The Common Medieval Kitchen Garden, a 21st Century Interpretation

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In the 2012 fall semester a group of students, led by Professor John Gerber, began the exploration of common Medieval and Renaissance cottage gardening practice in collaboration with the University of Massachusetts Renaissance Center. The original thesis of the project, and therefore our initial research, revolved around the belief that “Old World” gardening practice and species content shifted rapidly with Columbus’s discovery of the Americas in 1492. However our group quickly reached the consensus that contact with the “New World” did not rapidly affect renaissance gardening. Many newly discovered species were transported to the “Old World”, but were often viewed as novelty items and found only in gardens of the wealthy. These species were not widely accepted in common kitchen gardens within our timeframe of interest. In light of this information the structure of our planned final product shifted from the construction and comparison of two model renaissance-era common kitchen gardens, one pre and one post 1492, to a more in-depth exploration of gardening in the medieval era. We sought the answers to several questions: how did members of this society construct their gardens, what were they eating and how were they growing it? Our findings will be displayed in the creation of, what our research informs us is, a common renaissance kitchen garden.

Gardening has changed immensely since the renaissance era and it is important to understand the purposes of medieval cottage gardens, and the thinking surrounding them, before we can strive to recreate them.
I first began research at the general level, simply looking for any renaissance garden information, but I soon began to focus more specifically on the structure of the garden, watering techniques, tools used, and the compilation of a list of the most common species mentioned within my sources. The ultimate goal of my research was to produce a plan for the recreation of a common renaissance garden on the 20 x 40 foot plot provided at the Massachusetts Renaissance Center. I approached this daunting task with the reassuring knowledge that common medieval kitchen gardens were not all constructed in the same manner, the garden would be modified in certain ways to allow for visitors, and that the other members of our group would provide support throughout the project.

My research began where I knew construction of the actual garden would surely begin, the structure and layout. Medieval gardens were often enclosed and protected within some type of wall, fence, or hedge. Teresa Mclean writes in her book *Medieval English Gardens* that individuals of this era enclosed their gardens in order to “shut out fields from which they fought to earn a living; the forests, fens, and wilderness they fought to bring to cultivation, the animals, wild and domestic, as well as thieves and neighbors”. Gardens in this era were vitally important, providing sustenance to the medieval population. Medievals recognized the importance of their gardens and took measures to protect their interests by placing “thorn hedges, ditches, banks of earth, fencing, paling and walls” around them. Many of these enclosure techniques, including brick and stonewalls, were relegated to use by the wealthier classes; found only at manor house and monastic gardens. Wattle fencing however, defied classist boundaries and was one of the most
commonly used garden containment methods. This fencing was used in monastic, manor house, and common kitchen gardens throughout the medieval era.

![Image 1:](https://example.com/image1.png) 

**Image 1**: taken from Sylvia Landsberg’s book *The Medieval Garden* illustrates different types of fencing used in medieval times including several wattle variations.

Wattle fencing is very dynamic. It is easily assembled, durable, utilizes an easily harvested and abundant material, and can be used for various purposes. These factors contributed to the popularity and accessibility of wattle fencing. This fencing is made of woven saplings and can be formed in many shapes and heights. It can also be used to create raised beds, a favorite in the medieval era.
Use of this simple fencing was so widespread that it permeated medieval culture. It is often depicted in period artwork including the two illustrations below.

The first image, which was created in 1415 in the Boucicaut Master's French workshop, depicts the first meeting of Adam and Eve. The artist chose to enclose the Garden of Eden with a wattle fence. The second miniature was produced between 1440-50 by the Master of Sir John Falstolf. This illustration depicts Jesus and a group of Saints and soldiers within a wattle-surrounded garden. Though these illustrations depict Biblical scenes the presence of wattle fencing represents its popularity during the era in which the images were created.
Wattle fencing is very useful, easy to construct, hardy, and made with easily sourced materials. These characteristics as well as the medieval propensity to protect the garden ensured the popularity of wattle fencing at all levels of society.

