
GEDDY GARDEN NEWS

“If the 24th of August be fair and clear, Then hope for a prosperous autumn that year.”

Old Folks Saying

August 24th is the feast day of Saint Bartholomew, who was one of the twelve Apostles and died a martyr for preaching the Gospel in barbarous countries.

The extraordinary heat of this summer has contributed to a bumper crop of figs. Everyone has been enjoying them. Some visitors have sampled them for the very first time and that is always special when a new experience can be introduced in my garden.

Figs were available in Virginia in the 18th century. They were not however among the favorite fruits Fithian mentions in his diary. He and the ladies went through the garden and gathered some figs. He wrote, “the ladies seem fond of them, I cannot endure them.” We know that Thomas Jefferson grew them in his garden as early as 1769. By the 19th century the popularity of the fig increased. Many northern visitors describe covering their fig trees to protect them from the cold in winter. That is not necessary here.

In my search for women garden writers I came across Margaret Morris. She was a Quaker widow in Burlington, N.J. in the 18th century who kept a kitchen garden journal which she called her gardening memorandum. She was growing her garden in an effort to aid the poor and sick and elderly in her Quaker community. She grew few flowers; mostly food for charitable donations filled her garden. Much of it seems to have been donated to the Asylum, which today is known as Friends Hospital in Northeastern Philadelphia.

Her gardening methods combined old and new techniques. The old method of planting by the phases of the moon. She was also experimenting with some ideas in planting potatoes by cutting them in pieces and drawing conclusions from the results.

Garden journals or notes, or as in Margaret Morris’s words, Memorandums, are wonderful windows into the past. Like most diaries the most mundane practices or activities are omitted in the writings. It was taken for granted that certain things were common knowledge and therefore did not need to be written down.

Another female contributor to our garden information of the past is Lady Jean Skipwith. Laura Viancour has done a great deal of research on Lady Skipwith. Although her garden journal is not accessible to the public because it remains in the possession of a family member, we do have copious garden notes written by her. She

kept detailed records of her garden at Prestwould Plantation in Mecklenburg County, Virginia.

She was born in Virginia but lived in Britain from the age of 12 to 38. She married a baronet in 1788 after she had returned to Virginia to live. Her garden notes show us a remarkable woman with a love and devotion to gardening. Her house remains today. She wrote that she had fig trees near the beehives and it is thought that the figs in the recreated garden there today might possibly be off shoots of her original fig trees. Some of her notes and records were used during the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg. Her stepdaughter and niece became the wife of St. George Tucker. Lelia Skipwith Carter, a widow, married St. George Tucker in 1791. She like her Aunt Lady Jean had a love of gardening, as did her new husband, St. George Tucker. He referred to his wife in a letter to his children in 1810 as the "Matron of the Green."

Sometimes we find garden writing in poetry and essays. In 1802 Dorothy Wordsworth, sister of William Wordsworth wrote a beautiful description of the first sighting of daffodils.

Some children's books were written about plants and flowers in the eighteenth century and they combined moral lessons with pictures of flowers. The Practical Flower Garden: with Moral Reflections, for the Amusement of Children printed in London in 1778 is one such book. Although there is not a great deal of written garden information of the period it is found in diverse places.

We are still in desperate need of rain for our gardens and reservoirs. There is an old rhyme that tells us that cows are good weather indicators.

When a cow tries to scratch its ear, It means a shower is very near.
When it clumps its side with its tail, look out for thunder, lightning and hail.

Let's hope we see some ear scratching cows soon.

Janet Guthrie