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978-1-108-07661-6 - Old Time Gardens Newly Set Forth: A Book of the Sweet o' the Year

Alice Morse Earle

Excerpt

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Old Time Gardens

CHAPTER I

COLONIAL GARDEN-MAKING

“There is not a softer trait to be found in the character of those stern men than that they should have been sensible of these flower-roots clinging among the fibres of their rugged hearts, and felt the necessity of bringing them over sea, and making them hereditary in the new land.”

— *American Note-book*, NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE.



AFTER ten wearisome weeks of travel across an unknown sea, to an equally unknown world, the group of Puritan men and women who were the founders of Boston neared their Land of Promise ; and their noble leader, John Winthrop, wrote in his Journal that “we had now fair Sunshine Weather and so pleasant a sweet Aire as did much refresh us, and there came a smell off the Shore like the Smell of a Garden.”

A Smell of a Garden was the first welcome to our ancestors from their new home ; and a pleasant and perfect emblem it was of the life that awaited them.

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They were not to become hunters and rovers, not to be eager to explore quickly the vast wilds beyond; they were to settle down in the most domestic of lives, as tillers of the soil, as makers of gardens.

What must that sweet air from the land have been to the sea-weary Puritan women on shipboard, laden to them with its promise of a garden! for I doubt not every woman bore with her across seas some little package of seeds and bulbs from her English home garden, and perhaps a tiny slip or plant of some endeared flower; watered each day, I fear, with many tears, as well as from the surprisingly scant water supply which we know was on board that ship.

And there also came flying to the *Arbella* as to the Ark, a Dove — a bird of promise — and soon the ship came to anchor.

“With hearts revived in conceit new Lands and Trees they spy,
Scenting the Cædars and Sweet Fern from heat's reflection dry,”

wrote one colonist of that arrival, in his *Good Newes from New England*. I like to think that Sweet Fern, the characteristic wild perfume of New England, was wafted out to greet them. And then all went on shore in the sunshine of that ineffable time and season, — a New England day in June, — and they “gathered store of fine strawberries,” just as their Salem friends had on a June day on the preceding year gathered strawberries and “sweet Single Roses” so resembling the English Eglantine that the hearts of the women must have ached within them with fresh homesickness. And ere long all had

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dwelling-places, were they but humble log cabins; and pasture lands and commons were portioned out; and in a short time all had garden-plots, and thus, with sheltering roof-trees, and warm firesides, and with gardens, even in this lonely new world, they had *homes*. The first entry in the Plymouth Records is a significant one; it is the assignment of "Meresteads and Garden-Plotes," not meresteads alone, which were farm lands, but home gardens: the outlines of these can still be seen in Plymouth town. And soon all sojourners who bore news back to England of the New-Englishmen and New-Englishwomen, told of ample store of gardens. Ere a year had passed hopeful John Winthrop wrote, "My Deare Wife, wee are here in a Paradise." In four years the chronicler Wood said in his *New England's Prospect*, "There is growing here all manner of herbs for meat and medicine, and that not only in planted gardens, but in the woods, without the act and help of man." Governor Endicott had by that time a very creditable garden.

And by every humble dwelling the homesick goodwife or dame, trying to create a semblance of her fair English home so far away, planted in her "garden plot" seeds and roots of homely English flowers and herbs, that quickly grew and blossomed and smiled on bleak New England's rocky shores as sturdily and happily as they had bloomed in the old gardens and by the ancient door sides in England. What good cheer they must have brought! how they must have been beloved! for these old English garden flowers are such gracious things;

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marvels of scent, lavish of bloom, bearing such genial faces, growing so readily and hardily, spreading so quickly, responding so gratefully to such little care: what pure refreshment they bore in their blossoms, what comfort in their seeds; they must have seemed an emblem of hope, a promise of a new and happy home. I rejoice over every one that I know was in those little colonial gardens, for each one added just so much measure of solace to what seems to me, as I think upon it, one of the loneliest, most fearsome things that gentlewomen ever had to do, all the harder because neither by poverty nor by unavoidable stress were they forced to it; they came across-seas willingly, for conscience' sake. These women were not accustomed to the thought of emigration, as are European folk to-day; they had no friends to greet them in the new land; they were to encounter wild animals and wild men; sea and country were unknown — they could scarce expect ever to return: they left everything, and took nothing of comfort but their Bibles and their flower seeds. So when I see one of the old English flowers, grown of those days, blooming now in my garden, from the unbroken chain of blossom to seed of nearly three centuries, I thank the flower for all that its forbears did to comfort my forbears, and I cherish it with added tenderness.

