

## GARDENS OF YESTERYEAR

Sadie Cole Gordon  
Master Gardener  
Grove, Oklahoma  
[sadiegordon@att.net](mailto:sadiegordon@att.net)

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### ABSTRACT

Begun as a response to a request to develop a historically accurate museum garden representing home gardens before and after Oklahoma's statehood in 1907, research reported in this article describes both native and non-native plants cultivated in gardens in Northeast Oklahoma, Southwest Missouri, Southeast Kansas, and Northwest Arkansas between 1841 and 1930. Much of the evidence of the diversity of plants grown in home gardens by Native Americans who were moved here and homesteaders who settled here is found in historic records that have only recently been digitized for global accessibility.

### INTRODUCTION

The initial goal of this project was to investigate the history of home gardens in Northeastern Oklahoma during the time period of 1860-1930 so that a historically accurate museum garden could be developed. This historical investigation focused on identifying both native and non-native plants that were available for cultivation by homesteaders before and after Oklahoma statehood.

Many difficulties exist for those who are interested in researching garden history. This is especially true concerning early home gardens in Northeast Oklahoma. Therefore, the decision was made to enlarge the geographical area of study to include Southwest Missouri, Northwest Arkansas, and Southeast Kansas, since the growing conditions of these three regions are similar to Northeast Oklahoma. Furthermore, these three neighboring areas established statehood many years before Oklahoma, and it seemed likely that by researching all these areas, more historical evidence could be found that might be helpful in this project. Research yielded unexpected records of plants cultivated in Native

American gardens as early as 1841, which has also been included here. Historical archives and agricultural bulletins from all of these areas were useful for the identification of native plants used by Native Americans before settlement and by homesteaders during that time period. Species nomenclature has been updated following the PLANTS Database compiled by the United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA, NRCS 2014).

### NATIVE AMERICAN GARDENS

Ethan Allen Hitchcock, an army officer, had been sent by the United States Government to investigate conditions among Native American tribes and nations from November 1841 through March 1842 in a region that included the Grand Saline River near what is now Salina, Oklahoma (Foreman 1996). He had described the Cherokees of this area as having well cultivated fields, gardens, and orchards. In 1873, a review was made of agricultural conditions among 24 Native American tribes who were living in Indian Territory and was presented to the General Council

of the Indian Territory meeting at Okmulgee. The report described the gardens as being well cultivated. The plants were not identified as to whether they were native; however, the information provides documentation about the home gardens at that time. The Cherokees were growing corn, wheat, and tobacco for home use. The Muskogee Nation reported growing fruit. In Tahlequah, there was an establishment called the Cherokee Nursery where a large number of fruit trees could be purchased. The Cherokee delegation also reported that honeysuckle was growing near windows of their homes (Wright 1956).

Norman Graebner described similar agricultural conditions in his article, "Provincial Indian Society in Eastern Oklahoma". He observed vegetables such as beans, potatoes, squash, turnips, and pumpkins, as well as new varieties from other states, growing in gardens. He went on to explain that there was a great variety of fruit trees. In the spring and summer, food such as edible wild vegetables and fruit supplemented garden foods (Graebner 1906).

M. A. Carleton, a botanist from the Kansas Agricultural Experimental Studies, visited Eastern Oklahoma in the summer of 1891. He described the eastern part of the Territory as having soil of a clayey consistency that was desirable for growing fruits such as plums. He observed native fruits in both the Cherokee and Creek Nations areas. They included *Prunus angustifolia* Marsh. (Chickasaw plum), *Prunus americana* Marsh. (ordinary wild plum), and *Prunus serotina* Ehrh. var. *serotina* (wild cherry). He also reported that he saw many *Rubus flagellaris* Willd. (common blackberry) and *Rubus occidentalis* L. (raspberry) growing in the town of Vinita. He identified another species of blackberry, *Rubus trivialis* Michx. (southern blackberry), as well (Carleton 1892).

## GARDENS OF EARLY SETTLERS

Very few historic landscape plans are available for documenting home gardens in the United States (Griffith 2008). The first home gardens in the four state region were devoted to growing food for survival and were planted nearby. It is likely that early settlers depended on both native and non-native plants. The development of the railroad system, as well as the nearby Fort Smith, Arkansas port, offered the home gardener many possibilities to purchase plants if income was sufficient (Slossen 1951). Later, as small crops of corn, wheat, and barley were successful and the railroad was expanded, communities developed so that foods could be purchased or bartered. In later years, the gardens were enlarged to include flowers and ornamental shrubs as well as fruits such as raspberries and strawberries.

An issue important to the establishment of early gardens was weeds. Oklahoma Agricultural Station Bulletin No. 41 from May 1899 by E. E. Bogue, a botanist and entomologist, explored the topic of "Weeds of Oklahoma". He asserted that one of his objectives was to call attention to weeds that interfere with agriculture. He identified *Solanum carolinense* L. var. *carolinense* (horse nettle), *Acacia angustissima* (Mill.) Kuntze (prairie acacia), *Amaranthus cruentus* L. (red amaranthus), *Convolvulus arvensis* L. (field binderweed), *Erigeron annuus* (L.) Pers. (eastern daisy fleabane), and *Passiflora incarnata* L. (passion vine). He also identified 10 native sunflowers and compared the differences between them and the ones he saw in Kansas in 1898. The most common one in Oklahoma was *Helianthus annuus* L. (common sunflower). He stated that in favorable conditions they grow to be 12–14 feet (4 m) tall (Bogue 1899). It is highly likely that these weeds were transplanted to the home garden for their ornamental flowers.

