



THE GEDDY GARDEN NEWS

Issue #53

AUGUST 1998



Camomile

german-matricaria chamomilla
roman anthemis nobilis

“Fairest of months, ripe
Summer’s Queen
The hey-day of the year
With robes that gleam
With sunny sheen,
Sweet August doth appear.”

JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER, JR. LIBRARY
COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION
P. O. Box 1776
Williamsburg, Virginia 23187

R. Combe Miller

August weather so far has been atypical. I am beginning to question if we can ever call the weather typical. It seems to me each season each year has been unusual weather wise. It has been either too cold in the winter months, too rainy in the spring, too windy or too something or other in every season. This particular summer definitely can be put in the “too hot” column. But we are surviving. The Jr. Interpreters have been most helpful by drawing water from our well and Layne Chappell was invaluable in harvesting potatoes with me. My grateful thanks to all those that helped. I also wish to acknowledge our peer teacher, Sarah Finkelstein as the winner of the Name the Scarecrow contest. Our scarecrow this year is Matilda, and she is withstanding the heat and the cameras.

I enjoyed the experience of growing white potatoes. I have always grown sweet potatoes in the past. Gerard called the white potato the Virginia potato, the colonists usually referred to it as the Irish potato. It was customary to plant it on March 17, St Patrick’s Day. I had a few potato bugs but not a serious problem. Since there was no real infestation I simply picked off the pests and dropped them into kerosene. They also would drown them in salt water in the 18th century. There was a good harvest and we roasted some potatoes in the Geddy yard and enjoyed them. Now I’ve planted seed potatoes. I was careful to select potatoes that were larger in size than an egg, thereby insuring enough stored nutrition to produce new, strong, shoots and eventually healthy potatoes. I planted in a new location to avoid any remaining disease in the soil and I was sure to cover them well

with soil to avoid exposure to light. When exposed the potatoes become green and toxic.

The first Englishman to write about gardens was Alexander of Neckaham who was born in 1157. In The Nature of Things he wrote of the flowers, herbs and fruits that should be included in a noble garden. Among those fruits was the fig. Our figs are ripe and plentiful and I enjoy eating them right from the branches. Phyllis made a fig cake with them that we all enjoyed.

Among the herbs in my garden is one that was very popular booth in the 18th century and today as well, chamomile.

The two chamomiles, German and Roman are similar in appearance and in their apple – like fragrance. In fact that name, chamomile loosely translated means, “ground apple.” I like the names of the herbs, as they are generally not named for people or places but relate to the plant itself and are descriptive and sensible names.

Herbalists say these plants are interchangeable. The chemical properties in both are alike. The differences are that the German chamomile is an annual, wild plant, and grows tall whereas the Roman is perennial and creeps lower. They are sometimes identified as chamomile I and chamomile II.

I am growing the German chamomile. It's medical use can be traced back to ancient Egypt. Oil of chamomile was prepared as ointments and poultices. Nicholas Culpeper acknowledged its value in the 17th century. It was suggested that chamomile be used to relax tense muscles and alleviate fatigue. Landon Carter used it frequently for his slaves and himself for a variety of ailments, among them colic, stomach disorders, fever, cold symptoms and worms. It was even prepared as a strong tea and washed externally on small pox ulcers.

Sir John Hill wrote in 1772, “All parts of this excellent plant are full of virtue.” The leaves and flowers served in aromatic bitters. In January 1774 an article in the Virginia Gazette recommended it as one of 17 herbal teas to be made as an alternative to drinking imported tea.

A receipt from the Good Housewife's Handbook, 1588 for chamomile oil instructs; "To make oyle of chamomile – take oyle a pint and a half, and three ounces of chamomile flowers dried one day after they be gathered. Then put the oyle and the flowers in a glasse and stop the mouth close and set it into the sun by the space of forty days."

John Randolph's Treatise on Gardening by a Citizen of Virginia suggested that you slip your chamomile in the month of March. Parkinson mentioned that the plant be planted, "in walks, and on banks to sit on, for that the more it is trodden on, and pressed downe in dry weather, the closer it groweth, and the better it will thrive."

Today chamomile tea is well known the world over as one of the major herbal teas. It is considered a treatment for insomnia. Some take it as a cure for diarrhea, for nervous disorders, heartburn, morning sickness, urinary tract infections, relief for gout, relief of arthritic pains, fever and flu symptoms. For those people with allergies it should be noted that chamomile is related to ragweed and should be avoided if you are sensitive to ragweed.

Aside from that long list of medicinal uses the versatile plant has been used cosmetically for centuries as well. Both in the past and now chamomile oil in the bath water serves as a means of relaxation. Also then as now hair washed in chamomile tea brings out color highlights and softens the hair. Today chamomile is used as a beauty treatment in facial masks and also in wet compresses on the eyelids to refresh puffy eyes.

This wonderful versatile plant serves not only people but other plants as well. Chamomile tea can be sprayed on mildewed seedlings and by planting chamomile throughout the garden, sickly plants can be restored to good health.

I personally am not fond of the taste of chamomile tea but I drink it mainly because it comes so highly recommended. Mrs. Rabbit administered it to Peter and that's good enough for me!

Janet Guthrie