

# Cottage Gardening in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century England



A Research project on reconstructing  
Renaissance gardens

The Massachusetts Center for Interdisciplinary Renaissance Studies

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“I found that some of the gardens had grape arbors, did anyone else find that?” a student in the group asks. “Yeah, but I heard they were more of a treat for the wealthy manors, the lower income commoner cottages had wild varieties or basic fruit like apples and gooseberries,” someone answers.

“I read that too, and that they used the prickly fruit bushes as part of the fencing to keep animals and unwanted visitors out,” another offers. The conversation continues in this way in the furnished dining room of The Massachusetts Center for Interdisciplinary Renaissance Studies not far from the University of Massachusetts campus. To look at it, one could almost believe the room was a scene from the Renaissance period: the shelves are tastefully arranged with medieval artifacts and sculptures, richly colored tapestries drape the walls and the central table is decorated with wood carvings. But it is actually a sunny fall day in the year 2012 during one of meetings of the new initiative by the center, UMASS staff and Five College students to create replicas of English commoner cottage gardens from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. During the Middle Ages, these gardens were emerging as valued sources of food, medicine and recreational aesthetics. Medieval literature abounds with references of castle gardens as luxurious mazes, romantic scenes of courtly love and displays of royal wealth, but the story of commoner gardens, known as cottage gardens, is little known.

The original project hypothesis was that English cottage gardens changed dramatically from the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the 15<sup>th</sup> century after Columbus’ voyage, which introduced new plants and goods from the New World. However, a semester of research, my collaborative group found that this was not immediately the case, firstly because the exchange of goods, customs and resources took a long time in the period of slow

transportation and commerce, but also because the hypothesis centralized around the gardens of the lower class which would not have had access to the expensive foreign goods. Although the gardens did eventually change to reflect Columbus' voyage it was not to happen within the hypothesis 14<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century timeframe.

As a student member of this research project, I spent my fall semester investigating various aspects of 14<sup>th</sup> century English agriculture and cottage gardening and blogged regularly about my findings to exchange information with the other project members. At first, I researched the general time period to give historical event context to the gardening and later branched out to examine studies about plants cultivated through evidence from archaeological digs, period gardening books and manuscripts, daily life and even cookbooks. By using a variety of resources, I was able to gain insight on not only how gardens were designed and what plants were cultivated, but also how they were used in daily life.

Despite contemporary perceptions of the Middle Ages being a glorious period of daring quests, magic, fancy court life and courtly love, the 14<sup>th</sup> century was a hard time for Europe. One of the most significant events was the bubonic plague, or the "Black Death" from 1347 to 1351 that killed an estimated 25-50% of the European population<sup>1</sup>. It is believed that cottage gardens first became common in the aftermath of the plague, when the high mortality caused vast tracks of previously peasant-owned land to be left untended<sup>2</sup>. This change was a sharp contrast from the previous centuries of escalating food prices, famine and limited fertile land<sup>1</sup> whose abrupt halt due to the plague allowed for personal garden plots to be constructed near houses<sup>2</sup> as land was redistributed, and thus the birth of the cottage garden.

The term “cottage garden” refers to a style of garden begun by lower commoner classes directly outside of their cottage homes. Predominantly functional gardens, they varied in structure and arrangement from cottage to cottage, although they often shared plant species and are typically described as densely cultivated lawns of flowers, herbs and vegetables for culinary, decorative and medicinal purposes <sup>2</sup>. The size ranged from 100 yards to  $\frac{1}{4}$  of an acre<sup>3</sup> and the design depended on the cottage owner’s whims, needs and resources. Having a cottage garden was highly convenient, since vegetables and herbs used daily could be harvested right outside the house to be dried or used immediately, as opposed to planting in the faraway fields used for planting grains and vegetables in high quantities.

Local manors and castles had gardens as well, but were more elaborate and varied than the cottage gardens, which were considered humble and quaint<sup>3</sup>. In the earlier part of the century, both of these garden types were fairly simple, usually surrounded by a hedge or fence, with a few small trees, herbs and flowers. But these high-class gardens were constantly experiencing “improvements” in the form of new plants and designs inspired by new art and Italian styles<sup>2</sup>. Although they were fancier than cottage gardens with grape arbors, hedge fences, and hybrid roses, the gardens were more minimally used for harvesting produce and more a space for aesthetic appreciation and socializing, especially for women<sup>4</sup>.

