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Out of the Attic

A colonial garden: one-stop shopping

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Image: Carlyle House Historic Park

Gardens offer bursts of color for our viewing pleasure while enticing scents top off the experience. To make the beautiful useful, Virginia colonists expanded the breadth of garden plants, presenting an attractive visual backdrop that also supplied food and medicinal herbs; most commonly, however, a smaller kitchen garden was planted to feed the family.

The style of a household's garden spoke volumes about a family's status. As a member of the Virginia gentry, Alexandria merchant John Carlyle's garden would have reflected his position in society by incorporating ornamental touches, in the same way fancy wallpaper decorates his mansion. The green refuge behind Carlyle's Alexandria home offers visitors a shaded, serene trip back to the colonial era in the midst of the hustle and bustle of downtown.

The exact dimensions and plants of Carlyle's garden are not known, so the present-day Carlyle House gardeners follow the norms of straight walkways arranged in parallel and perpendicular lines to create a framework for the boxwood and crape myrtles. In colonial gardens, symmetry and proportion ruled, guiding the size and location of the planting beds and grass plots – which could be a square, circle, rectangle or another geometric figure. Such balanced beds of greenery radiated calm suitable for an after-dinner stroll, a popular Virginia pastime.

What did colonists choose to grow? Plants that aided and abetted their lifestyle – such as sage, rosemary and thyme to season game meats and stew – were thick on the ground. Angelica leaves and roots were boiled to make tea for the relief of colds. Tucked into stored clothing, lavender masked odors created by the prevailing custom of only one full bath a year.

Colonists combined the beneficial with the decorative: vegetables were planted in plots next to beds of flowers, herbs, shrubs or fruit trees. Some flowers were chosen for looks but many earned their keep as food, medicine, fragrance or dye. Vegetables included leeks, onions, garlic, cabbages, English gourds and melons. George Washington pushed the utility of his garden even further by placing a "necessary" (outdoor toilet) at the end of a garden path perfumed by the fragrance of lilacs.

The gardeners' politics were also displayed on their grounds. Our founding fathers viewed agriculture and by extension, gardens, as a crucial part of the American identity since tobacco, wheat and other crops drove the economy. When George Washington was commander in chief on the verge of





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

facing the onslaught of the British in 1776, he wrote instructions to his estate manager to flank Mount Vernon with two groves of native trees, “a horticultural Declaration of Independence,” according to Andrea Wulf, author of “Founding Gardeners.”

On both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, the geometric garden layout was gradually replaced by greater naturalism. Landscaper Capability Brown, working in Great Britain from 1740 to 1780, ushered out the symmetric look to create a more natural, sculpted look: he perfected nature. This organic approach was more appropriate for a freeborn Englishman, and a counterpoint to the French and Italian formal, ornate gardens designed for monarchs. After the Revolutionary War, George Washington landscaped portions of Mount Vernon to emphasize more natural contours.

With roots in the natural style, modern house gardens juxtapose flowers and shrubs to lend color and texture, which is appreciated while one ambles past to pick up vegetables and herbs elsewhere.

The Carlyle House, completed in 1753 by Alexandria merchant John Carlyle, gained a foothold in history when British General Edward Braddock suggested, while living in the house, that colonists should be taxed by Parliament. For more information: www.novaparks.com/parks/carlyle-house-historic-park

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.