

MHS COLLECTIONS

On GARDENING



MARILYN ZIEBARTH

Marilyn Ziebarth is assistant editor of this magazine.

Friendly gardening consultation among the corn, beans, squash, peas, and tomatoes, possibly near Mille Lacs Lake, about 1908

Since Adam and Eve unwillingly left the Garden, people have sought to regain that peaceful relationship with nature's abundance. Minnesotans have been no exception. They have planned and dug, planted and weeded, and watered and harvested their patches of earth in search of pleasure, pride, beauty, and daily sustenance.

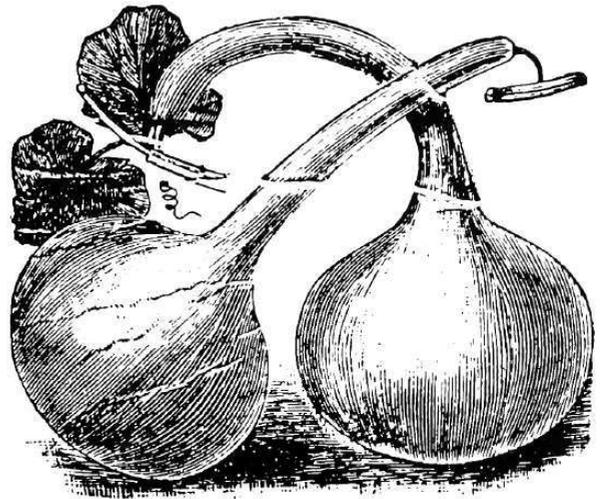
Before the state existed, Dakota Indian women raised corn, beans, squash, and sunflowers on small plots. To their north, Ojibway women grew corn and, after contact with traders and missionaries, added hardy potatoes, turnips, and beans to their gardens. Both groups gathered wild crops such as strawberries, cranberries, raspberries, gooseberries, plums, hazelnuts, elderberries, and cherries in season. Later, when settlement began, the women brought their surplus to town markets.¹

For frontier Minnesotans cut off from town and vulnerable to harsh, unfamiliar weather, gardening and foraging were necessary survival activities. With luck, garden crops supplemented their monotonous diet of salt pork, codfish, mush, and corn cake, tiding them over the long winters and, on occasion, providing diversions such as dandelion and rhubarb wine.

Settlers' reliance on seeds and seedlings procured from friends and mail-order houses in the East eased somewhat in 1851 when Rufus Upton of St. Anthony opened a commercial nursery on the lower end of Nicollet Island. Shortly thereafter, Lyman M. Ford began his long-lived Groveland Nursery between St. Anthony and St. Paul, capitalizing on some shrewd purchases of rhubarb plants and apple-tree stock. He soon produced advertising catalogs and price lists even though he had little competition.

Just two years after statehood in 1858, Ford, working with J. H. Stevens of Glencoe, began publishing *The Minnesota Farmer and Gardener*. This monthly journal featured chatty advice on topics such as orna-

¹Here and below, see Marjorie Kreidberg, *Food on the Frontier: Minnesota Cooking from 1850 to 1900 With Selected Recipes* (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1975), 18; Marjorie Kreidberg, "The Up and Doing Editor of *The Minnesota Farmer and Gardener*," *Minnesota History* 49 (Spring 1985): 192-93.



1892 Northrup, Braslan, & Goodwin Co. seed-catalog advertisement for gourds, from which dippers are "very easily prepared. . . will last for years, and are particularly valuable for dipping hot liquids—the handles do not rapidly become hot."

Dakota women and children watching over their cornfields, about 1862





*Gardener's spade,
used in the turn-of-
the-century decades*

*1892 Northrup,
Braslan &
Goodwin Co.
advertisement
for garlic*



mental hedges and troublesome pests, a "Work for the Month" column, news of encouraging experiments, and letters from readers sharing anecdotes about planting, growing, and harvesting.

Ford and Stevens were not alone in their enthusiasm for the new state's cornucopian potential. By 1861 Minnesota could already claim more than two dozen county agricultural clubs, horticultural societies in St. Paul and St. Anthony, and the Minnesota State Agricultural Society established by Governor Alexander Ramsey to succeed the territorial organization. In 1869, another—albeit short-lived—St. Paul periodical, *The Minnesota Monthly, A North-Western Magazine*, offered hortatory advice to readers in articles titled "Stake That Tree," "A Word for the Girls about Botany," "The Pleasures of Agriculture in Old Age," "Parlor Orchards," "Benefits of Mulching," and "Fruit That Can be Raised in Minnesota."