**Application of Wattle Fencing/ Containment:** Because Medieval gardens were so often enclosed our replication garden should include this feature. Wattle fencing should be used to contain the garden, because of its widespread use in the era of our interest. Construction of this fence could utilize local saplings. Wattle could also be used if any raised beds are desired. Thorn and bramble hedges were also often used to create barriers, and I would like to include this as an element in our garden. I suggest that local roses and transplanted blackberry and raspberry bushes be incorporated with the wattle fencing on one edge of the garden. This would represent a combination of protective techniques often implemented in the medieval era. Everything in a medieval garden had a dual purpose, which further supports the inclusion of blackberry or raspberry bushes. These plants would not only offer protection, but also berries. I suggest they be transplanted from a local source because medieval gardens often included native plants found in the wild. I suggest the incorporation of the rose in the hedge because of the flowers importance in the medieval era and reputation as one of the two “greatest medieval flowers” The most commonly mentioned roses in medieval literature and depicted in art of the time are red, though the white *rosa alba* was a favorite and often grown as a hedge. Whatever color rose is used this flower should have a place in our garden and the duality of its beauty and protective thorns will be
perfectly suited for garden containment. Wattle and protective hedging will be a handsome addition to our garden.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency approves the use of wattle fencing and offers building instructions and tips at this link

http://www.epa.gov/greenacres/wildones/handbk/wo27fence.html

Irrigation and the location of a water source also informed the structure of the medieval garden. Without proper irrigation crops could easily perish, and a valuable food source would be lost. Placement of this resource was much more important than it is now in an age of outdoor plumbing and long reaching hoses. Several irrigation methods were utilized in the medieval garden. These inventive methods were intended to decrease the amount of time required to keep the garden sufficiently watered.

The most complex irrigation systems involved the use of channels or canals that diverted water from its source to the garden beds. This process was often used with raised bed gardens, in which the lower pathways served as the water irrigation channels. These systems relied on gravity as the main force of energy and because of this the water source was often located at the highest point in the garden. A manure pile was frequently located close to the water source so “moisture oozing from it could be diverted into the water channels.” These complex systems were originally used in Roman agricultural system but were adopted in the medieval era by monastic gardeners. Monasteries often had rather advanced aquatic systems that not only served to water the garden but also as a sanitation system. These highly structured systems were consigned to monastery,
manor, and palatial gardens though a less substantial version of this method, involving small earth dams may have been used in a common kitchen garden.

In the 14th or 15th century the use of a kitchen garden pond became popular\textsuperscript{xiii}. These ponds, shallow and lined with a clay water barrier, not only supplied a water source for the renaissance garden but were also “appreciated (for) their ornamental value”\textsuperscript{xiv}. They were placed near or within the gardens. Manure was often added to these ponds as a fertilization method. Water was removed from these ponds manually.

Several smaller scale irrigation methods are mentioned in Susan Campbell’s book \textit{Charleston Kedding, A History of Kitchen Gardening}. Capillary watering methods from the medieval era clearly informed watering techniques still in use today. The common watering can is highly reminiscent of the medieval thumb pot. Both technologies were designed to provide a gentle flow of water to plants. Thumb pots, crafted out of earthenware, were perforated with many small holes on their bottom and one thumb hole at the top. The pots were filled by submersion, perhaps in a kitchen garden pond. When full the thumb hole was covered to ensure none of the water escaped until it was meant to.

\textbf{Image 4:} A full thumb pot. \hspace{1cm} \textbf{Image 5:} The bottom of a thumb pot
A similar technique involved hanging a perforated earthenware pot over plants that required constant moisture. A feather, piece of straw or a bit of cloth was inserted into the holes, allowing the water to gently and slowly reach the plants below. This technique was perhaps a precursor to modern day drip irrigation systems. These capillary watering systems could have effectively watered a small kitchen garden, however their sole use in a large manorial garden would have been impractical. These irrigation methods were implemented to decrease the amount of time spent on watering the garden. Though these techniques may sound time consuming to a modern gardener they represented a large improvement in the medieval era.

**Application of irrigation techniques:**

It would be ideal to include all of these irrigation methods in our garden. However, because the channel system of irrigation was usually only used in manor house and monastic gardens its role in our garden should be small. Our common kitchen garden representation should utilize the Romanesque kitchen garden pool,
which was classically located either at the center of the garden or to the side\textsuperscript{xvi}. This method of water containment may be too involved for our garden project, however a water source should definitely be included. A trough placed within the garden fence could substitute for a pool or well, providing a similar affect while serving a utilitarian purpose. The inclusion of a manure pile close to the water source, to be mixed with water as a fertilizer, would add authenticity. The capillary watering systems should be utilized in the garden and could be filled in the trough. Thumb pots are available for purchase here: http://www.fromfarmtomarket.com/p-63-thumb-pot-waterer.aspx

Before Columbus introduced sugar to the New World in 1492, creating a massive industry that soon flushed the global market with the once scarce product, honey was the most common sweetener used in Europe\textsuperscript{xvii}. Honey was a very important in the medieval era because it was used in many products including jams and preserves, mead, medicines etc.\textsuperscript{xviii}. The wax collected from hives was also very valuable because it could be made into candles and was particularly sought after in monasteries. Honey was so highly valued that it was sometimes collected as payment for rent, and though there were different levels of beekeeping and quality of hives, bee tending was prevalent at every level of medieval society\textsuperscript{xix}. If an individual household could not afford a hive, one could be shared and moved between multiple cottage gardens.

