ULTIVATING CANADIAN GARDENS

THE HISTORY OF GARDENING in Canada



An essay by Carol Martin



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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps no other activity has grown so exponentially in recent decades in this country as has gardening. Classified as a leisure activity (although leisure seems hardly the right adjective!), Statistics Canada puts it at the top of the list with more than 80% of adult Canadians claiming to garden to some extent. All signs indicate that this passion for gardening will only increase in the future.

Whether "gardening" means tending a spindly house plant struggling to survive in the dark winter days of a downtown apartment, or dedicating hundreds of hours and more dollars to a lush acreage with woods, ponds, streams, ornamental plantings, there are few who do not respond to the sight of a new blossom unfurling, or the gustatory pleasure of the first tomato off the vine.

The exhibition, "Cultivating Canadian Gardens", tells the story of the development of gardening in Canada through the books, periodicals, and printed materials collected, for the most part, by the National Library of Canada. It begins with the earliest recorded information on the plantings of the Huron Indians who had been tending their crops long before Europeans arrived in North America, and concludes with a brief look at the flood of printed material now available across the country.

The Garden in History

The history of gardening as a formal activity is a long and fascinating one. Since the Garden of Eden, human life on earth has been inextricably entwined with plant life. But the cultivation of plants requires societies that are settled, at least for the length of a growing cycle. Our recorded history of organized planting goes back some 4000 years to the famous Chinese and Egyptian gardens, and, most beautiful of all, those of Persia (the Persian word for garden and paradise are the same) where gardens of east and west met. The Roman Empire carried the idea of extensive gardens to Italy and France and as far as Britain. In the Americas, maize (corn), was under cultivation as early as 5000 years ago.

PLANTING THE SEEDS

Native Agriculture and Plant Use

When Europeans first arrived in what is now Canada, many Native peoples were living by hunting and fishing alone, but others were practising agriculture, either directly or by tending or harvesting wild crops. The Hurons were the most adept of the farmers. They cultivated large acreages, devoted in particular to their most important crops, the "three sisters" — maize, beans, and squash. In the West, more than 200 plants were used for food, medicine and other purposes by the Coastal First Peoples. When the Europeans arrived, Native gardeners passed on their knowledge of indigenous plants and, in turn, adopted many of the new seeds and fruit trees brought by the immigrants.

The earliest records of the farming activities of the Native peoples are contained in *Relations des Jésuites*, 1611-1672. More recent writings by Bruce G. Trigger, in such books as *The Huron: Farmers of the North* (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1990), include a wider range of information from a number of sources.

Canadian Flora

European gardeners were fascinated by the plants being discovered in the New World. Native plants of North America were gathered first by the Jesuit missionaries, who were encouraged to observe and collect them. Early in the nineteenth century, the European passion for collecting new plants and trees was reaching its peak. Stories of the early North American naturalists who fed this passion are filled with physical discomfort and danger, as well as disappointing losses when plants and seeds were lost at sea.

There now exist many flora (systematic descriptions of plants particular to a region) describing the plants of Canada, from H.J. Scoggan's four-volume *The Flora of Canada*, to individual volumes for each of the provinces and territories, as well as more narrowly based studies of unusual localities. The first book on the subject of plant life in Canada was written in Latin by Jacques Philippe Cornut, a physician in Paris who had never set foot in this country, and entitled *Iac. Cornuti doctoris medici parisiensis canadensium* ... (Paris: Venundantur apud Simonem Le Moyne, 1635).

The earliest of the nineteenth-century naturalists in Quebec was Abbé Léon Provancher. His *Flore canadienne* (Québec: Darveau, 1862) is filled with clear, detailed, scientific descriptions of the plants of the region. Catharine Parr Traill was not a botanist in the formal sense but a keen observer of the plants around her and her *Studies of Plant Life in Canada: Or, Gleanings from Forest, Lake or Plain* (Ottawa: Woodburn, 1885) and *Canadian Wild Flowers* illustrated by Agnes Fitzgibbon (Montreal: John Lovell, 1868) are classics of the period.

More recently, frère Marie-Victorin, after years of work and nearly a hundred papers on the subject, published his magnificent work, *Flore laurentienne* (Montréal: La Salle, 1935). At much the same time, John Macoun, one of the country's foremost botanists, was amassing his collection of more than 100 000 specimens that formed the basis of the Dominion Herbarium. (Waiser, W.A. *The Field Naturalist: John Macoun, the Geological Survey and Natural Science*. Toronto: University of Toronto, 1989.) Meanwhile, in the Yukon, the amateur collector Martha Black was putting together the first record of wild flowers native to that region.

