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Flowers in the Garden

Flora, Goddess of Flowers



We often use the Latin term *flora* when speaking about plants or flowers, but the name also refers to Flora, the Roman goddess of plants.



Titus Tatius, who ruled with Romulus, is said to have introduced her cult to Rome. Flora's duties were to provide the blooms to flowering plants so they would thrive, grow, and reproduce and to stand as their champion against drought and other disasters. Flora's temple in Rome stood near the Circus Maximus, and her festival, Floralia, was instituted in 238 BC. The celebration included floral wreaths worn in the hair, much as by modern participants in May Day celebrations.

In 1731, Sir John Clerk of Pennycuik wrote a poem called "The Country Seat" about the gardens and estates of England. In the poem he said, "Where

Flora with a Knot of gaudy Flowrs [*sic*] / may dress her lovely head.”¹ To understand the reference, it helps to look at a bit of Roman history. A representation of Flora’s head, distinguished by a floral crown, appeared on coins of the Roman Republic. In paintings of Flora since that time, such a crown has been an essential element.

The wealthy in eighteenth-century England, who had adopted a new, naturalistic landscape design for what they considered the “modern” garden, also developed a love of all things classical Greek and Roman, including horticulture and agriculture. English landscape gardener Batty Langley, in his important book on landscape design, *New Principles of Gardening* (1728), wrote that the landscape should include “a Flower-Garden, enrich’d with the most fragrant Flowers and beautiful Statues,” in particular a depiction of Flora.²

Landowner Henry Hoare’s showplace, Stourhead, west of London, included not only the statue but a temple as well, built in 1745 by landscape gardener and architect Henry Flitcroft. The *London Chronicle* wrote of this temple in 1757, “Here is the figure of the Goddess (i.e. a Ceres or Flora), with her proper emblems, standing in front of you as you open the door.”³ Hoare’s temple stands today, and over its entrance a Latin inscription still reads, “Keep away, anyone profane, keep away.” Hoare wanted any visitor to enter his garden in the right spirit.

American seed company owner George Thorburn also recognized the role of Flora in providing the flowers that mark the good taste of the homeowner, “from the humblest cottage enclosure to the most extensive park and grounds.” He joined others in invoking the figure of Flora, when in 1838 he quoted an earlier article from the *Journal of Health*: “A neglected, weed-grown garden, or its total absence, marks the indolence and unhappy state of those who have been thus neglectful of Flora’s favours.”⁴

James Vick, too, promoted Flora’s spirit in the landscape. He even named a chromolithograph in his magazine *Flora’s Jewels* (fig. 2.1).



The key element in landscape gardening is variety. Even more than concepts such as “natural,” “informal,” or “wild,” even more than the symbolic content



of the design, variety emerged as the most important structural element of the eighteenth-century English landscape garden.⁵ This element of variety included the planting of flowers, especially in the parterre area. “Parterre” refers to a geometric arrangement of beds of plants like boxwood separated by a series of walks or grassed areas. William Shenstone—whose estate “the Leasowes” was considered the preeminent example of the modern landscape garden of the time—divided gardening into three types: kitchen gardening, parterre gardening, and “landskip” or picturesque gardening.⁶



Flowers took on various meanings important at a particular time and place. Flowers in the late-Victorian nineteenth century, for example, represented a link to civility, to community, to morality, to God, all wrapped up in a plant and its flower. Vick sought to encourage gardening with flowers as a way to offer contact with nature, but also to set a moral tone for the home environment of the gardener.

Today, flowers are important for reasons that each gardener might explain in a different way. Some love that they bring color to an otherwise dull setting. The colors also vary depending on the plant variety. Perhaps a gardener chooses only one color for a garden, like the white garden at England’s Sissinghurst Castle or the blue and white garden at Sonnenberg Gardens and Mansion in upstate New York. The color of a flower may bring back memories from childhood gardening with a parent or grandparent. The yellow of the black-eyed Susan reminds one gardener I know of the happy times spent with her mother working in the garden.