The search for seeds and plants acclimated to Minnesota's short growing season and extremes in temperature persisted throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In St. Paul, St. Anthony, Minneapolis, Faribault, Taylor's Falls, Duluth, and other towns, local seed companies, nurseries, and commercial greenhouses developed loyal networks of users and testers. Minneapolis's Northrup, Braslan & Goodwin (later Northrup King) produced lavishly illustrated seed catalogs similar to those pioneered by Luther Burbank and W. Atlee Burpee. After the turn of the century, small firms including Faribault's Farmer Seed & Nursery Co. and the Duluth Floral & Seed Co. produced less glamorous versions. Green-thumbed entrepreneurs such as Minneapolis's Miss Emma V. White and "Jessie R. Prior, seedswoman," soon followed suit. During dreary winter months Minnesota gardeners enjoyed—as they still do—lingering over the magical catalogs that make the challenging seem plausible.

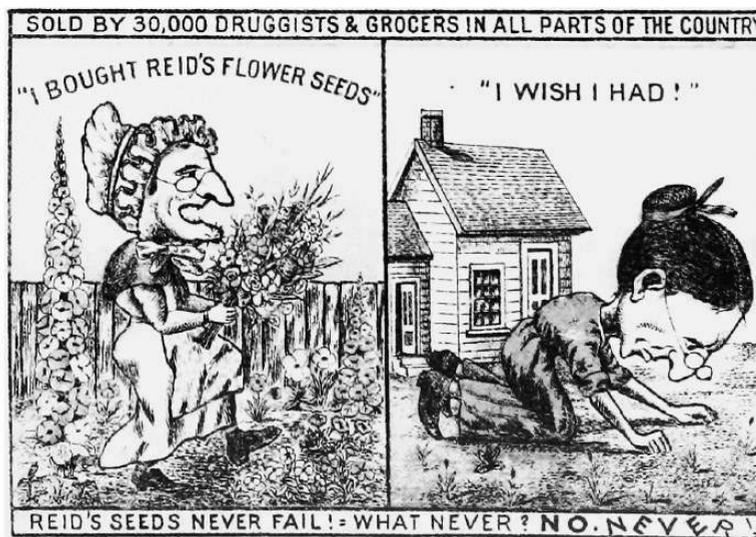


The Kalsich family's impressive garden near the Pioneer Mine, Ely, 1922

Cotton-print sunbonnet with detachable brim, a style worn from the 1890s through the 1920s



Trade card promoting the superiority of Reid's seeds, about 1910





Galvanized sheet-metal watering can

Seed catalog with silk-screened cover, 1918

REPUTATION GARDEN GUIDE



DULUTH FLORAL & SEED CO.
DULUTH, MINN

By the turn of the century, the efforts to develop Minnesota-hardy plants began paying off. In 1896, for example, A. W. Latham, secretary of the Minnesota Horticultural Society, received this request from J. P. Andrews of Faribault: "Friend Latham: It looks now as if we might have more apples than our home market demands. How are the Duchess [apples] selling in Minneapolis and what would be the best places for a good fair price?"²

PLANTING DIARIES record Minnesotans' high devotion to backyard gardening and also hint at the peculiar satisfactions reaped by backbreaking work, dirty fingernails, and insect bites. In 1848, for example, Henry Hurlbut, a Minneapolis lumber dealer and sawmill owner at St. Anthony Falls, dutifully began keeping records for his extensive vegetable gardens and orchards. Doubtless, the diaries helped him decide when and what to plant in succeeding years. Not incidentally, they also recorded tangible triumphs and defeats. In the year 1860, for example, he began work on Wednesday, April 11: "Get out manure on to garden—uncover raspberries." He suffered some low moments, as recorded on Tuesday, May 8: "Most of the strawberries destroyed, chiefly by insects," and on Monday, May 28: "Plant out another 100 sweet potatoes & water—destroy yellow bugs & cutworms—plant mushrooms in vacant ground—replant watermelon & cucumber—cut worms in corn—every where—small black bug destroying grape cuttings. P.M.: Went with Mr. Walcott to Minnehaha Cr[ee]k fishing." Hurlbut's activities drew to a satisfying close on November 9: "Finished protecting garden."

