

# Author Q&A Thomas J. Mickey

*America's Romance with the English Garden*

## **Why did you write this book?**

I wrote the book because I wanted to tell the story from what I found in my research during my year at the Smithsonian in Washington. There I examined hundreds of nineteenth century seed and nursery catalogs. I was amazed at the friendly tone of the company owner in the Introduction section of the catalogs. He cared about his customers, and he wanted them to succeed in planting a garden.

## **What is the book's main idea?**

The book centers on the idea that in the late 1880s for the first time with the rise of the number of newspapers in each city along with national magazines, Americans had a type of garden inspired by the media, and not simply by a small group of family and friends who might offer advice on what to plant and how to arrange a garden. People wanted standardized products like Quaker Oats and Ivory soap. They wanted a garden like the one on the catalog cover.

By then the garden industry, like all businesses of that time, used mass production to grow the seeds, package them, sell them, and send them around the country. Catalogs were printed in the hundreds of thousands with covers in color to illustrate images of the perfect garden.

The seed and nursery catalogs were no longer just selling seeds and plants. They were also selling a style of gardening, the English garden. They branded the garden as English, even though they were familiar with Spanish, Italian, and French gardens. The lawn appeared regularly on the cover of garden catalogs.

## **How did you get interested in this topic?**

For the past twenty years I have examined public relations materials like brochures, catalogs, videos, and press releases to see what they were promoting besides the company's product or service. What amazes me is how we try to persuade others to take up an idea, a candidate, or a product. We have to align it with what is valuable to the customer, like you will attract friends if you use our product; you will have better skin if you use this cream; the car will make your life much happier; you will help the country if you sign up for this service.

## **Your book was based on research you did at the Smithsonian In Washington. How did you get that opportunity at the Smithsonian?**

I applied to the Department of Horticulture Services to study the question of marketing the garden in nineteenth century America. I wanted to explore how garden businesses motivated customers to buy their seeds and plants.

**How did you develop an interest in seed and nursery catalogs of the nineteenth century?**

At the beginning of my time at the Smithsonian, I wondered what could I look at in the archives of such resources now available to me like the National Museum of American History. Many of them had seed and nursery catalog collections. That's where I began, and where I stayed for the whole time: looking at garden catalogs that were produced and distributed throughout the nineteenth century.

**How long did it take you to write the book?**

I wrote the first draft in about a year. Then I realized that it was too factual, too academic. So I had to rewrite it with more focus on narrative and the people involved in the story. After that, I still went through several rewrites. It took about four years of writing, rewriting, and editing.

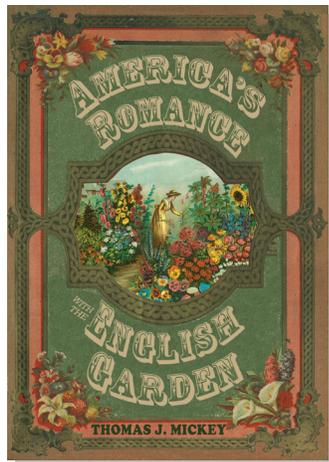
**Any experiences along the way in writing the book that you can share?**

Each chapter ends with a plant from my own garden. I thought that would be a neat way to connect with the reader. In Chapter 9, for example, I discuss the rose 'Crimson Rambler', which became popular in that 1890s, first in England and then in America. At the end of the chapter I included an image of the rose 'Excelsa', which grows in my own garden, and first appeared at about the same time as 'Crimson Rambler'. It replaced the 'Crimson Rambler' as a much better garden variety of rose.

So the fact that I like gardening, and include an image from my own garden, puts a bit of a personal touch on the book.

**Are you a gardener?**

I have been gardening for about thirty years. For me it is an escape but also a way to connect with nature. Because of my many years in the academic world, I am an idea person. I like to have an area of my life where things like soil, insects, weeds, and compost bins demand my attention.



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