



Dancing round the MAY-POLE.

GEDDY GARDEN NEWS

*"Then came faire May, the fairest
mayd on the ground,
Deckt with all the dainties of
Her season's pryde,
And throwing flow'res out of her
Lap around."*

Edmund Spenser

Once again we celebrated the season with a maypole festooned with colorful ribbons and surrounded by baskets of lovely spring flowers. The weather cooperated and gave us a perfect May Day. The low humidity contributed to the energy of those dancing around the maypole.

This year our dancing mistress, Marcy Wright, conducted the May dance and was assisted by her three-year-old daughter, Lily and accompanied by John Needre on the flute. A large crowd of visitors took part in this annual event which always proves to be a very joyful day. My thanks to all who helped me and contributed to making this May Day so successful.

I recently learned of another May Day tradition that took place in the 18th century in Wales and Ireland. It involved the traveling of young women called garden girls from these countries to London. The girls were usually farmers' daughters seeking seasonal summer work. The Irish girls often worked in the hayfields. They were poor and traveled barefooted. The Welsh girls acquired jobs in the market gardens, private gardens, and the royal parks in London. Their duties involved the garden tasks of weeding, planting, pea-picking, and the preparation of vegetables and fruits for the market places. They were sometimes referred to as codders.

There is an 18th-century Welsh poem which, when translated, goes:

*"I will go to London on May day,
If I am alive and well,
I will not stay in Wales,
To break my little heart."*

Women were believed to have a more sensitive touch and therefore the delicate job of picking and packing fruit was accomplished better by these girls. The cane-shaped baskets that they packed the strawberries in were called pottles and they then carried them on their heads in larger baskets called mornes to the markets. Many of the market places were located several miles away in other parts of the city. One such location was Hammersmith. Several years ago when visiting England I stayed in Hammersmith and shopped in a street market there. I bought my fruit there. In the 18th century that fruit would have been supplied by one of these garden girls! Some of the girls sold strawberries on the street and were called strawberry girls.

Workers worked hard all day and usually slept in barns on the farms and ate fruits and vegetables as their regular diets. They earned about half the salary of the men, only about 5 or 6 shillings a week. And although these were low wages, they were still higher than a woman could earn in Wales and Ireland at the time. Some could return to their homes at the end of the summer with as much as 8 to 12 pounds if they had saved their earnings.

This custom ended by the 19th century due to the improvement in the construction of vehicles with springs which enabled safer transportation of the fruit to markets and made hand transportation unnecessary. Another reason for the custom ending was the potato famine in Ireland in 1846, which drove many of the Irish to England, giving England a larger year round work force which lessened the need for seasonal workers.

Have you seen the beautiful display of foxgloves in the flag garden on Duke of Gloucester Street? If not, I urge you to go by and see that display. Foxglove is the classic case of a folk cure which was accepted and is part of conventional medicine. Its medicinal properties were known early on and in 1780 a mixture of glucosides from the plant digitalin was introduced into legitimate medicine for the treatment of heart disease. What a marvelous plant, and beautiful, too!

Another beautiful spot to enjoy is on Palace Green where the Catalpa trees are in bloom. We usually have to wait until Memorial Day weekend to see the pretty, little white flowers appear on the Catalpa trees, but this year due to the weather they showed up about two weeks early.

Janet Guthrie