Bee cultivation has been common practice dating back to the Romans, who raised specific plants for the pleasure of their bees\textsuperscript{xx}. This practice was continued
into the medieval era, with similar plants including Marjoram and Burnet, which were used to attract bees to gardens\textsuperscript{xxi}.

The most common medieval hives, called skeps, were made of straw and were popular with cottage gardeners because they were lightweight and easy to move. Although skeps often left bees vulnerable to disease this type of hive maintained popularity throughout the medieval era\textsuperscript{xxii}. Wicker hives, insulated with clay and dung and covered with bark or woven straw, were also popular\textsuperscript{xxiii}. These hives would likely have been placed on small tables and if additional protection from the elements was deemed necessary a small hut would have been constructed to house individual hives\textsuperscript{xxiv}. Bee cultivation in the renaissance era was widespread and a very important aspect not only of cottage and manor gardens, but of European culture itself.

\textbf{Image 7:} A common skep surrounded by flowers.
Application of Beekeeping:

Honey and the tradition of beekeeping was a very important part of the medieval culture. Because of the historical value of beekeeping a hive should be included in our medieval garden representation, however, the use of traditional skeps is prohibited in the state of Massachusetts. Section 33 of the Massachusetts Agriculture and Conservation Laws states that “No persons shall knowingly maintain a colony or colonies of honey bees in hives, other receptacles, trees or other lodging places in which brood combs are fastened to the container of the colony”\textsuperscript{xxv}. According to beesource.com this legislation is in place to ensure the health of bee colonies. Framed hives with removable combs simplify the inspection process, enabling the detection of diseased bee populations. A frame hive could be installed in place of a skep. The presence of bees and their pollinating abilities would not only benefit our garden but also the orchard and other plantings at the Massachusetts Renaissance Center. A replication of a skep could be kept on site as a representation of medieval beekeeping practices. Beekeeping was an important aspect of medieval gardening and culture and would contribute a great deal to our garden. Skep making instructions can be found here:

http://www.beedata.com/data2/skeps.html

A decorative skep is available for purchase here:


Though manor house and common gardens varied in structure and species content, a commonality existed in the types of tools used in their upkeep. According
to Teresa Mclean the “equipment necessary to a countryman, were as basic to palace, burgess and manorial as to cottage gardeners”\textsuperscript{xxvi} (198). Tools today very closely resemble those used in medieval gardens\textsuperscript{xxvii}. Records of gardening tools are rather common, found in medieval descriptions of gardening or receipts of purchase.

In the 12\textsuperscript{th} century Alaxander Meckhams listed the gardening tools he thought were most useful in his essay \textit{De Utensilibus} including,

\begin{quote}
“a fork, a wide blade, a spade shovel, a knife... a seed- basket for seed-time, a wheel-barrow (more often a little hand-cart), basket, pannier and trap for sparrow-hawks... a two edged axe to uproot thorns, brambles, briars, prickles and unwanted shoots, and rushes and wood to mend hedges... timbers, palings, and stakes or hedging hurdels... he should also have a knife hanging from his belt to graft trees and seedlings, mattocks with which to uproot nettles or vetch, darnel, thistles, sterile oats and weeds of this sort, and a hoe for tares...”\textsuperscript{xxviii}
\end{quote}

A 1453 bill for tools at Dorset England’s Munden’s Chantry was as follows,

“5d. for one spade, 2d for one rake, 4d. for one hoe”\textsuperscript{xxix}. In 1676 John Rea, in \textit{Flora}, wrote about period tools necessary for gardening. This segment was taken from Charles Quest-Ritson’s \textit{The English Garden, A Social History},

\begin{quote}
“a Skreen, a Wier- Ridle, two spades, a bigger and a lesser, likewise Shovels, and Howes of several sizes, a Pruning-hook, Grafting-knifes, a Saw, a Chisel and Mallet, and also a small penknife for Inoculating, and laying of Gilliflowers, a Line and Rule, Trowels of several sizes, a handsom Hammer, with two pair of Garden-shears, and two Iron Rakes, a bigger and longer in the head, and a shorter with the Teeth thicker set, with several Baskets of Twigs, and Besoms, to sweep and carry away the cleanings of the gardens”\textsuperscript{xxx}.
\end{quote}

It is remarkable how many of these tools are still in use today, and how early on they were developed and put into use.
Image 8: Taken from Pietro de Crescenzi’s 13th century agricultural writings, this image depicts various gardening tools from the era.

