



Historic Gardens

OH 50

Leonard Perry, Extension Professor

If you have an old or historic home from the last century or before, you may wish to recreate gardens around it of the same period. They won't be "true" reproductions, because our current lifestyles have some influence, as does the unavailability of some of the plants. Yet fairly accurate reproductions can be achieved.

To avoid mistakes in reproducing historic gardens, avoid the "overmanicured" look of the twentieth century. Fences are appropriate (especially wooden), as are gravel walks. False wells, old farm implements, and other contrived features should be avoided, as should foundation plantings if your home is pre- or early Victorian, and herb gardens. Herbs were usually mixed with flowers and vegetables.

Researching your home in probate records, deeds, photos, paintings, town histories, early newspapers or the like may reveal particular features of your property of the time which will make it unique.

Historic gardens of this country can generally be divided into three periods: Colonist and Pre-Revolution (1600-1776), Post-Revolution (1776-1850), and Victorian (1850-1900). During the Colonial or Pre-Revolution period, when around 90% of people farmed, gardens were functional. Trees were utilitarian, such as for shade and fruit. There were few nurseries, and plant types were limited. Most were obtained by exchange with other gardeners; a few were imported and the rest were natives. In the rear of the home would usually be found a kitchen/cutting/herb garden enclosed by a fence/wall/hedge to separate it from the wilderness and keep wandering livestock and animals out.

During the Post-Revolution era, plant exploration led to more plant types, and more nurseries. Trees were massed for a "natural effect," with more ornamental varieties, and a mix of evergreen and deciduous types. Flowers increased toward the end of this period, lawns were used to set off the house (mown 3 to 4 times with a scythe by hand, thus a rough appearance), and ornaments such as fences, benches, arbors, sundials, and beehives came to be used. Oval flower beds might be lined with ageratum or sweet alyssum, and rectangular beds with bricks or boards.

By the Victorian period, less than 50% of people farmed, and increased technology made ornaments more available and affordable. It also created classes of society, and so of gardens. The craftspeople and workers of the mills and factories who had little income had gardens similar to the Colonial period. If they used flowers, it was usually dahlias or cannas in round beds on either side of a walk, or in a larger round bed in a side yard. For those with greater income, "tasteful" was the key--such as restraint in the use of ornaments. Increasingly, ornaments of cast iron--especially animals such as deer--were seen, as were foundations, urns planted with flowers near the house, sundials on pedestals as focal points, formal perennial and rose gardens (rosariums), and ornamental but not "picket" fences. These were considered "old-fashioned," as were plants typical of "grandmother's garden," such as hollyhocks, sunflowers, daylilies, sweet-williams, blood-red peonies, poppies, nasturtiums, larkspurs, snapdragons, and pansies. These were replaced in Victorian gardens with large and bold foliage plants such as castor beans, cannas, dahlias, lilies, and ornamental grasses. Exotic species from plant expeditions were introduced, with tender ones overwintered in glasshouses. In fact it was hard to remain "tasteful" and resist using too many plants.

Exaggerated features--such as dwarf, weeping, or over-sized--were popular. Specimen and shade trees remained popular, especially in groves. Perennial gardens began the period as many-parted beds, evolving into borders

during the gay 90s and the turn of the century. Foundation plantings around homes did not emerge until the end of the period.

With a combination of abundant inexpensive labor, many new flowers, and a trend for the exaggerated, elaborate "bedding out" schemes of annual flowers began (our current day bedding plants), which are generally too costly to reproduce in such designs today except in parks.

Victorian bedding-out flowers

ageratum	begonia	canna	celosia	convolvulus
coleus	four o'clock	geranium	gladiolus	gomphrena
mimulus	petunia	portulaca	salvia	sweet alyssum

In summary, the basics of Victorian gardens included:

- **Lawns** - essential front and rear, to set off the home.
- **Trees** - specimens were important, especially exotic forms.
- **Shrubs** - massed with a mix of varieties, only around homes later.
- **Fences** - used around most gardens; ornamental (not picket), wood only if cast iron not available.
- **Ornaments** - all types used "tastefully" in restraint.
- **Flowers** - few circular beds along walks, or more elaborate "carpet beds" for more prosperous.
- **Vines** - picturesque use on fence, trellises, and summerhouses.

References consulted:

1. "For Every House a Garden," Ruby and Jay Favretti, Pequot Press, Chester, Conn. 1977.
2. "American Gardens of the 17th, 18th and 19th Centuries" (series of 3 books), Ann Leighton, Univ. Mass. Press, Amherst, Mass. 1987.
3. "Plants for Historic Gardens," [OH 51](#), University of Vermont Extension.