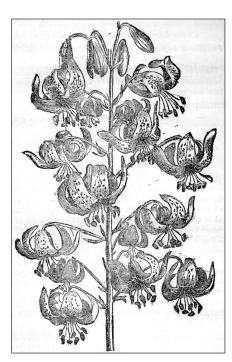
Pioneer Gardening

The pioneer era of gardening in Canada stretches from the seventeenth century, with Champlain's first settlement at Isle Sainte-Croix on the south shore of the Bay of Fundy, and the gardens at early northern Hudson's Bay Company Posts, to more recent settlers who struggled with the land – sometimes fertile but just as often rock-ridden or dense with forests – to raise the crops on which their survival depended. Their letters, diaries, books, sketches, and paintings give an idea of just what a daunting task this could be.

Louis Hébert, who supervised the gardens of Port Royal, the second settlement established by Champlain, later settled at Quebec and is known as New France's first farmer. (Couillard-Despres, Azarie. *Louis Hébert, premier colon canadien et sa famille*. Paris: Saint-Augustin, Desclée DeBrouwer & Cie, c1913.)

The sophisticated gardens of eighteenth-century France, based on logic, order, discipline, and beauty, were adapted to the *potager* requirements of eighteenth-century Louisbourg, and Pehr Kalm, who visited Quebec City in 1749, noted the flourishing kitchen gardens and listed the vegetables he found there (*Travels into North America...* Warrington, England: W. Eyres, 1770-1771.) One of the few early Quebec, French-language books on gardening was by Abbé Provancher (*Le Verger, le potager et le parterre dans la province de Québec*. Québec: C. Darveau, 1874). In it he gives useful advice for growing fruits, vegetables and flowers. As he notes in the preface, there was no shortage of gardening books in the French language, but none specific to the climate and resources of Quebec.

The United Empire Loyalists who arrived in Upper Canada from the United States in the 1780s and '90s brought with them seeds, plants and trees, and different methods of cultivation.



"Lilium tigrinum" (Tiger lily): illustration from Le Verger, le potager et le parterre dans la province de Québec... by Abbé L. Provancher (Quebec: C. Darveau, 1874).

Much of our detailed knowledge of the day-to-day life of pioneers in Upper Canada comes from the books and letters written by sisters Catharine Parr Traill and

Susannah Moodie (best known for *Roughing It in the Bush*). In *The Backwoods of Canada* (London: Knight, 1836), Traill describes her early years in the Peterborough area. She and her husband arrived in 1832. Their first tasks were to clear and fence the land, build a house, dig a well and construct a root cellar. By 1834, they had already established a garden and were growing peas, beans, lettuce, cabbage and root crops, surprised that everything grew so quickly in the short season.

One of the earliest Canadian books on growing flowers (an adaptation of a British publication), and probably the smallest in spite of the length of its title, (*The Cottage Florist for the Province of Ontario: Being a Compendious and Practical Guide to the Cultivation of Flowering Plants, Adapted to the Late Province of Upper Canada.*Toronto: Bain) was published in 1868. Small though it is, it has a few words to say about many of the shrubs, annuals and perennials found in today's gardens and includes a monthly guide to activities, a favourite subject for gardening books then and now.

The importance of apples and the development of the "McIntosh Red" is a particularly fascinating story, beginning with John McIntosh's discovery of a tree with particularly tasty fruit in 1811. His son, Allan, learned how to graft branches from the tree onto other root stock and soon the tree had been reproduced by the thousands, making the McIntosh one of our most popular fruit crops.

In the West, pioneers faced many of the same challenges as did those in the East, such as Susan Allison's record of the difficulties of protecting early crops from the black bears illustrates.

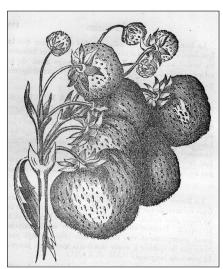
CULTIVATING THE GARDEN

From the 1890s through the early decades of the twentieth century a social awakening, known as the "social gospel", spread through most of the western world. This Protestant movement, based on the idea that no personal salvation was possible without social salvation led to a wide range of reforms. One such reform was a new emphasis on nature and the importance of improving the landscape in and around the cities. This, in turn, led to an increased interest in gardens and their role in the new, socially responsible Canada. An excellent source for the history of gardening during this period can be found in Edwinna von Baeyer's *Rhetoric and Roses: A History of Canadian Gardening 1900-1930* (Markham, Ont.: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1984).

