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America's Romance

WITH THE

English Garden



Thomas J. Mickey

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Athens

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Introduction



*Let us encourage our writers—and that can be
any of us—to write garden stories.*

KENNETH HELPHAND

TODAY IN Doylestown, Pennsylvania, outside of Philadelphia, you can visit Fordhook Farm, bought by the seedsman W. Atlee Burpee in 1888. There Burpee spent his summers, on what he called his trial farm, to test seeds for his catalog. The two-story eighteenth-century farmhouse still stands, and in the first-floor study lined in mahogany panels near the fireplace you see the desk at which Burpee wrote his seed catalog.

At the corner of the room a door opens to steps that lead up to the bedroom on the second floor. If, in the middle of the night, Burpee got an idea for his catalog, he would descend the steps to his desk below and record his thought. He did not want to lose any inspiration, because seedsman such as Burpee were serious about their business: helping the gardener grow the best lawn, flowers, fruits, and vegetables.

Burpee was only one of dozens of nineteenth-century seed merchants and nurserymen who were passionate about the garden and eager to spread the word about the importance of a garden for every home.

This book tells the story of how mass-marketed seed and nursery catalogs in the late nineteenth century told us what seeds to use, plants to choose, and landscape design ideas to employ. It is the story of how we became English gardeners in America because the seed companies and nurseries sold us the English garden.

They did their job well. To this day we love the English garden. Why is it that so many people stress over the perfect lawn? In the face of mounting

questions about the sustainability of English-style gardens and their lawns—water shortages, chemical damage, and the use of demanding, exotic plants—we cling to the ideals sold by these merchants.



Here, the meaning of the phrase “English garden” dates to the nineteenth century. Its landscape includes a lawn, carefully sited trees and shrubs, individual garden beds with native and exotic plants, and perhaps, out back, a vegetable or kitchen garden. The lawn and the use of exotic plants are relics of the English garden style we have loved for the past two hundred years.

The English style of garden began in its modern form after the reign of King Henry VIII, in the sixteenth century. Garden then meant a symmetrical layout, often with a well-trimmed knot garden, which you can still see at London’s Hampton Court. By the early eighteenth century, the formal look was disappearing, replaced by a picturesque or more naturalistic view, with its signature feature, the long, sweeping green space devoted to lawn. By the early nineteenth century the garden had come to mean a gardenesque view—still a natural look but also with the careful grouping of exotic plants. Victorian gardens after 1850 meant carpet beds of annuals that the English usually first imported from a tropical climate and then cultivated in their conservatories over the winter. By the end of the century, the English garden included the wild garden, colorful perennial borders, and a return to a formal garden design.



The first section of the book (chapters 1–3) deals with early British influence on American gardening. Beginning in the colonial period, British garden authors provided the books for American gardeners. Professional gardeners emigrated from Great Britain, and Americans hired them, or they came to own large American seed and plant companies in such cities as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia.

Like the English, horticultural societies appeared in major American cities, first along the East Coast. America followed the English format as well as content of garden journals, so it is no surprise that C. M. Hovey's *The American Gardener's Magazine* mirrored J. C. Loudon's *Gardener's Magazine*. The rural cemetery movement in major American cities corresponded with the British example of that time. If American businessmen with money to spend on their hobbies loved gardening, they collected plants, many exotic, and built their greenhouses, just as the English aristocracy had done before them.

We look at eighteenth-century Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, where, as in the other British colonies, the Elizabethan-era English garden style became the model of what a garden should look like. The plant choices were limited, as were sources for those plants. It is worth noting that at a time when few seed and nursery catalogs appeared in America, the colonists engaged in a vigorous exchange of seeds and plants across the ocean.

Next follows a story of a mid-nineteenth-century country gentleman's landscape, dependent on the ideas of the English picturesque landscape garden. The country estate of Joseph Shipley, in Wilmington, Delaware, established in the 1850s, provides the example. Shipley could afford the leisure of gardening for pleasure, designing a landscape with the parklike style of the English design. Most Americans were farmers, and so more concerned with survival.

The second part of the book (chapters 4 to 7) develops the persuasive hold of the American seed companies and nurseries. The mass-produced catalog proved an important business decision because it was a way to connect with customers across the country. Seed companies, along with nurseries, had published catalogs of one sort or another for decades, but never had they produced the thousands of inexpensive copies that the new technologies of print and illustration made possible after 1870. Cheap newspapers, low printing costs, easy mail delivery, the railroad, and chromolithography, combined with an emerging middle class in the suburbs, contributed to the growth of the business.

The history of the seed and nursery industries of the nineteenth century comes through in the words of the company owners in the introduction section of their catalogs. The essays captured an owner's thoughts and hopes for readers. Here he (most owners were men, though not all) spoke in a friendly, colloquial way about the industry, about new seeds and plants, about how difficult the catalog was to put together, about how important the reputation of the company was, and about how gardening formed an important part of American life. As the Maule Seed Company from Philadelphia put it in its 1892 catalog, "Nothing represents the growth of this business so well as this book [catalog] itself."