The new public interest in designing gardens inspired an outpouring of garden romanticism in the form of books and poetry. In fact, the first gardening book ever recorded, *The Feate of Gardening*, was published around 1440 by Jon Gardener (probably a pseudonym), which provided cultivation tips for many garden species<sup>5</sup>, a clear indication of

gardening growing as an art from its simple beginnings. Although the illiterate commoners could not access the information directly from this book, they became knowledgeable by observing and working in the castles (some even as the castle gardeners) and through wisdom passed down through the generations. Clearly even without the validation of my project's original Columbus' voyage impact hypothesis, these gardens were developing on their own through local exchange and refinement.

Gardening was not only common in castles and cottages, but also churches, abbeys and monasteries. One example is Paisley Abbey, a Cluniac monastery built in 1163 in the town of Paisley, seven miles from Glasgow, Scotland<sup>6</sup>. In an Archaeobotany study, the contents of river silt deposits close to the abbey were dated to be from the 15th century and the author found cookware artifacts and fish and animal bones, which showed that the monks had a meat diet, but she also found many culinary, household and medicinal plant remains<sup>7</sup>. Using the nut and seed fragments and plant parts, she was able to identify plant species and researched their uses in 15th century life and monasteries. By studying the monastery landscape and history she also determined which of the plants were locally grown versus purchased from elsewhere<sup>7</sup>.

One of my main goals this semester was to develop a list on my blog of the plants that were typically grown in cottage gardens to utilize in the following semester and summer garden creation. The following subheadings summarize the most dominant of each with a list of more detailed plant types included at the end of the essay.

## **Vegetables**

The four major vegetable staples were garlic, leeks, onions and turnips. Leeks were

extremely common in the everyday diet to consume cooked or stewed into a potage soup and were a staple during the religious months of Lent<sup>3</sup>. Onions and garlic were also essential ingredients to add flavor to otherwise bland or spoiled food. Belonging to the family Rapus, turnips were even mentioned in a medical context in an early medieval period book called *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, by Ibn Butlân, which combines beautiful manuscript illustrations with medical herbal advice<sup>8</sup>. According to this book, turnips were supposedly best when long and dark in pigmentation and helped to prevent body swelling<sup>8</sup>. Other vegetables included greens such as borage, a spinach-like green often incorporated into stews<sup>3</sup>.

## **Herbs**

Herbs were typically hardy<sup>2</sup> and likely tolerant of low soil nutrient and temperature extremes. Major herbs included parsley, mint, thyme, rosemary and comfrey. The great diversity of herbs cultivated can be attributed to the commoner's reliance on them for not only culinary flavoring purposes, but also medicinal. Sage and hyssop were commonly used to flavor foods, but were also the supposed cure of leprosy. As another example, today, sweet majorum is not as well known as its similar smelling counterpart, oregano. In *Tacuinum Sanitatis* it is advised to harvest when small and aromatic for curing colds and blood purification<sup>8</sup>. Herbs were also used to scent the cottage and enjoyed for their other aesthetic assets when they flowered. It was not uncommon in commoner cottages and castles alike to find branches of herbs called strewing herbs scattered on the floor to improve and disguise ambient smells.

## **Flowers**

Although some flowers like roses were used for medicinal and culinary purposes, they mainly contributed a decorative aspect to the densely planted garden, although many flowers also doubled as herbs. The most popular flower in all classes of the Middle Ages was the rose, which represented idealic beauty and perfection. Generally trellised in arbors or grown in bushes they were usually the wild country species transplanted from the meadows in cottage gardens, while the wealthiest castles and manors could obtain hybrids from abroad<sup>4</sup>. Along with appearance, aroma was another important factor in what influenced the presence of particular garden flowers as evidenced by the commonality of the aromatic lavender, hollyhock and angelica<sup>9</sup>.

With this great abundance of garden produce one may wonder what the commoner did with it all. Town markets and fairs were very common places to sell and buy produce, but during the 14<sup>th</sup> century fruits and vegetables were very cheap<sup>3</sup>. One English market account book recorded a castle purchased enough leeks for a forty-person household for only a few pence<sup>3</sup>! Thus, it was logical that cottage garden commoners did not put in time and effort to sell in markets except for their field produce since the labor and compensation of selling and cultivation was disproportionate on the small cottage garden scale. The majority of cottage garden produce was consumed at home, although some was traded between neighbors and townspeople to settle debts or pay for goods<sup>3</sup>.

