, Cocumscussoc, U.S. 1, Wickford
Varnum Gardens, East Greenwich
“White Hall”, Middletown
Wanton-Lyman-Hazard House, Broadway Street, Newport
III Authentic Plants for Colonial Garden Design

People interested in colonial buildings and the grounds that surround them are excited to see that so many buildings and sites of this period are being carefully restored. Within recent years, restorers have used greater care in architectural restorations and have furnished buildings in an authentic manner.

Generally, this has not been true concerning the grounds. It is disappointing to see careful restorations ending with the four outer walls and no care given to making the grounds equally authentic. In one sense, this is betraying the viewer who expects a thorough and accurate representation of the period.

There are many carefully restored houses that have foundation plantings surrounding them. These are entirely wrong for they represent the period from about 1850 to post World War II and certainly not the colonial period. Within these plantings one finds Forsythia, not even introduced into England from the Orient until 1844 (27); Japanese Yews, introduced into America from Japan in 1861 (27); Pfitzer Juniper, introduced in 1901 (27); Pachysandra, introduced in 1882 (27); and Spirea vanhouttei, whose first documented date in America is 1866 (27).

Certainly, the way in which plants are used around structures of the colonial period makes these buildings more authentic, real, and alive.

It is the purpose of this article to present a documented list of authentic plants for the colonial period. Many lists exist but few are documented and it is possible to find errors and misinterpretations that have been perpetuated for over fifty years. Hopefully, this article will eliminate some of these errors.

In discussing the design aspects of the colonial era, we usually deal with the years from 1620 to 1840 (6, 6a) because design did not change drastically during this period. But in considering the plants, many nurseries and seed houses were established after the Revolutionary War (14, 15), and many plants were imported (14); so we define the colonial period in its true, historical sense, 1620 to 1776, recognizing that there was a settlement in Jamestown, Virginia as early as 1607.

Plants in the Colonial Period

Although nurseries and seedhouses were few, research in this
era reveals that there were many plants available. Many of them were brought over from Europe with the settlers, others were sent for (14, 15), and there was a great deal of trading and exchange of slips, cuttings, and seeds from person to person. The statement is often made by individuals and committees in charge of restoring old gardens and grounds that the kinds of plants available were limited. This is not true as the following list shows. Perhaps there were fewer varieties and spectacular colors, but it was still easy to provide a “splash” of color during the summer months.

The most common annuals during the colonial period were Four-O’Clocks in all the colors available today; Balsam, in red, white, purple, blush or pink, singles and doubles; the several Amaranthus in the following list; Globe Amaranth, or Gomphrena, in purple or red, and white; Batchelor’s Buttons in white, blue, purple and red; and Calendulas in yellow and orange (1).

Of the biennials, Sweet Williams were used extensively, in fact so much so that they divided the shorter and narrower leaved ones into a different common group called “Sweet Johns” (19). Hollyhocks were plentiful, both singles and doubles “in several colors” (17). Believe it or not, two of the most popular garden flowers were Buttercups (Fair-Maids-of-France) (5), and Dandelions (5, 8, 9). From these early gardens, these two flowers, among others, escaped from cultivation into the wild.

Three flowers used little today were very common during this period. Cowslips or Oxslips (Primroses) gave a great deal of color to the gardens of our early settlers and so did the Clove-Gilliflowers, Pinks or Dianthus. Another common inhabitant of the garden was Feverfew or Featherfew. All of these flowers and others are mentioned in the attached list.

Having listed a dozen or so of the most common flowers during the colonial era, how do these compare with what one authority considers the leaders of today? (21)

*Petunia* — We have found no mention of this flower in the early garden books. Perhaps it was grown in the early gardens but the literature does not identify it as such. The name Petunia is a South American aboriginal name said to have been applied to tobacco (3). It is possible that Petunias are called tobacco or Nicotiana in some of the early books.

*Zinnia* — These are listed quite frequently in the literature of the late 18th century but not during the early writings. It appears that they were just being introduced around the
Marigold — The French Marigold (*Tagetes patula*) was used extensively quite early in the colonial period, but it appears that the African Marigold (*Tagetes erecta*) was not as common until around 1800 or later. The tiny, dwarf varieties that are so commonly used today would not be appropriate in an authentic restoration.

China Aster — Contrary to earlier lists, this plant was used during the colonial period, but it wasn't used as commonly as those flowers listed above. It seems that the most common varieties were single (5).

Sweet Pea — These were probably used throughout the colonial period, but we have not found a reference to them before the 1700's.

Snapdragon — Although these do not appear to have been among the most common annuals, they were used very early and the most popular colors were “red, white, purple, and variable” (1).

Larkspur — These were used very early, but were not called Larkspur until late in the period. Earlier they were called Larks Heels or, rightly so, Delphiniums.

Morning Glory — There seems to have been practically every color imaginable (red, white, purple, dark blue, and striped) (5) with the exception of today's popular “Heavenly Blue”.

Bibliography


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