The authors of horticultural literature in nineteenth-century America were often the owners of the seed companies and nurseries. They knew not only what the gardener had to plant but also how to plant it. The company owners followed with their own books, magazines, and articles. The catalog covered such topics as soil preparation, watering, bulbs, container planting, and landscaping. The company owner considered himself an educator, not just a purveyor of seeds and plants.

In the catalogs the companies frequently told their own stories of how they used the latest technological developments for printing and illustrating the catalog and also of the newest means of shipping their products. Major themes included the availability of novelty plants; the impressive size of company buildings, extensive trial gardens, and greenhouses; and the use of railroads for shipping. Addressing these themes both in words and in images, a company constructed its relevance to society. The reader could see that the company was progressive and thus surely deserved a customer's business.

This change in our garden story came with an increase in the numbers of newspapers and national magazines dependent on advertising, especially after 1870. The nineteenth-century seed companies and nurseries used the new mass media to sell a standardized garden—their version of the English garden of contemporary fashion—which their customers could easily recognize in articles, illustrations, and ads. For the first time, a mass-media-driven garden became part of the culture.

The third part of the book (chapters 8 and 9) examines the importance of a garden as part of the home landscape for the emerging middle class—but a garden reflecting the English garden style. The middle class, who were defined more and more as consumers by modern advertisers, wanted a standardized product. The gardener that catalogs sought to attract was the woman of the house, who made most of the purchases for the home, while the husband spent the day at work outside the home. Most women wanted a garden like the one that appeared in the catalogs. They would buy the seeds and plants as well as the books and magazines about gardening that came from the seed houses and nurseries, holding on to an ideal of a garden that one day might be theirs.

Philadelphia nurseryman Thomas Meehan wrote in his magazine, *Gardener's Monthly*, “The garden is the mirror of the mind, as truly as the character of a nation is the reflex of the individuals composing it.”¹ He wrote what we still in some sense believe today: show me a garden, and I will tell you what class of people inhabits the home. The garden became a cultural symbol for the middle class. Today, lawns and yards may exist to fulfill some innate human love and need for beauty, but it is more likely that they announce the dignity and responsibility (or perhaps, in some cases, lack thereof) of their owners.²

When, as if in one voice, the catalogs recommended a plant, they exerted an influence unlike any in earlier times, because the production and mass circulation of the catalog made the company's message available across the country. In the mid-1890s, the catalogs trumpeted a novelty plant called the ‘Crimson Rambler’ rose, introduced from England. By the end of the century, most major catalogs listed this plant and included chromolithographs of its bright red color. The ‘Crimson Rambler’ soon became an important addition to the American garden and maintained its popularity for over thirty years.

The final section of the book (chapter 10) concludes with the home landscape, the embodiment of an enduring English garden style. The catalogs taught the middle-class reader how to landscape the home grounds. The

landscape discussed in the catalogs included the lawn, curved walks, groupings of shrubs, trees to line the property, flowerbeds of annuals, and, later, borders of perennials.

The English style of landscape appeared around the country. Horticulturalist Denise Wiles Adams, in her research into heirloom plants from the nineteenth century, wrote, “As I studied the gardening practices of different areas of the United States, it became increasingly clear that landscaping and garden styles remained fairly consistent and homogenous across the continent.”³



In nineteenth-century America, the seed and nursery merchants worked hard to publish catalogs that would both tell their story and sell their products. They considered it their duty to endorse a particular style of garden, an English design, and so they wrote about and illustrated garden and landscape ideals they thought would motivate their customers. They were just doing their job.

Seedsman and Civil War veteran Roland H. Shumway, in his catalog of 1887, discussed how he would like to be remembered: “Good Seeds Cheap! is my motto; and has been ever since I left the tented field as a soldier, and staked the few remaining years of my busy life, in an earnest endeavor, to place good seeds within reach of [the] poorest planters. I will further inform you how we strive to do you good, and not disappoint you. From the beginning of the new year, until after spring planting, my industrious employees work 16 hours, and myself and family 18 or more hours a day. Are we not surely knights at labor? How can we do more? Do we not deserve the patronage of every planter in America?”

Seed merchants such as Burpee and Shumway worked long hours to create a successful business, but they and their nurserymen brethren offered more than seeds and plants. This book tells the story of how the nineteenth-century seed and nursery industry sold the American gardener the English garden.

Featured Plant

Each chapter concludes with a section called “Featured Plant,” discussing a plant that I grow in my own garden. The image is also from my garden.

The plant choice is based on the discussion of that chapter, so it is usually an early plant variety, either native or exotic, though in some cases a newer variety is presented. These plants are still available to the gardener, thus linking the garden of the nineteenth century to today’s home landscape. I give a history of the plant and instructions on how to care for it as well.

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