That there are so many colors to choose from amazes. The shades of blue could range from very light to a dark, almost purple blue. In a clematis flower you can find a light blue like ‘Ramona’ and then a darker blue like ‘Perle d’Azur.’ Not only can a gardener choose a particular color for a flower, but often within that variety there may be lighter or darker versions. One reason to visit flower gardens is to see what other people are planting and learn the

 *Figure 2.1.* Chromo E. *Flora’s Jewels*. Statuette of Flora holding thirty-seven varieties of flowers. (*Vick’s Floral Guide*, 1874.)

possibilities of color in a flower. Tulips present an array of color, and of course, in some varieties they also offer more than one color on a flower.

The imagery around the garden has long fascinated artists, including writers. We even call “Paradise” a garden. Poets have always been delighted with the beauties of a garden.⁷ They have often proclaimed the glory of flowers. Shakespeare used flowers to express feeling and emotions in the characters of his plays.⁸

Today we use flowers to show feelings of both joy and sorrow. At weddings and other special occasions, like the birth of a new baby in the family, flowers take center stage. The colors are usually light in tone. Flowers also appear at funerals, but often in darker tones to symbolize the darkness of the passing of a loved one.

In both nineteenth-century Europe and America, there was much interest in the language of flowers, which went by the name of “floriography.” A rose meant love. The jonquil meant “I desire a return of affection.”⁹ Each flower defined a feeling or sensation, and people used them to convey that emotional state. An artfully arranged bouquet could be a complete letter. One writer informs us that “between 1827 and 1923, there were at least 98 different flower dictionaries in circulation in the United States.”¹⁰



Not long ago, Boston’s Arnold Arboretum announced that it was sending members of its staff to search for plants both in the United States and abroad. Following a year of planning, eight collectors would be in the field, pursuing scores of target species—just as with many other such quests before and since sponsored by the Arboretum.¹¹ Other public gardens, like Philadelphia’s Longwood Gardens, undertake similar excursions to seek out plants around the world, including trees, shrubs, perennials, and annuals. Many new hydrangea shrubs, for example, have come to the United States from such hunting in gardens around the world. Such hunts ultimately provide the gardener with new plant choices, including new kinds of flowers.

Plant hunting has long been a way for gardeners to enjoy plants that come from other parts of the world. In the sixteenth century, England’s

Hatfield House supported John Tradescant the Elder (1570–1638) in his search for plants in other countries. Since then, but especially in the nineteenth century, England has introduced hundreds of new plants, like the South African *pelargonium*, or geranium. Most of them came from Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Thanks to a healthy nursery trade in both common and exotic plants, these same plant varieties soon came to American gardens as well.

Such novel flower specimens became important in the garden, simply because they were different and new. Those two words will continue to distinguish a plant for generations as the key motivating factor in flower choice for the garden. Often the seed and nursery catalogs promoted a flower simply because it was new or at least unknown to the ordinary middle-class or cottage gardener.

Seed merchants also played a role in determining flower selection by their customers. For instance, James Vick offered his favorite annuals for sale, and customers in turn chose their own favorites from that group. One wrote a poem on her twelve favorite annuals, all offered in the pages of Vick's catalog, and Vick included the poem in his magazine.



The farmer was always on the search for seed that would provide the highest profit from his labor. By the mid-nineteenth century, hybridized seeds for crops like corn, barley, and rice presented farmers with better yields. This happened all over the world, including Europe and the United States, where a young nation was intent on feeding its ever-growing population.

Farmers would display their new grain and vegetable products at fairs, where other farmers would learn about the seeds that had produced such bounty. When a new variety of a plant offered important qualities like better size, color, taste, and disease resistance, farmers were quick to try that new seed.

The same was true in the flower seed industry. As Vick wrote, “Every year seedlings are produced and named which are considered as surpassing their predecessors in some point of excellence.”¹² A better petunia, a stronger pansy, or a verbena with bigger flowers were all possible with hybridizing. By the late nineteenth century, commercial seedsmen were quite important in the spread

of these many new vegetable and flower varieties.¹³ In 1833, for example, Philadelphia nurseryman Robert Buist exhibited thirty-seven varieties of dahlia at the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's annual exhibition. In 1844, nurseryman Charles Mason Hovey of Cambridge, Massachusetts, offered 160 varieties of the dahlia in his catalog. And by 1873, James Vick was cultivating five acres of dahlias in Rochester. In 1878, Vick said, "The *Dahlia* is our best autumn flower. We can depend upon it until frost, no matter how long delayed."¹⁴ Vick made available to his customers dozens of dahlia varieties, most of them the result of hybridizing (fig. 2.2). His praise of a particular plant might be read by a gardener in some far western state like Illinois or Missouri and thereby spread the popularity of that variety to a wider populace.