By the early nineteenth century, Lower Canada was already into a second generation of

landscaping gardens on its great estates. The wealthy fur and lumber barons were building elegant homes with elaborate grounds and gardens. Towards the end of the century, serious gardeners in Ontario were into second-generation gardening as well and were beginning to produce helpful guides about gardening in the Canadian environment, or writing loving descriptions of their own gardens and gardening practices. Seed companies had become well established and were including in their catalogues beautiful art illustrating the kinds of flowers, fruits and vegetables growers dream of.

D.W. Beadle, the son of nurseryman Chauncey Beadle, was the first editor of the *Canadian Horticulturist*. As such, he was an appropriate person to write the detailed guide supported by the Fruit Growers' Association of Ontario, *Canadian Fruit, Flower and Kitchen Gardener* (Toronto: James Campbell, 1872). Not surprisingly, it emphasizes the cultivation of fruits and how to successfully sustain an orchard. For many years it was the only English-language, comprehensive text on gardening in the Canadian climate.



"Albanie de Wilson": illustration of strawberries from *Le Verger, le potager et le parterre dans la province de Québec...* by Abbé L. Provancher (Quebec: C. Darveau, 1874).

It was nearly three decades later before two new books of gardening lore were published, one in French, one in English: *Le Potager: Jardin du cultivateur* (Québec: Darveau, 1902) by Alec Santerre and Annie L. Jack's *The Canadian Garden: A Pocket Help for the Amateur* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1903).

Landscape Architecture

Landscape architecture, the formal planning, design and management of private and public landscapes, began seriously in the late nineteenth century in Canada. Early in the new century, as part of the national movement to beautify the nation, landscape architects such as Frederick G. Todd of Montreal were commissioned to prepare plans for the Plains of Abraham, the National Capital, and a number of other parks and cities across the country. Some of the most useful information on home landscaping can be found in the illustrated historical atlases. Although clearly idealized, these charming landscapes, with their lively dogs and horses, give us an idea of what homesteaders of the time were aiming for.

Writing in Belleville, Ontario where he was a landscape gardener with extensive expertise in designing cemeteries (he designed the Belleville Cemetery, Union Cemetery in Port Hope and Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Toronto), Heinrich Engelhardt produced the first Canadian book on landscape gardening: *The Beauties of Nature Combined with Art* (Montreal: Lovell, 1872).

In 1930, the Canadian Horticultural Council initiated what was described as a Dominion-wide campaign to beautify Canada by planning and planting public and private grounds with ornamental trees and shrubs and flowering plants. A pamphlet by M.H. Howitt, *Beautifying the Home Grounds of Canada* (Ottawa: Department of Agriculture, 1930), was issued as a guide.

Railway Station Gardens

Influenced by the social reform ideas of the period, public institutions began to take responsibility for improving the property within their management. For the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) this coincided with the need to promote the fertility of the Prairies in order to encourage immigration. The CPR started by providing seeds as an encouragement to station agents to cultivate small gardens on station property. The idea was enthusiastically adopted across the country. A forestry department was set up to formalize the program, and greenhouses were built to give plants an early start before they were distributed. Teams of experts crossed the country inspecting the gardens. Other railway lines, not to be outdone, started their own programs. As the station agents gained expertise, it was often they who helped to create local horticultural societies and garden clubs.

Gardening in the Schools

James Wilson Robertson, an early educational reformer, believed that rural life could be reformed by making practical knowledge more available on a local basis and by adapting education to make farming more attractive to children. His view was shared by Sir William Macdonald, a Montreal tobacco merchant and philanthropist. Their campaign, usually referred to as the "Macdonald movement", got under way with the new century,

and school gardening was among the most successful of the practical elements it encouraged.

Teachers were sent to take special courses and gardens were planted and tended in many communities – at home as well as at school. The movement culminated with what were known as Consolidated Schools, financed by Macdonald, in Ontario and the Maritime Provinces (Herbert Francis Sherwood, *Children of the Land: The Story of the Macdonald Movement in Canada*. New York: The Outlook, 1910). In these schools, each pupil tended his or her own garden. There was a firm belief that working with the hands built moral character. The idea spread westward, but the costs of funding such schools proved to be impossible to maintain.