John W. G. Dunn's quarter-century garden record, begun in 1903, evidences a similar fascination with gardening and seasonal observations. His journals typically commenced in March with terse notations of the first robins, bluebirds, martins, and larks, followed by the first digging of the garden (typically in the second week of April), occasional April and May snowstorms, and the first appearance of currant worms in May or June. He also noted significant events such as the first picking of each crop, the last cutting of the lawn, the planting of spring bulbs, the first killing frost, and the final covering of perennials.

In addition, Dunn carefully and with certain pleasure recorded his substantial gardening accomplishments. In 1905, for example, he tallied up 7 eggplants, 192 radishes, 27 bunches of rhubarb, 67 quarts of beans, 64 quarts of peas, 74 heads of lettuce, 594 on-

²Andrews to Latham, July 25, 1896, in Correspondence, Minnesota State Horticultural Society Papers, Minnesota State Archives, MHS.

ions, 469 beets, 19 pecks of chard, 415 tomatoes, 37 heads of cabbage, 31 cucumbers, 150 carrots, 15 "veg. marrow" (white summer squash), 30 ears of corn, 87 bunches of endive, 39 "ruta бага" (Swedish turnips), 12 quarts of currants, and a disappointing 14 peppers. For almost a decade Dunn also photographed his garden and fruit trees from the upper story of his St. Paul home on Lincoln Avenue, incidentally recording the growth of family members as well.

IT WAS IN the last decades of the nineteenth century that Minnesota's wealth and population grew enough to support a large middle class with the discretionary income and leisure time to engage in pleasure gardening. Such literate folk enjoyed the essays of Andrew J. Downing, a leader in the movement to refine the primitive look of America's cities and suburbs. They no doubt endorsed the sentiment expressed in J. S. Harris's July 4, 1872, oration to state horticultural society members that "floriculture shuts out the darkness of sin. . . . The cultivation of flowers, whether it be the tiny plant in the cracked cup of the poor man's cottage or the stately palm or other tropical glories in palatial gardens and crystal palaces, is wielding an influence to elevate the human race."³

In Minnesota towns and cities, small front-door or parlor gardens with little function other than "show" became a familiar sight, their roses, perennials, herbs, and perhaps fragrant annuals usually enclosed by low fences. Larger fenced front gardens, front yards, and

window gardens also became popular. Forerunners of modern how-to books offered extensive advice on garden design and care, including elaborate pruning instructions for verdant arches, bowers, arbors, and other topiary constructions. Viewed as physically and morally uplifting, well-tended gardens and yards notified passersby that the residents appreciated beauty and took pride in domestic accomplishments.

Gardening, other writers urged, suited women in particular because it stimulated but did not strain. *The Minnesota Farmer and Gardener* similarly found weeding to be "healthful and pleasant exercise" and "adapted to give an elastic step and rosy cheek without the chemist's rouge."⁴

Minnesota's new leisure class enthusiastically embraced the cause of urban improvement, with beautification through gardening a key component. Civic-minded individuals formed long-lived clubs such as the Minnesota Garden Flower Society, which encouraged interest through lectures and popular shows with abundant awards. During summer months, ladies of well-to-do and middle-class homes moved exotic and common parlor plants outside to the front porch or plant stands, where they stretched their roots and drew the attention of neighbors.

Even males joined the ranks of avid gardeners, notably in the Men's Garden Club of Ramsey County, which formed in 1912 to help St. Paul become "truly a City of Flowers and Song Birds." The group's activities included the annual distribution of twenty-eight thousand packages of vegetable and flower seeds "to assist in making the home grounds more attractive."⁵