Application of tool use:

Through my research I have compiled a list of the tools used in Renaissance gardens that I believe will be useful in our pursuits: pitch fork, wide blade (a type of hoe), spade shovel (“arguably the one tool that no gardener can afford to be without” xxxi), seed basket (to collect seeds), wheel barrow (how to build a medieval wheel barrow [http://www.bloodandsawdust.com/sca/barrow.html]), basket (general use), pannier (crop collection vessel), two edged axe (used for clearing the planting space and collecting wood for the construction of walls or wattle fences),
mattocks (similar to a pickaxe), knife (for various uses), and a hoe (for general purposes). Screen (for separating rocks from the soil), garden sieve (Available for purchase here [http://chinamesh.en.alibaba.com/productshowimg/506993381-212816220/Garden_sieve_riddle.html](http://chinamesh.en.alibaba.com/productshowimg/506993381-212816220/Garden_sieve_riddle.html)), large spade, small spade, small shovel, big shovel, trowel (small handheld shovel), hammer, garden shears, twigs and besom (twig broom), scythe. In order to completely understand and appreciate the medieval garden experience the tools of the time should be used, luckily they are very similar to gardening tools of this era.

The tools of the medieval gardener may be similar to those in use today, but general tastes in produce have shifted. Appreciation for certain vegetable characteristics dictated the species commonly found in common kitchen gardens. Vegetables with high starch content were greatly appreciated and any species with strong flavor were prized\textsuperscript{xxxii}. Teresa McLean even suggests that “for medievals, a vegetable had to be full of either carbohydrate or flavour; it had to come near to being a cereal or a herb to justify its existence”\textsuperscript{xxxiii}. This penchant for flavor also ensured the popularity of herbs. Herbs held a very important place in the medieval garden because they not only offered flavor, but many were also believed to have healing capabilities. The dominant fixtures in the common renaissance garden were starches and highly flavorful vegetables; these sole requirements dictated the vegetable content of common gardens throughout this period.

The size of a cottage garden was usually diminutive, though could vary depending on family size. Limited space dictated the types of plants found within
the garden; species that served multiple purposes were prized\textsuperscript{xxxiv}. Cottage gardens often incorporated indigenous flora into their gardens, sometimes transplanting certain species from the wild into their protected plots\textsuperscript{xxxv}. The cottage garden was extremely important in this era, and produced not only food for the owner, but also medicines and other household necessities.

Unlike manor gardens of the time, which were appreciated for their high levels of structure, cottage gardens were often more wild and, “were nearly always just yards, or vegetable patches, in which fruit trees, vegetables, herbs and flowers all grew together”\textsuperscript{xxxvi}. However, despite the initial appearance of a lack of organization there were certain groupings of plants that suggest an intentional method. Often members of the Allium family, a very popular group of vegetables, were grown together in the same bed. In this case the taste of these vegetables, Leek (\textit{Allium porrum}), Onion (\textit{allium cepa}), Garlic (\textit{allium sativum}), dictated their placement within the garden and illustrate the type of structure present within the common renaissance garden.

These flavorful vegetables are found in practically all records of medieval kitchen gardens\textsuperscript{xxxvii}. The Anglo-Saxons held leeks in such high regard, and found them such an important part of the garden that their name for a kitchen garden was “leek-garth” or “leac-turn”\textsuperscript{xxxviii}. Chives and shallots were also highly regarded for their flavor.

The Brassica family, including kale and cabbage was an extremely popular addition to the medieval garden\textsuperscript{xxxix}. These vegetables were almost always included in kitchen gardens\textsuperscript{xl}. 
Starchy root vegetables were appreciated, as long as their leafy greens were also edible. Parsnips, turnips and beets were appreciated for these characteristics. Radishes, a root vegetable with a strong spicy flavor, were also found in many gardens.

Beans and peas were an important part of the medieval diet, and were sometimes found in kitchen gardens, however they were more often grown as field crops. These species were frequently planted together.

