

# BOOKS

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*Keeping Eden, A History of Gardening in America.* Walter T. Punch, general editor. A Bulfinch Press Book, in association with the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, 1992. 277 pages. Hardcover. \$50.00

Green-jacketed picture books on American gardens, planting design, and garden ornament swell the shelves of bookshops across America, but it's rare to find a beautifully illustrated one that is well written *and* does justice to the manifold issues in American garden history. This splendid book combines rich visual material with an unusually high standard of writing that makes it a book definitely worth keeping. Green jacket notwithstanding, its handsome presentation is certain to attract many unsuspecting readers to an entirely new and rewarding territory.

That territory encompasses garden literature, horticulture, science and technology, horticultural institutions, and the cultural and economic issues that shaped America's garden history. Walter Punch, librarian of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, conceived and edited the book, and it is appropriate that the concept of the book came from a librarian although it was originally envisioned as a television series. He commissioned essays on a highly personal selection of topics, and the result is a pleasant mix of scholarly and popular writing styles. The work of well-known historians such as William Howard Adams, Diane Kostial McGuire, and Melanie Simo, accompanies that of others not so well known, whose work is usually buried in scholarly tomes often unseen by the general public. More popular writers, such as Mac Griswold and

Tovah Martin, each of whom has published several books, give balance to the book. The essays that concentrate on a single topic are more successful than the broad overviews, but on the other hand, those more general essays may be precisely what the neophyte finds most helpful.

Gordon De Wolf traces the earliest interest in gardening by the explorers of the New World, who out of necessity had to glean information on native plants and methods from native peoples. The familiar later gardens of the colonists in Virginia and elsewhere on the Atlantic coast, which were heavily influenced by English and European sophistication, are considered by Diane McGuire. David Streatfield's chapter, one of the best in the book, follows the settlers as they moved westward and explains how distinctive garden styles echo geographical concerns. Melanie Simo considers modernism in the context of regionalism from the Midwest to California.

American artists have provided a visual resource for information about flowers, gardens, and landscapes, and some of the more spectacular examples are included in Mac Griswold's essay, including a painting by Georgia O'Keeffe and one of Mattie Edwards Hewitt's evocative garden photographs. Charles Willson Peale's portrait of William Paca, squire of Annapolis, demonstrates the documentary uses of garden art. A tiny detail provided information for an accurate restoration of Paca's eighteenth-century garden.

Consideration is given to public gardens, cemeteries, and townscapes as well as private gardens. Phyllis Andersen traces the relationship of city and garden as colonial

towns evolved into dense urban centers. The changing needs for green space that began with the colonists' ideal pastoral city can be seen today in traditional community gardens as well as in small townhouse gardens. Walter Punch offers insights into the role of horticultural societies, garden clubs, and the botanical gardens and arboreta in public education, and considers the relevance of an entirely twentieth-century venture, the Garden Conservancy, which seeks to orchestrate the survival of America's premier gardens.

Some of the elements in the creation of gardens—books, plants, technology—are vast subjects that the volume skillfully introduces to the novice. One of the most obvious topics in any discussion of American gardens is the diversity of horticultural books that shaped and recorded the subject. The late Elisabeth Woodburn, whose extensive knowledge of the topic grew out of forty years' experience as an antiquarian dealer specializing in gardening and horticulture books, sketches the nineteenth-century work of Bernard M'Mahon, Joseph Breck, and Peter Henderson as pre-

lude to the explosion of gardening titles by women such as Neltje Blanchan and Louise Beebe Wilder in the early twentieth century. Peggy Newcomb details the colorful history of plants in American gardens with illustrations from seed catalogues and plant monographs in the collection at the Massachusetts Horticultural Society. The scientific aspects of the garden are pondered by D. Keith Crotz who discusses plant culture as well as some of the paraphernalia necessary to maintain the garden, from hand tools and garden carts to water sprinklers and Budding's lawnmower. More follows on the lawn from Michael Pollan, who concludes the book with a provocative afterword.

Excellent notes, bibliographies, and reference material enhance the usefulness of the book. This is a book to be enjoyed chapter by chapter, provided the reader is not sidetracked by a trip to the library to learn more on the chapter just finished. *Keeping Eden* should become a standard text on American garden history; certainly it can play a role in educating the public about America's garden heritage.