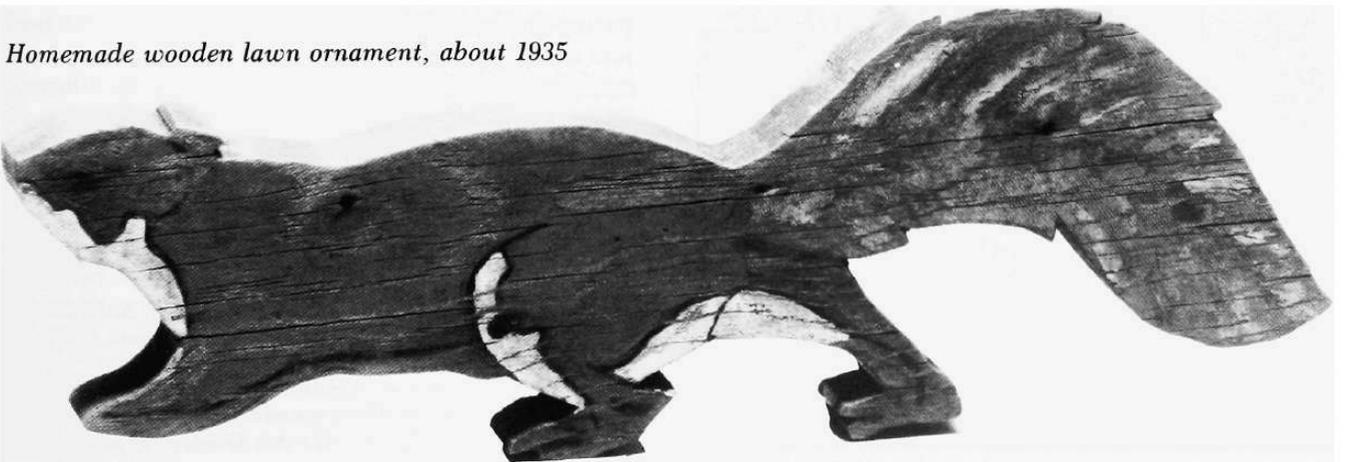
IN CONTRAST to the front porch, with its unusual specimen plants and polite conversation, the back porch served as a staging platform for work associated with large backyard kitchen gardens. In this more informal environment, family and helpers tended seedlings and soaked seeds, shelled peas, shucked corn, pit-

³J. S. Harris, "Flowers," *Transactions of the Minnesota State Horticultural Society* (St. Paul: Office of St. Paul Press Co., 1874), 87.

⁴*Minnesota Farmer and Gardener* 1(May, June 1861):145, 176.

⁵"Garden Guide" (St. Paul: Men's Garden Club of Ramsey County, [n.d.]), in James Taylor Dunn and Family Papers, MHS.

Homemade wooden lawn ornament, about 1935



ted cherries, peeled apples, and wrapped herbs and flowers for drying.

Minnesota's home vegetable gardeners may or may not have agreed with the writer in *The Garden Magazine* who claimed in January 1906 that home gardening "never pays, that is, not in dollars and cents, if you count your time worth as much as the market garden-



Gardener Freda Aronson, about 1910

Tending potted plants including cactus, possibly at Marine on St. Croix, about 1885



er's." But they surely concurred with his prescient observation that homegrown produce bests the grocery store for freshness and for "better kinds—the varieties that stand for quality, not for ability to ship round the world and last forever."⁶

For some fortunate Minnesota women, gardening became the pleasant focus of long summer days. For instance, on June 2, 1899, Frances L. James, who summered in Newport, wrote her husband: "Our life runs along very simply. Currant worms and potato bugs form the most exciting elements. The currant worms are very numerous, and hellebore [insecticide] costs about as much as the currants are worth—so I fear the worms will win the victory. . . . Our mulberry tree acts as though the winter had hurt it—it is leafing out very slowly. If that should die, it would be like losing a friend."⁷

Suggesting the healing and comforting aspect of garden flowers, James's letter to her husband of August 10, 1899, describes preparing an elderly relative for burial by "covering her with the most beautiful roses, hundreds of them, the delicate pink and white around her head with some more of the exquisite Alleghany [*sic*] vine." This flower shroud, she marveled, seemed to ease the family's grief.

Children could also benefit from the constructive and healthful aspects of gardening. According to Henry T. Williams, author of *Window Gardening* (1872), "The [plant's] very delicacy, forbidding rough handling, serves to impose a healthy restraint upon the children." The Men's Garden Club of Ramsey County later concurred that children should be involved in gardening because "they like to work with real, live objects. The boy, girl, and plant are all live things. If the job is big enough, they will be ready for it." (Could ulterior motives have been at work here?)⁸

LATE SUMMER and autumn brought the important time for "putting by," or preserving summer abundance for lean winter times. Putting by entailed weeks devoted to picking, culling, washing, cooking, and preparing fruits and vegetables until pantry shelves held jars containing almost everything that had graced the summer garden. Apples and peaches could be sulfured; fruit, pumpkins, beans, peas, corn, and sweet potatoes could be dried; other produce could be pickled or stored whole in root cellars. Most thrilling may have

⁶"How to Have a Better Garden," *The Garden Magazine*, January 1906, p. 1.

