



A GARDEN FROM OUR FOREFATHERS

In earlier days every home was a farm, dependent on its own resources for most of its food. Vegetable gardens, orchards, cows, and chickens were tended. Sheep were raised for their wool and flax was raised to spin into linen to supply the family with material for its clothing needs. Nowadays most of us go to the supermarket and to department stores for our food, medicines, and sewing supplies. As with most everything, times have changed.

Gardening was more than an occupation when our **forefathers** settled in Vermont. It was a way of life and a source of survival. If your farm did not produce, your family could not eat. The farm produced much of what a family needed and gave it enough **capital** to purchase those few things that the farm did not supply. Here a New England farmer describes his farm in 1787:

“At this time my farm gave me and my whole family a good living on the produce of it, and left me one year with another one hundred and fifty silver dollars, for I never spent more than ten dollars a year which was for salt, nails, and the like. Nothing to eat, drink or wear was bought, as my farm provided all.”

Today if your family was preparing to move to a new home in another state or country, the chances are very good that none of you would include seeds as a necessity on your packing list. But if you had

been living two hundred years ago, you would have most carefully packed your precious vegetable and herb seeds for use at your new home. Before seeds were available through stores and seed catalogs, farmers always saved the seed produced from the garden for the next year's planting. Along with the family tools, frying pan, and rifle, seeds were among the most valued possessions.

Much of the knowledge our ancestors acquired about wild foods and gardening came from the Indians. Other knowledge was learned in the “old country” and passed down through the generations of new Americans. The settlers who moved north to the Green Mountain state adapted what they knew to Vermont's hilly land and cold climate.

Root crops like turnips, parsnips, and potatoes were common to most farms as were pumpkins and squash. Without refrigerators and the luxury of out-of-season produce shipped from California and Florida, farmers had to raise hardy vegetables that could be stored in the household root cellar throughout the long Vermont winters. Here is a verse that describes the farmer's dependence on these crops:

Potage and puddings without custards and pies,
With turnips and parsnips are common supplies;
We have pumpkins at morning and pumpkins at
night,
'Twas not for pumpkins, we should be in a plight.



As the verse says, pumpkins were a staple in most families. They were either cooked or dried for storage. Baked pumpkin was a favorite meal. One **receipt** called for a ripe pumpkin with a firm shell. The top was cut out in a circle like in a jack-o-lantern. Then the seeds were scraped out. Fresh milk was poured into the pumpkin, filling it up half-way. Then the lid was replaced and the pumpkin

was put in the oven to cook for as long as six hours. When done and cooled, it was eaten with more milk.



Vegetables, herbs, and wild plants were not used only for food. Medicines were made from a variety of these plants to soothe anything from toothaches and sore throats to hiccups and stomach flu. Some of these medicinal herbs and plants, once used by our forefathers and the Indians before them, are sold in our drugstores today. Witch hazel and slippery elm are two of them.

How many cures do you know for the hiccups? Just as there are many cures now, so there were in the early days of our state. One popular old receipt for their cure was a mix of caraway, dill, and fennel seeds. Supposedly chewing this mixture would not only cure the hiccups, but it would also sweeten the breath as well as keep one awake during an especially long, dull church sermon. For this last reason it was called "meetin' seed." Another cure for the hiccups included dried spiders as one of the main ingredients.

Wild plants had other uses as well. Horsetail, which we still see growing along many a Vermont roadside, was used as a pot scrubber. Milkweck was not only eaten in several stages of its growth but its fluffy seeds were collected for stuffing pillows. Corn husks were used to stuff mattresses and in the making of dolls. Other plants were used to scent the family linens or as **natural dyes** for homespun wools and linens.

Although our great-great-grandparents' gardens did not have nearly the variety our gardens do today, they did have many vegetables that we cannot get through any store or mail order seed catalog. Ver-

mont had several vegetables unique to the state. The Green Mountain potato and the Gilfeather turnip were two.

To get a feel for such an oldtime garden, why not try your hand at planting a small one this summer? Recreating an old style garden today is not an easy task. Many of the old varieties grown are now lost forever. The only record of them is in journals kept by farmers of long ago. You can, however, grow the modern day **equivalents** of our ancestors' varieties. If you are interested in an historical garden, you can purchase an **heirloom** seed package.



With a little detective work you might even discover some vegetable varieties that your great-great-grandmother grew that you cannot buy any longer. Searching for these antique varieties can be as much fun as rummaging through an old trunk in the attic, or looking for arrowheads in a field. Many of these plant seeds have been passed down from family member to family member. Interview some of the people in your community to learn what plants they grow and try to discover whether any were passed down to them by their families. Someday these heirloom plants will be lost forever if people like you do not keep them growing for future generations.

Three things to remember if you decide to have a garden:

1. Your garden will grow only if you have chosen a site with enough sunlight and have properly tilled the soil before you plant.

2. Do not plant more than you can take care of easily.

3. Watch your garden carefully as it grows. Keep it weeded and moist.

For information on how to care for the plants you want to grow, read your seed catalog or the directions on the seed packets. Most nurseries will be able to answer any questions that you have. Have fun and good eating!



VOCABULARY

forefathers - ancestors

capital - material wealth

receipt - an old term for recipe

natural dyes - colored dyes made from plants, bark, and berries

equivalent - equal or having similar effects

heirloom - valued possession passed down in a family through the generations

AMAZE YOUR FRIENDS

Have you ever seen a sailboat in a bottle and wondered how it got inside? Here is something you can do with a cucumber in the same way. All you need is a cucumber, just starting to grow in your garden, a clear glass bottle with a small mouth, and several sheets of newspaper or some large white rags.

Watch your cucumber plants in the garden very carefully. Just as a cucumber has begun to grow, but

is still very tiny, take your bottle out to the garden and set it down beside your cucumber plant. Very gently slide the little cucumber inside the bottle, leaving it attached to its vine. Then cover the bottle with newspaper or rags so that the cucumber plant is protected from the hot sun, just as it would be tucked under the leaves of the plant. If the newspapers or rags blow off, the glass will become too hot and the cucumber will die. As it grows it will begin to fill up the bottle. Be careful not to let it get too big, as it might break the glass. When the cucumber is the size you want, snip off the vine, and take your bottle out of the garden and into your house. Your friends will wonder how you ever got such a big cucumber into such a small bottle!