A condensed list of the most common vegetables found in medieval gardens follows:

- Leek (*allium porrum*)
- Onion (*allium cepa*)
- Garlic (*allium sativum*)
- Shallots (*allium cepa*)
- Chives (*allium schoenoprasum*)
- Kale (*brassica oleracea*)
- White/headed cabbage
- Heart cabbage
- Roman cabbage
- Cauliflower/ cole wort
- Plain coles/ rape (*brassica hapus*)
- Turnip/neeps (*brassica rapa*)
- White beet
- Raddish (*raphanus sativus*)
- Fennel (*foeniculum vulgare*)
- White pea
- Green pea (*pisum sativum*)
- Beans (*faba vulgaris*)

Common kitchen gardeners grew herbs and vegetables in close proximity. Herbs are used very differently today than they were in the medieval period. They have a less important role now, often appreciated solely for their flavor. However in the medieval era herbs not only provided flavor but were also used as medicine, and even in
food preservation. I would love to cultivate these herbs and try out some of their ancient uses. The most commonly found herbs are compiled below:

- Clary (*Salvia verbenaca*): a type of wild sage that is native to England.
- Rue (*Ruta graveolens*): was “used to make pickles that sharpened up broths and pottages”\textsuperscript{xliii} and was widely used by the 15th century.
- Betony (*Stachys officinalis*): considered a cure-all, and I imagine if the cottage gardener could cultivate only one medicinal herb it would be this.
- Dill (*Anethum graveolens*): used to flavor foods and its seeds were used to aid digestion.
- Cumin (*Cuminum cyminum*): widely grown and at times was collected as part of peasants rent.
- Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*): “grown in infirmary, herb and kitchen gardens all through the medieval period”\textsuperscript{xliii}. This plant had many uses, and was much appreciated for its scent.
- Pot/Winter Marjoram (*Origanum vulgare*): grown in kitchen gardens for its use in pottages. This plant also attracted bees.
- Pennyroyal (*Mentha pulogium*): the favorite mint in medieval times, because it is very strong. Other mints were also grown, including spearmint, water mint and corn mint.
- Black mustard (*Brassica nigra*): grown in both herb and mixed kitchen gardens.
- Parsley (*Petroselium crispum*): extremely popular, growing in “every single kitchen and infirmary garden too”\textsuperscript{xliv}.
- Chervil (*Anthriscus cerefolium*): was a common cottage garden plant and was often found planted next to Fennel, Coriander and Angelica.
- Fragrant tansy/tansy balm/Costmary (*Tanacetum balsamita*): “a common plant in tavern, cottage and all kinds of kitchen gardens”\textsuperscript{xlv}.
- Rosemary (*rosmarinus officinalis*): by the late 1400’s rosemary had become a common herb. It was often planted along garden walls and was a favored flower at funerals, symbolizing remembrance. Rosemary was also appreciated as an attraction for bees\textsuperscript{xlvi}.

The common kitchen garden was a very productive area. Medieval gardeners sought to produce what they needed in the smallest area possible\textsuperscript{xlvii} the vegetables and herbs discussed above enabled them to do this.

**Application of Plant Species:**

The vegetable and herb species listed above should be included in our medieval garden replica, following any of the details discussed. The garden plan I
have created will provide more specific details regarding placement. Though the exact varieties of species grown in the common medieval kitchen garden are often unknown or unavailable the following sites offer a wide selection of heirloom seeds.


Territorial Seed Company (http://www.territorialseed.com/Victory_Garden_Seed_List)

Log House Plants (http://loghouseplants.com/plants/product-category/heirloom-vegetables/)

Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds (http://rareseeds.com/shop/)

The common medieval cottage garden, though often small and unassuming was a very complex space, packed with historical references and a wealth of very useful plant species. This project served as an opportunity to learn not only about gardening techniques, but also about European culture and life in the medieval era. The medieval or renaissance garden was not a uniform entity, but took on many varied forms and functions across class lines and uses. It is my hope that my research of garden containment, irrigation techniques, beekeeping, medieval tool use, and common vegetable and herb species will contribute to the medieval garden replication at the Massachusetts Renaissance Center. Working on this project was extremely informative and challenging because of my lack of prior knowledge. It will be rewarding not only to see my research realized in the creation of this garden, but also to know that my contribution will be used to inform others.
Additional thoughts for the garden:
- Informational signs should be placed around the garden, highlighting specific plants and including any interesting stories or medieval uses of these plants
- A pamphlet about the garden should be compiled and distributed to the Smith and Mount Holyoke greenhouses and five college Biology and Environmental Studies programs to bolster interest and publicize the garden
Bibliography:


Images:


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