⁷Here and below, see "Aunt Lucy's [Lucy A. Williams] Recollections," II: 305, 315, Frances Haynes James and Family Papers, MHS.

⁸Henry T. Williams, *Window Gardening. Devoted Specially to the Culture of Flowers and Ornamental Plants* (New York: the author, 1872), 7; "Garden Guide."



Marie Madison King of Fulda, with asters, hydrangeas, phlox, and Boston fern, about 1910

been the jams and jellies, ranging in color from purple (grape) and black (blackberries) to yellow (apple) and green (mint). Minnesotans also tamed and jarred wild plants like violets, sassafras, dandelions, and Queen Anne's lace for the table. Of course, groaning shelves frequently meant generous gifts to family, friends, and neighbors.⁹

Small sections of kitchen gardens may have been devoted to herbs and special plants, some for seasoning food or dyeing fabric and some for medicinal purposes or beauty aids. The experienced housewife had more than one remedy for problems ranging from coughs (poppy-blossom syrup, thyme tea, hollyhock syrup, or comfrey) to cuts and bruises (sage lotion, chervil, white-bean or comfrey-leaf poultices, tansy leaves, or

Children in gardening class at Pipestone school, about 1910



⁹Here and below, see Laura Martin, *Grandma's Garden—A Celebration of Old-fashioned Gardening* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1990), 133–38.



Canning cellar in Mille Lacs County, 1941

Northrup King brochure, about 1943

WAR GARDENS

FOR

VICTORY



GROW VITAMINS AT YOUR KITCHEN DOOR



St. Paulite Watson Davidson in his Summit Avenue garden, 1949

mistletoe leaves mixed with wax). She laced bath waters with different herbs: basil, bay, horseradish root, lemon verbena, mint, or pine needles to stimulate; catnip, chamomile flowers, tansy flowers, or violets to soothe; and sage, strawberry leaves, chamomile, or comfrey to relax weary muscles.

DURING TWO WORLD WARS, gardeners found themselves with another role to play. Both the federal government and war-restricted industries urged patriotic Minnesotans to set aside a “small” victory garden plot at least twenty-five by fifty feet in size, free from tree and shrub roots, and enjoying at least six hours of sun each day. A World War II writer explained: “You



may not be able to carry a gun or drive a tank, but you can grow food for Victory! . . . Raise food because in so doing you will save metal that would have been used for cans. You will save the fuel that would have been used to carry the food to your local store. You will save the space on railroad trains that is so vitally needed for the transportation of ammunition and supplies for our armed forces." Step-by-step advice in garden planning, planting, and care proliferated in seed-company and government pamphlets during both wars.

Interest in gardening has gained in popularity since

¹⁰Carolyn Anthony, "Cultivating Their Garden," *Publishers Weekly*, Feb. 24, 1992, p. 24.

World War II. A 1991 National Gardening Association survey reported that 80 percent of the 93.3 million households in the United States claimed one or more members participating in some form of lawn or gardening activity, an increase of 7 percent over the previous year.¹⁰

Some modern gardeners are planting heirloom nineteenth-century vegetable varieties, including Early Blood Beet, Bullnose Pepper, and Early Russian Black Spine Cucumber, distributed through seed exchanges and by the Minnesota Historical Society's Oliver H. Kelley Farm near Elk River. They cultivate out of curiosity but also concern that important plant genes are being lost forever as world agriculture moves exclusively to larger-yield hybrids.

Contemporary gardeners tend their patches of earth for highly personal reasons. They may seek relaxation after the day's work and financial stress. They may hope to beautify their environment or increase property values. Or they may wish to produce luscious food for hungry mouths. Perhaps gardening's long popularity reflects the mix of these tangible rewards with other intangible satisfactions—a sense of stewardship for the planet, blind faith in the future, and even hidden memories of the Garden.

The books, magazines, manuscripts, photographs, and objects mentioned or reproduced in this article may be found in the various collections and the Minnesota State Archives at MHS.

Sampler by Helen A. Bengtson, Kittson County





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