One nineteenth-century dahlia, 'White Queen,' achieved a reputation as a most desirable plant in the garden. In 1883, the English publication *Gardening Illustrated* called it "the finest white Dahlia in existence—perfection, in fact, in every respect."¹⁵ Another English garden magazine wrote, "Nothing can surpass it either for planting in large masses on lawns or as an autumn bedding plant for large spaces, more especially in parks."¹⁶ Vick recommended this dahlia in his garden magazine as well.

Another white dahlia, 'White Aster,' appeared in 1879 and is still on the market today. Some say it is the oldest dahlia variety still grown. In the nineteenth century, different varieties of dahlia were often planted with one another in the trial garden, resulting in the appearance of new colors and sizes of blossom. The outcome was a rich selection, and hundreds of new dahlias appeared on the market due to such crossing of varieties. It was impossible to keep up with the new cultivars available to a gardener. In 1895, Jacob Alexander from East Bridgewater, Massachusetts—or "the dahlia king," as he referred to himself—grew an immense variety.

Breeding of new plants in a scientific manner, however, did not begin in earnest until the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time, Cornell horticulturist Liberty Hyde Bailey, a prolific writer and early leader in horticultural education in the United States, inaugurated formal plant breeding.¹⁷



❧ Figure 2.2. Dahlias. (*Vick's Monthly Magazine*, 1878.)



Perhaps it is our need for change that drives a gardener to try new plants. Sometimes they work just fine, and other times you wonder why you bothered to plant them at all. Today, catalogs from seed companies or nurseries are important sources for learning about change in flower choices, but of course their true business is to tempt the consumer with new and better plants.

New hybrids afford growers the opportunity to present novel choices to the home garden market. It is not unusual for such new varieties to spend several years in a trial period to make sure that the plants will perform in the garden. Thus, a grower might send out dozens of samples of a new plant to select gardeners to try for a year or two before it comes on the market, if it does at all.



At the same time, however, gardeners continue to plant many of the same flowers every year, just out of habit. Gardeners get used to planting certain varieties in the flower bed, and those varieties remain their choice season after season.

On a trip to a garden center or box store in May to purchase bedding plants, you see the same varieties from the previous year. The store carries the same varieties because the owner understands the importance of recognition on the part of the customer and therefore knows what will sell. Both are dealing with a familiar product.

It is in looking at the plant as a product that we begin to understand why the home gardener of today may display such a limited palette. Today there are two hundred varieties of the perennial *Heuchera*. Who needs that many? A garden center will choose a few that are already familiar to the gardener and perhaps one new variety. It is no surprise that the choice becomes defined for the gardener rather than by the gardener.



A number of factors drove the growth in sales of flower seeds in the second half of the nineteenth century in America. More people around the country, whether middle class or working class, could afford to take up gardening as a hobby. Gardening by then had expanded beyond simply growing vegetables for the table to include ornamental gardening, especially with flowers,