THE CULTIVATORS

Horticultural Societies and Garden Clubs

Gardening seems to encourage communication and sharing. Even now when growing information is readily available in libraries and bookstores, on radio and television, gardeners tend to find personal discussion more satisfying. Imagine then how important it must have been in earlier times when seeds were hard to come by and little information on the limits of the Canadian climate was available. We will probably never know when the first garden club met, although there are records of horticultural societies in Montreal and Toronto as early as the 1820s and, '30s. Many such meetings would have gone unrecorded and of the many, many records that were kept only a few remain. There were certainly clubs and associations from east to west before the turn of the century, and they all traded seeds and information, held flower shows, beautified public spaces, sent food in time of war, and worked together to develop special gardens for the benefit of all. In many cases, it was the garden clubs and horticultural societies who researched and recorded the history of gardening in the various regions of Canada and, during Canada's

centennial year, many locally published histories came into print.

"Huckleberry": illustration from *Canadian Fruit, Flower and Kitchen Gardener* by D.W. Beadle (Toronto: James Campbell & Son, 1872).

Experimental Farms and Seed Nurseries

The plants we grow have changed and developed, often dramatically, over the decades. One result has been a wider range of flowers, fruits and vegetables, and hardier plants more resistant to disease. Another has been, ironically, the loss of many of the older varieties, the delicately scented and fragile flowers, the easily bruised but more flavourful vegetables. Two forces continue to reinforce this trend. The hybridizers and nurseries work to create plants that will withstand drought; fruits and vegetables that will ship without damage; and larger, more colourful flowers. Furthermore, those who wish to protect our heritage seeds and keep alive the gene pool from which more modern plants have derived, encourage the growth of the valuable older seed stocks.

In the nineteenth century, gardeners and farmers gained most of their information on plants from friends, the very few books that were available, and newspapers and periodicals. More formal help became available in 1886 when the Department of Agriculture established the Central Experimental Farm just outside Ottawa (now within the city limits), and subsequently a number of experimental farms or stations across the country. There the staff developed hardy strains of plants that would survive in the Canadian climate.

The hiring of Isabella Preston, the first woman hybridist in Canada, in 1920 marked the beginning of an emphasis on the breeding of flowering plants and shrubs. She created nearly 200 hybrids. Many of these were lilies, a flower in which she took a life-long interest (*Lilies for Every Garden*. New York: Orange Judd, 1947). Trevor Cole, Dominion Arborist at the Farm until his recent retirement, has written a number of valuable books on gardening both for Agriculture Canada and for commercial publishers. The Farm's own story is told in a new book, *Ottawa's Farm: A History of the Central Experimental Farm* by Helen Smith (Burnstown, Ont.: General Store Publishing House, 1996).

In New Brunswick, Roscoe A. Fillmore was developing new perennials and shrubs that would withstand the harsh climate along the Atlantic coast, while on the prairies, Frank Leith Skinner made his home in Dropmore, Manitoba famous for his new varieties of roses, lilies and crab apples.

Botanical Gardens

Botanical gardens and arboreta offer beautiful displays of interesting and often unusual plants. They also play an important role in research and education, as well as provide general information to the public. Most are connected with a university or are government-funded institutions. The directory of Canadian Botanical Gardens and Arboreta lists nearly 80 of these special gardens, from the Botanical Garden at Oxen Pond in St. John's to the Yukon Botanical Garden in Whitehorse. One of the most interesting is the Devonian Botanic Garden in Alberta, while the largest are the Montreal Botanical Garden and the Royal Botanical Gardens in Hamilton.

Heritage Seeds and Gardening

With the increasing interest in gardening and the development of hybrid seeds in the 1960s and '70s came a growing dependence on showy annual flowers that bloom all summer long, and a move away from the charming, often scented, old-fashioned annuals and perennials that once flowered for a few short weeks in the gardens of an earlier period. Seed experts began to worry that so many of the heirloom seeds were being lost, and amateur gardeners began to search out the flowers they remembered from the gardens of their childhood. The result has been an interest in recreating or maintaining historic gardens, and a desire to add traditional plants to the home garden.

The Heritage Seed Program (now Seeds of Diversity), initiated in 1984 under the auspices of the Canadian Organic Growers, boasts hundreds of members across the country. They seek out endangered seeds (sometimes preserved by a single family) and, through a yearly exchange, give new life to genetic strains that might otherwise be lost. For almost a decade, the driving force behind the program was the appropriately named Heather Apple who managed the organization from her country home in rural Ontario. Maintaining genetic diversity is essential since changing conditions can easily wipe out

the hybrids now so popular. If this happens, a wide range of heritage seeds will be required.