The following year, Bogue authored another bulletin, “Annotated Catalog of Ferns and Flowering Plants of Oklahoma”, which provides identification of native plants growing without cultivation in the territory. The author asserted that the results recorded in the bulletin were “those obtained by four years of more or less constant study and observation on the flora of the territory”. He went on to affirm that this is the first attempt made to permanently record the plants of Oklahoma (Bogue 1900a).

Bogue admitted that he did not travel to every part of the territory, but he claimed that he made visits to the southern and eastern section as well as Payne County. Among his findings he observed that:

...in the eastern part, the climate is more moist and surface of the country is more broken than in other parts of the territory. In the western part are extensive level plains of more or less sandy soil which do not support a great variety of plants... In the eastern part of the territory, limestone crops out more or less, and here plants differ a little from those found in other parts of the territory. Sandstone frequently crops out or comes very near the surface. In such places are plants which occur nowhere else. In some places sandstone exposes walls more or less extensive, even to the height of twenty feet or more. In the crevices of these rocks some ferns of small growth can be found. (Bogue 1900b)

He identified 750 plants growing throughout the territory, including two ferns growing in Pawhuska: *Asplenium trichomanes* L. ssp. *trichomanes* (maidenhair spleenwort) and *Polystichum acrostichoides* (Michx.) Schott

var. *acrostichoides* (Christmas fern). Plants he identified that were suitable for cultivation include *Clitoria mariana* L. (butterfly pea [Atlantic pigeon wings]), *Oxalis violacea* L. (violet wood sorrel), *Callirhoe involucrata* (Torr. & A. Gray.) A. Gray (purple poppy mallow), *Oenothera speciosa* Torr. (showy primrose), *Conoclinium coelestinum* (L.) DC. (blue mistflower), and *Solidago speciosa* Nutt. (showy golden rod) (Bogue 1900a).

Use of native plants and trees in early home gardens occurred more frequently in the Central and Great Plains regions than other parts of the United States. Extreme weather changes, wind, soil conditions, and pests were some of the challenges of gardening in this region. Inability to secure commercially cultivated plants could also have contributed to the transplantation of native plants into the home gardens of Northeast Oklahoma (Adams 2004).

It is obvious that those who dared to travel far away from their birthplaces during 1860–1930 to settle in Oklahoma experienced many physical hardships. They depended on native plants and trees for survival. The first plants grown were those that could provide food, while herbs were grown for medicinal use rather than ornamentation. Brides were often given seeds and plants as their dowries. These gifts included native plants as well as cultivated ones (Ise 1996). Many garden historians also believe that the early gardens served as powerful sources of identity or a link to their pasts which helped them cope with the psychological hardships (Haavisto and O’Sullivan 1995).

Like early American colonists, the first gardens developed in this four-state region were planted very close to the residence of the settler, using landscape plans that offered security. Likewise, many of the homesteaders who settled in Oregon used this same plan which is commonly referred to as a “dooryard garden” (Calkins 1996). Furthermore, water often had to be transported from a distance; therefore, any

used household water could be reused. Often the water was tossed from a bucket into the garden. The term “dooryard garden” describes this landscaping arrangement. Fencing was a priority due to the potential damage that might occur from wildlife and livestock. Theft of food from the garden was also a concern. Thus, a garden placed in close proximity to the home was a way of enforcing security (Calkins 1996; Haavisto and O’Sullivan 1995).

By 1886, University of Arkansas was offering classes on the subject of home gardens (Reynolds and Thomas 1910). As early as 1886 there is evidence that dooryard gardens were indeed important in the region. In an article authored by Lou Pancost of Iola, Kansas in the Kansas Horticultural Report Meeting for the year 1886 entitled “The Home Garden”, emphasis is made that a home garden should be located near the house and be surrounded by a fence (Pancost 1887). Another article reported to this same group is “Flowering Plants and Shrubs: Their Management in Dooryard Gardens” (Milliken 1887).

During this same time, cultivated apple trees from Northwest Arkansas were being sold commercially (Fruit-full Arkansas 2013). Likewise, cultivated fruit trees could be obtained from Stark Brothers Nursery in Louisiana, Missouri (Booth and Mooring 1911). An assortment of garden plants such as peonies, daylilies, and iris could be purchased from Gilbert Wild Nursery in Sarcoxie, Missouri (Slosson 1951).

Examination of notes from the Missouri Horticultural Society Meetings during 1893 confirms that native plants were recommended for use in the home gardens. C. W. Elliot (1894), in “Some Desirable Native Perennials”, points out that many plants advertised for sale at that time are native to Missouri. Perennials that he identifies for their beauty in the garden include *Asclepias incarnata* L. ssp. *incarnata*

(flesh colored asclepias or swamp milkweed), *Baptisia australis* (L.) R. Br. (deep blue baptisia or blue wild indigo), *Aruncus dioicus* (Walter) Fernald var. *vulgaris* (Maxim.) H. Hara (goat’s beard [bride’s feathers]), and *Coreopsis lanceolata* L. (coreopsis or lanceleaf tickseed).

The goal of this article is to provide information about native plants in historical gardens and to spark interest in native plant advocacy. It is hoped that bringing this historic data to the attention of professional botanists, amateur gardeners, and those who love nature will promote and insure the preservation and propagation of native plants.

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