

Abigail Hally

## ***Strawberries and Aromatic Flowers in Renaissance***

### ***Kitchen Gardens***

#### **Strawberries:**

When I first set out to conduct my research on kitchen gardens in the Renaissance era of northern Europe, I wasn't exactly sure what I'd find. After some time spent researching, strawberries seemed to catch my attention. Strawberries have been a major fruit used throughout European and American history and it was interesting to trace back to the Renaissance era to see where they began to become a main part of gardening.

Finding information on strawberries during Pre-Columbian Renaissance Europe was not an easy task. The first book that offered any kind of helpful information about strawberries was *Flowers of the Renaissance* by Celia Fisher. This book had a lot of information about wild strawberries and the symbolism of strawberries in Renaissance paintings and art. Wild strawberries in Europe were very plentiful and grew like grass. They grew on lawns and in between pre-established gardens. As stated in the book, "Two species of European strawberries provided the beloved little fruits that could be gathered wild or cultivated in gardens" (pg. 151). During the 17th century, a new type of strawberry was introduced to Europe from the New World. After being brought over from the New

World, these strawberries were hybridized to produce larger fruits. As the strawberries became larger, they lost some of their sweetness and flavor.

Celia Fisher continues to talk about the different symbolic meanings of strawberries. The symbolism of strawberries changed with time and was shown differently in many paintings. Strawberries initially represented lust and temptation, which still hold true in present day. They also represented a more religious meaning. “The white flowers and red fruit stood for purity and for Christ’s redeeming blood. The three parts of a strawberry leaf reflected the doctrine of the Trinity, that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were distinct entities joined in one God” (Fisher, 149). The opposing meanings show the differentiation of symbolism over time.

Originally, strawberries were cultivated in the woods along with other fruits such as hazelnuts, gooseberries, crab apples, wild pears, sloes, bullaces and cherries (Campbell, *History of Kitchen Gardening*, 97). They were used sparingly and only cultivated when they could be found wild. When strawberries began to be incorporated more into kitchen gardens, they were planted throughout the garden in between existing crops and along the borders. Their shallow roots made it easy to plant strawberries anywhere there was room without interfering with the growth of other plants. They were also planted between fruit trees in orchards.

## **Aromatic Flowers:**

When I reached a dead end with my strawberry research, I began to look at the use of aromatic flowers in the English kitchen gardens. I came across a lot of information about aromatic flowers and how they added to the design and function of kitchen gardens.

Flowers were a main part of kitchen gardens from the. Not only did they give off pleasant fragrances but also a lot of them were edible. They were often grown as borders or alongside the medicinal herbs. The first book I read that went into depth about aromatic flowers was *The Country Kitchen Garden: 1600-1950* by C. Anne Wilson. The flowers she discussed were as follows:

- Roses
- Lilies
- Flag Iris
- Marigolds
- Lavender (shrub aromatics)
- Hysop (shrub aromatics)

Roses were grown along the borders of gardens or in between trees. Besides their fragrance purposes, they were often included in a lot of different dishes and used as medicine. People consumed them to aid with the relief of eye ailments and fevers (Wilson, 88). Rosewater was used for perfume and flavoring in pottages and syrups. Lilies and irises roots were also used for medicinal purposes. Marigolds were grown throughout the gardens, especially among the aromatic herbs. They were used for fragrance and in pottages and broths.

The next book that went into some detail about aromatic flowers was *Elements of Modern Gardening: or, the Art of Laying out Pleasure Grounds, Ornamenting Farms, and Embellishing Views Round About Our Houses* by Dr. John Trusler. This book is written in Early Modern English where the long “s” is represented as “f”. This made the book a little more of a challenge to read. Trusler states the following about aromatic flowers:

“Those which scent the air the most are the violet, especially the double white, which blows twice a year; next to this the musk rose,; the lily, wallflowers, stocks, cloves, pinks, particularity the red pink, sweet-peas, sweet-William, minionet, and lilies of the Valley. Honey-suckles, and the woodbine and at a distance the jasmine, seringa and strawberry leaves dying. Burnet, wild thyme and water-mint, if planted in pathways, yield a most grateful smell, when trodden and crushed” (68).

His description focused more on the scent versus the use of aromatic flowers in cookery and medicine. It was interesting to learn of specific flowers listed such as woodbine (which I learned was a form of honeysuckle), minionet (mignonette or Reseda) that is a fragrant herbaceous plant, and Sweet William (*Dianthus barbatus*).



Sweet William (*Dianthus barbatus*)



Woodbine Honeysuckle



Mignonette

Through my research I have acquired a vast knowledge of Renaissance kitchen gardens and their historical significance. Strawberries and aromatic flowers became my main focus for this project because I found these topics the most interesting. They gave me a better understanding of the non-vegetable aspects of the kitchen gardens. Not only did I learn new types of flowers but also their function within the garden and the home. This research and project have proved to be a great experience and I plan to continue expanding my knowledge on kitchen gardens.