Sometimes it seems that every hamlet, every village, every city and region has a famous garden. It might be widely renowned and noted in books and travel guides, it might be the subject of a newspaper column from time to time, or it might only be the garden that neighbours love to walk by and introduce to their friends. Some of the more renowned of these are the Halifax Public Gardens, William Lyon Mackenzie King's Kingsmere just north of Ottawa, the Butchart Gardens in Victoria, and the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden in Vancouver. Guides to the heritage or specialty gardens of Quebec such as *Guide des beaux jardins du Québec* by Benoît Prieur (La Prairie, Québec: Broquet, 1992) and *Promenades dans les jardins anciens du Québec* by Paul-Louis Martin and Pierre Morisett (Montréal: Boréal, 1996) make it easy to find the many beautiful gardens in that province.

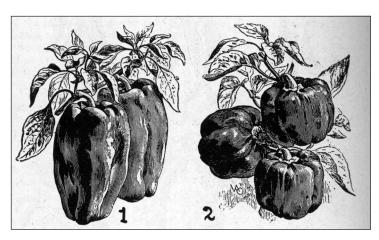
For the contemporary gardener, good advice on how to create a heritage garden is contained in, *A Heritage Garden for Your Ottawa House* by N.E.M. Smith (Ottawa: Department of Recreation and Culture, 1990).

REAPING THE HARVEST

Gardening Today

Canadian Books in Print for 1997 lists 190 English-language titles under the categories of gardening. How different this is from even two or three decades ago! In 1973, the first year a subject catalogue was published, only 26 titles were listed. When the first modern, general gardening title was published in 1970, Chatelaine's Gardening Book: The

Complete Guide to Garden Success by Lois Wilson (Toronto: Doubleday), the author was able to include only one Canadian book (a Oueen's Printer booklet on shrubs) among the 43 others recommended for use. A similar increase, on a smaller scale, has more recently taken place with French-language books. The turning point seems to have been about 1976, just about the time the magazine *Harrowsmith* appeared in response and as a stimulation to the back-to-theland movement. Within the last decade, the number of Canadian gardening books published has



"Piment Ruby King" and "Piment carré doux d'Amérique": illustration of peppers from *La Culture des légumes...* by Gabriel Billault (La Trappe, Québec: Institut agricole d'Oka, 1935).

increased each year. There are now bookstores in several cities devoted solely to gardening, and even antiquarian book dealers who make this their speciality.

Harrowsmith

The Harrowsmith story is a Canadian phenomenon. Created in small town Ontario by the Magazine American expatriate James Lawrence, the magazine was immediately successful and was soon winning prestigious awards. The first issue of *Harrowsmith* was on the stands in May of 1976. Over the course of the next 20 years the company published a whole shelf of books under their book imprint, including Jennifer Bennett's *The Northern Gardener* (Camden East, Ont.: Camden House, 1982) and Patrick Lima's *The Harrowsmith Perennial Garden* (Camden East, Ont.: Camden House, 1981).

The New Experts

During the past decade, not only have a wealth of garden books been published, but a number of recognized garden writers have emerged to write on a wide range of topics of interest to the growing field of hobbyists and professional gardeners – writers such as

Marjorie Harris, Benoit Prieur, Lois Hole, Mark Cullen, and Edwinna von Baeyer – whose opinions are valued and trusted.

Some of the most charming recent garden books are those in which the author writes personally about his or her own garden. The books might convey a lot of information about gardening along the way, but the real pleasure lies in the stories, the personalities, and the passion that they convey.

From Anne Hébert writing about Louis Hébert as the country's first gardener to Lorna Crozier's imaginative vegetable poems, creative writers have long been fascinated by gardens.

Gardening Books of Every Variety

In the 1990s gardening books covering almost every conceivable topic, it seems, have been published. No doubt even more will be produced in the coming decade. The hunger of people to read ever more on the subject, the desire of practitioners to share information, and the success of garden books have ensured that this trend will continue. Books that concentrate on one section of the country, or one type of flower, or one popular – or unusual – vegetable will continue to roll off the presses for some time to come. Added to these are the new specialized magazines that crop up each month. Gardeners all across the country will be kept busy reading through the long Canadian winters when gardening itself is only a dream of perfection.

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