## **Diet**

The food staples of medieval diets varied largely on social class. While the high-

classes enjoyed elaborate banquets focus on fruits, grains and fatty meats, a diet of vegetables was considered a poor man's diet<sup>3</sup>. Examples of this contrast can be found in cookbooks recipes and records of court feasts, such as the cookbook from the cooks of English King Richard II's kitchen. Published in 1390 and maintained by Samuel Pegge from the 17th century, the *The Forme of Cury* cookbook scroll has a large variety of recipes, obviously since it was from the king's court it is on the higher end of the typical diet, but there are a few simpler dishes of the commoner class meals<sup>10</sup>. Not a lot of detailed information of commoner meals exists since their food was not gourmet, merely what was economically available.

The 14<sup>th</sup> century abounded with beliefs and misconceptions about the health affects of vegetables and herbs. Because a king once died after eating a peach during a meal, the belief arose that peaches putrefy the stomach if eaten too early in a meal<sup>3</sup>, when the belief's origin could be more likely attributed to a poisoned king. Tender leafy greens and raw vegetables were considered too hard to digest<sup>3</sup>, so they were always stewed or cooked. As I discussed before, the manuscript *Tacuinum Sanitatis* offers an assortment of medical advice including about herbs and vegetables, which evolved in a time of limited medicine and science. For example, the book suggests that squash quenches the thirst and cures bad moods but is also a laxative<sup>8</sup>. Although the scientific or medicinal credibility of this text is not well established, it does give insight about the vegetables planted and their perceptions.

The following are recipes from *The Forme of Cury* cookbook with first a commoner meal followed by two castle meals for comparison.

## Recipes<sup>10</sup>

### Caboches In Potage (Old English original text)

Take Caboches and quarter hem and seeth hem in gode broth with Oynouns y mynced and the whyte of Lekes y slyt and corue smale 2 and do þer to safroun an salt and force it with powdour douce 3.

### **Modern translation:** Cabbage Potage

Take cabbages and quarter and boil them in a good broth with minced onions, the white bulbs of leeks cut in small pieces and a pinch of saffron and salt. Let boil and stir together with some “sweet powder.”

Unfortunately it is unclear what this sweet powder was, but it was probably a blend of sweet herbs and spices. Potage was pretty much a soup that depending on the ingredients available had the potential to be a nourishing blend of flavors and nutrients, or a thin watery broth. This is one of the simple variations on the recipe that the lower classes would have made. There are many another versions of potage with turnips instead of cabbage as the central focus and others include that use root vegetables, gourds, herb blends, grains or eggs.

The other main food staple for the commoners was bread, which they made by grinding the grains they grew in the country mills into a coarse brown loaf. At the time, white ground flour was considered a luxury and superior healthy bread compared to the brown grained, although today we know this is not the case.

The following are two examples of higher-class recipes for comparison with explanations.

### Bursen (Old English original text)

*Take the whyte of Lekes. slype hem and shrede hem small. take Noumbles 2 of swyne and boyle hem in broth and wyne. take hym up and dresse hem and do the Leke in the broth. seep and do the Noumbles þer to make a Lyour 3 of brode blode and vynegre and do þer to Powdour fort seep Oynouns mynce hem and do þer to. the self wise make of Piggis.*

### **Modern translation:**

Take the white part of leeks, peel them and cut them in small pieces. Boil pig entrails in a pot of water with wine to make a broth. Take the cooked entrails and dress them (presumably with herbs and spices) and meanwhile cook the leeks in a broth. Mix in the pig entrails along with vinegar, minced onions and seasoning to make a flavorful broth.

This dish was not common in the diet of the lower classes but more so in the wealthier manors since it involved killing at least one pig for the dish, or more than one pig if the dining party was large. That being said, the lower classes could have had it on occasion if they slaughtered a pig.