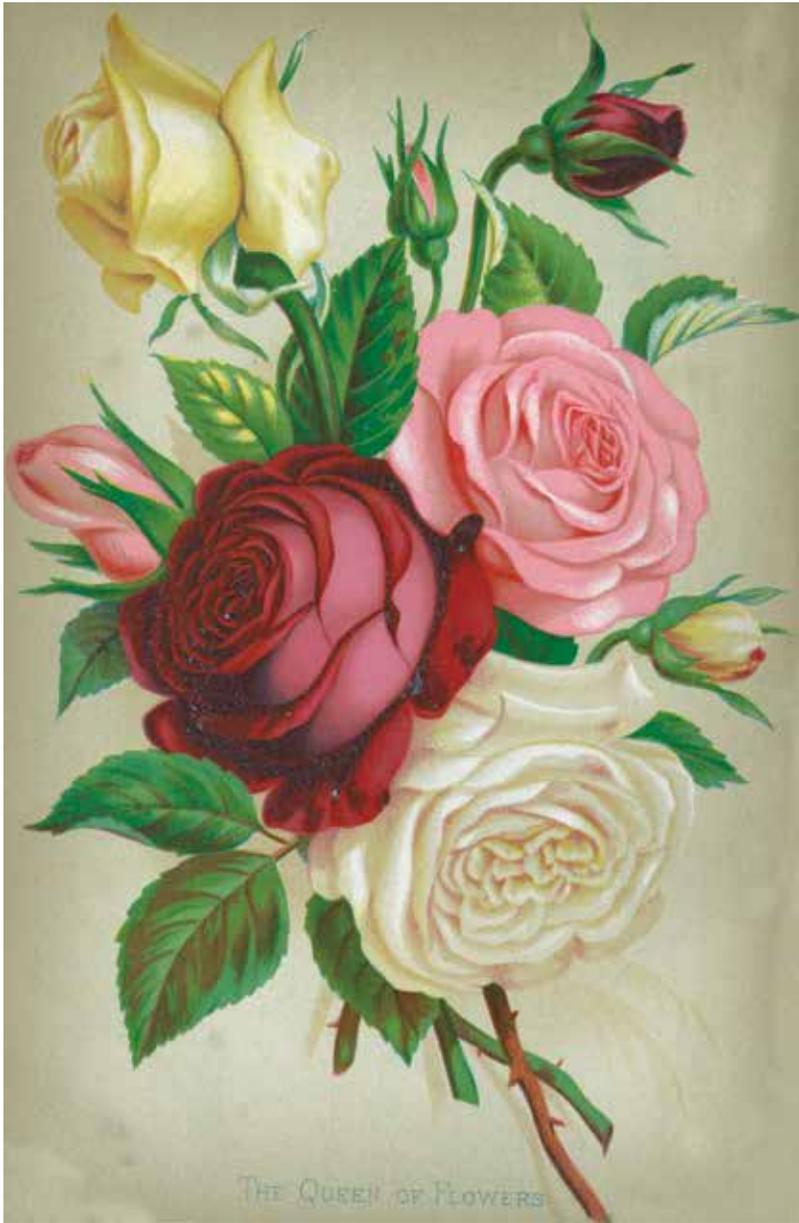


 Figure 2.3. Roses. (*Vick's Magazine*, 1882.)

which helped to fill a bit of the leisure time that people enjoyed. Though newer vegetable varieties were not ignored, gardeners wanted to plant the newest phlox, asters, and petunias in order to enjoy the colors and smells.

Modern advances in communication and transportation spurred the growth of suburbs. Gardening contributed to the social status of the suburban homeowner, whose large lot with its lawn and flower beds became an important indicator that the homeowner had “arrived.”

Whether in the village, suburb, or city, people were buying seeds for the garden from businesses rather than saving their own seeds, just as they bought clothes from a clothing store rather than making their own. They bought ketchup and horseradish from Heinz rather than spending hours in the kitchen preparing such foods, as they had for decades previously. Mass production and distribution of goods for the home also made it possible for James Vick to build his new four-story company headquarters in the residential area of beautiful East Street in Rochester.

Seeds for the garden had to come from a trusted source as a guarantee that the seed would grow, and grow true to type. A gardener did not know if the seeds from this year’s flowers would produce the same flower next year, so every spring the search was on for dependable seeds. Vick guaranteed them to his customers and people trusted him.



Vick’s message was that the gardener could contribute to the moral tone of the country simply by growing flowers. A garden, as he said, would bring the gardener that much closer to that first Garden of Eden. A customer from Kansas wrote to Vick these words of praise: “No missionary to Foreign Fields has ever done more for the common cause of Humanity.”¹⁸ From as far away as China one wrote, “I read your books with delight. You are scattering beauty around the world and brightening homes in all lands.”¹⁹

One correspondent even brought it all back around to the goddess Flora. A Catholic nun, Sister M. Eulalia from West Virginia, wrote, “I have half a mind to say St. Vick, so kind and generous have you proved yourself, and even the Church I am sure will confirm your position at the head of the Goddess Flora’s Calendar.”²⁰