



**PISCATAQUA  
PAPERS**

*Gardening  
from the  
Merrimack  
to the  
Kennebec*

# *Colonial Compromise*

*Sarah R. Childs*

**T**HIS is one horticulturalist's compromise with the antiquarians. I presume it will be more popular with the horticulturalists than with the antiquarians.

I have, for the past eight years, been Garden Chairman of the Society of Colonial Dames in the State of New Hampshire, who maintain The Moffat-Ladd House in Portsmouth. The house was built in 1762 and the gardens cover nearly two acres.

At first, it was just a delightful horticultural operation. Then we started hearing the words 'Museum Houses' and 'Museum Gardens' and it all became a different problem. Of necessity, I have acquired some knowledge of Colonial Gardens and more of how to compromise.

The reason for compromise is that, as an horticulturalist, I cannot bring myself to use inferior plant material just to be traditional. A great many of the 17th and 18th century plants are beautiful, and still used and loved by us today. There has been no need to improve them. Others, due to the work of the plant breeders, have been changed and are much better. The twentieth century hybrids of these are more compact, robust, and disease resistant, have larger blossoms, a longer flowering season, and come in much more pleasing colors. Could it be that the Garden of Eden was mostly magenta?

There are certain plants that fulfill definite requirements in our gardens. All of these may not be on the lists of Colonial Flowers. However, to rationalize — certainly many plants from foreign countries were brought home by travellers and used in their individual gardens, if not generally. This gives us a slight — if questionable — justification for using them. But, if we need them, should we have to substitute with something less desirable?

I, personally, feel that we should try to reproduce the atmosphere and feeling of the eighteenth century garden without confining ourselves to ALL its limitations. Obviously, this could be a very controversial statement.

I believe that the design of a garden, its background, its accessories, and the arrangement of its planting is more important in creating an atmosphere than is its actual plant material.

In the Colonial Gardens, most of these factors were the result of both necessity and heredity.

The fact that practically every garden was enclosed was certainly primarily due to necessity! It was to keep the animals out. First, especially in New England, we had the 'front door' gardens. These were usually fenced in with wood, were quite small, and, always, contained the most precious plants. They were safe from chickens, cows, and horses.

Then, when life became easier and more gracious, there were the formal gardens, usually at the back of the house. They were enclosed by brick or stone walls, hedges, snake fences, or more elaborate painted ones which were sometimes combined with brick. Although these walls or hedges gave the added boon of privacy, they were primarily to shut out the uncultivated land and, again, the animals.

Every garden, small or large, had herbs. This was definitely a necessity. It provided medicines for the family, as well as seasoning for their food.

There was frequently a place for vegetables within the enclosure, and,

also, for fruit trees. These trees were often espaliered and the art of grafting was well known and much used.

Heredity played an important part. Seeds were brought with the settlers from England, Holland, and France. These thrived when planted in the rich soil. Many native plants were used too, and the general effect was of crowded abundance. In addition to the seeds, the settlers brought with them the memories, plans, and traditions of their home gardens.

These gardens were largely formal and architectural in character. The plan was definitely geometric and symmetrical, giving a feeling of balanced straight lines. There were many paths — either of brick, marl, pebbles, or crushed oyster shells. The reason that the paths were never grassed was that the lawn-mower was not invented until 1868. Orchards were mowed with scythes, but grass paths could not be kept neatly trimmed.

The service walks were practical and direct but the paths in the garden made geometric designs. Knots and mazes were popular and, later on, there was an enthusiasm for parterres.

The beds were usually edged with borders of box, privet, hyssop, and sometimes germander.

Many garden accessories were used but practically no statuary. Ornamental bee-hives were very popular. Benches, arbors, trellises, and even dovescotes were common, and a sun-dial was considered a necessity. Fountains were used in the south — if at all.

If we keep or reproduce the plan of the Colonial Garden, make use of the accessories typical of the period, include herbs, attempt to achieve the same abundance of bloom, use as many of the old plants as possible, then, I think, we have created the feeling and atmosphere of a Colonial Garden. And if, in getting this effect we have profited by the great strides in plant breeding that have been made in the past three hundred years — is it not a satisfactory compromise between the horticulturalist and the antiquarian? I believe it is. Even museum houses have compromised to the extent of installing modern plumbing.

## *Colonial Gardens*

*Ruth D. Mathes*

FLOWERS and gardens have been a source of great joy to mankind since the world began. The Chinese have a wise saying which was found in a book of proverbs. "If you would be happy for a week, take a wife; if you would be happy for a month, kill your pig; but if you would be happy all your life, plant a garden."