### Sawse Madame (Old English original text)

*Take sawge. persel. ysope. and saueray. quinces. and peeres 1, garlek and Grapes. and fylle the gees þerwith. and sowe the hole þat no grece come out. and roost hem wel. and kepe the grece þat fallith þerof. take galytyne and grece and do in a possynet, whan the gees buth rosted ynowh; take an smyte hem on pecys. and þat tat 2 is withinne and do it in a possynet and put þerinne wyne if it be to thyk. do þerto powdour of galyngale. powdour douce and salt and boyle the sawse and dresse þe Gees in disshes and lay þe sowe onoward.*

**Modern translation:**

Make a special sauce stuffing to dress a goose and give the meat flavors. For the sauce use:

Herbs: sage, parsley, hyssop, savory

Fruit/Vegetables: Quinces, pears, garlic, and grapes

Put in the goose as stuffing and sew the opening closed so that the grease does not come out and drips into the sauce.

This is more of an upscale recipe for the manor houses, it is highly noticeable the lack of commoner vegetables. The point here is to present a goose with a special sauce of combined flavors, from the juicy sweetness of the pears to the distinct garlic. A lot of vegetables in the diet denotes a “poor man’s diet” and the point is to exhibit grandeur and impress those at court. The meat infused with these different flavors would have been a luxury most could not afford, but would be a showy course in the manor houses and castles, especially that of King Richard II. Most recorded recipes abound with special delights only a king or rich noble could frequently have: almond milk, foreign nuts and fruits, spiced beef tongue, stuffed capon and sugared crepes<sup>10</sup>.

**Conclusions**

Throughout the Middle Ages, cottage gardens were often viewed as vulgar unkempt plots, but after centuries of being second rate to the preferred elaborately designed castle gardens the cottage garden style was reborn in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. This romantic return to the medieval period altered the perceived purpose of the garden to be more decorative and fancy than it was. Recently there has been a renewed interest in the Middle Ages, history and all of its accompanying artifacts and remnants. Evidence of this can even be found in the context of English cottages, with various castles and manor houses being

converted into museums all over Europe to reenact the period, including the gardens. Today, people associate cottage gardening with sophisticated designs from the Tudor period, so it is important through this project to present its original format and purpose.

When I first joined this project initiative, I had only heard of cottage gardens from the 18<sup>th</sup> century revival period but was interested in the period history and agriculture. Although I had studied the medieval period, I was guilty of thinking gardens were only found within castle walls and the commoners only toiled in the fields. Throughout the semester I explored the texts and resources available and accumulated knowledge not only for myself, but also to share with my student and staff collaborators as well as any blog visitors. After this semester ends, my plan is to continue researching and working on this project with a goal of contributing to the conversion of the center grounds into a series of 14<sup>th</sup> century gardens with period plants and designs. With the combined research efforts of the group, we found that although we cannot construct two distinct 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century garden replicas, there were different types of gardens, including some specifically for potage cooking and others with mixed purposes. My hope as I continue this work is that these gardens attract educational interest in these time periods as well as much deserved attention to the center and its programs. As my next steps, I plan to meet with the group and staff to form a final list of authentic period plant species and begin to design garden blueprints and public information signs for the next stage of the project. Already the group has established an orchard and grape arbor space and added compost to the soil in anticipation of the upcoming growing season. As the center continues to host regular events and fairs with the new gardens, a new community interest will arise in

permaculture and medieval history to serve as a model for revisiting the localvore food movement in an educational and historical context.

## References

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## **Cultivated Plants**

*This is a list of plants known to be cultivated in the 14th and 15th centuries in Europe and England, including vegetables, orchard fruits, herbs and flowers that I gathered in research.*

### **Orchard Fruit**

Medlar

Grapes

Quince

Raspberry

Cherry

Gooseberry

English Walnut

Blueberry

Apple

Wild strawberry

### **Herbs and Flowers**

Thyme

Elecampane

Parsley

Gallica Rose

Yarrow

Globe flowers

Fennel

Hollyhock

Mallow

Loveage

Wormwood

Periwinkle

Catmint

Egalatine Rose

Lavender

Columbine

Rosemary

Clove Pink

Pot Marigold

Chamomile

Fennel

Angelica

Marshmallow

Clary

Field Poppy

Comfrey

Anise

Rue

Sage

Juniper

Hyssop

Sweet Majoram

Betany

Bugloss

Cornflower

## **Vegetables**

Onion

Leek

Garlic

Monk's rhubarb- *Rumex pseudoalpinus*

Turnips

Horse Radish *Amoracia rusticana*

Borage

Leafy Greens Brassica spp