We should have scant notion of the gardens of these New England colonists in the seventeenth century were it not for a cheerful traveller named John Josselyn, a man of everyday tastes and much inquisitiveness, and the pleasing literary style which

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Garden of the Johnson Mansion, Germantown, Pennsylvania.

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comes from directness, and an absence of self-consciousness. He published in 1672 a book entitled *New England's Rarities discovered*, etc., and in 1674 another volume giving an account of his two voyages hither in 1638 and 1663. He made a very careful list of vegetables which he found thriving in the new land; and since his flower list is the earliest known, I will transcribe it in full; it isn't long, but there is enough in it to make it a suggestive outline which we can fill in from what we know of the plants to-day, and form a very fair picture of those gardens.

“Spearmint,
 Rew, will hardly grow
 Fetherfew prospereth exceedingly;
 Southernwood, is no Plant for this Country, Nor
 Rosemary. Nor
 Bayes.
 White-Satten groweth pretty well, so doth
 Lavender-Cotton. But
 Lavender is not for the Climate.
 Penny Royal
 Smalledge.
 Ground Ivey, or Ale Hoof.
 Gilly Flowers will continue two Years.
 Fennel must be taken up, and kept in a Warm Cellar all
 Winter
 Horseleek prospereth notably
 Holly hocks
 Enula Canpana, in two years time the Roots rot.
 Comferie, with White Flowers.
 Coriander, and
 Dill, and

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Annis thrive exceedingly, but Annis Seed, as also the seed of Fennel seldom come to maturity; the Seed of Annis is commonly eaten with a Fly.

Clary never lasts but one Summer, the Roots rot with the Frost.

Sparagus thrives exceedingly, so does

Garden Sorrel, and

Sweet Bryer or Eglantine

Bloodwort but sorrily, but

Patience and

English Roses very pleasantly.

Celandine, by the West Country now called Kenning

Wort grows but slowly.

Muschater, as well as in England

Dittander or Pepperwort flourisheth notably and so doth

Tansie."

These lists were published fifty years after the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth; from them we find that the country was just as well stocked with vegetables as it was a hundred years later when other travellers made lists, but the flowers seem few; still, such as they were, they formed a goodly sight. With rows of Hollyhocks glowing against the rude stone walls and rail fences of their little yards; with clumps of Lavender Cotton and Honesty and Gillyflowers blossoming freely; with Feverfew "prospering" to sow and slip and pot and give to neighbors just as New England women have done with Feverfew every year of the centuries that have followed; with "a Rose looking in at the window" — a Sweetbrier, Eglantine, or English Rose — these colonial dames might well find "Patience

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growing very pleasantly” in their hearts as in their gardens.

They had plenty of pot herbs for their accustomed savoring; and plenty of medicinal herbs for their



Garden at Grumblethorp, Germantown, Pennsylvania.

wonted dosing. Shakespeare’s “nose-herbs” were not lacking. Doubtless they soon added to these garden flowers many of our beautiful native blooms, rejoicing if they resembled any beloved English

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flowers, and quickly giving them, as we know, familiar old English plant-names.

And there were other garden inhabitants, as truly English as were the cherished flowers, the old garden weeds, which quickly found a home and thrived in triumph in the new soil. Perhaps the weed seeds came over in the flower-pot that held a sheltered plant or cutting; perhaps a few were mixed with garden seeds; perhaps they were in the straw or other packing of household goods: no one knew the manner of their coming, but there they were, Motherwort, Groundsel, Chickweed, and Wild Mustard, Mullein and Nettle, Henbane and Wormwood. Many a goodwife must have gazed in despair at the persistent Plantain, "the Englishman's foot," which seems to have landed in Plymouth from the Mayflower.

Josselyn made other lists of plants which he found in America, under these headings:—

"Such plants as are common with us in England.

Such plants as are proper to the Country.

Such plants as are proper to the Country and have no name.

Such plants as have sprung up since the English planted, and kept cattle in New England."

In these lists he gives a surprising number of English weeds which had thriven and rejoiced in their new home.

Mr. Tuckerman calls Josselyn's list of the fishes of the new world a poor makeshift; his various lists of plants are better, but they are the lists of