

## Geddy Garden News

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*"The World is a garden  
Its pleasures are its flowers  
There are some beautiful ones  
And these are plentiful."*

This verse appeared in a volume of octonares that in 1607 was given to the Prince of Wales by Esther Inglis, a French Huguenot, who was a nursemaid to the young prince. This book contained a painting of a flower or fruit on the top of each page with a verse of eight lines beneath, written in iambic meter. The paintings were watercolors and the verses were written in brown ink in several types of script, italic, roman, and cursive. New Year's gifts were given to children as well as Christmas gifts. The Prince of Wales was twelve at the time he received this New Year's Gift. He died only five years later from Typhoid and his brother, Charles, became heir to the throne.

The idea of gift giving on New Year's Day does not really exist any longer and the custom of Christmas giving has grown almost out of control in our country today.

We have made many changes in Christmas customs. Christmas decorations in a home were displayed throughout Christmas-tide, which is to say, until Twelfth Night, January 6<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of the Epiphany. It was at that time that the greenery was removed.

Robert Herrick, a famous English lyric poet, wrote of January 6<sup>th</sup>:

*"Down with the rosemary and so,  
Down with the baies and mistletoe,  
Down with the holly, ivie, all  
Wherewith you drest the Christmas hall."*

We are all familiar with the association of certain plants like holly and fir trees with Christmas decoration, but there are a few lesser known trees and plants that have Christmas connections. For example, Scotch heather (*Hammelis*) is sold in London during the Christmas season. These potted heather plants are about a foot high with beautiful showy pink and white bell-shaped flowers which bloom for about a month. Approximately one half a million or more of these inexpensive Christmas plants are sold in London each year and considered the "poor man's Christmas flower."

Another Christmas-time flowering plant is Witch Hazel. This shrubby tree produces its flowers before its leaves so there are blossoms on naked branches and they bloom on Christmas or New Year's Day.

Mark Catesby wrote about Witch Hazel in a work called *Hostus Europae Americanus*, a work which described the adoption of American plants to English gardens. He said it survived the coldest winters and always bloomed at Christmas.

We must include the Christmas Rose (*Helleborus Niger*), which is really not a rose at all but a lovely, interesting member of the large buttercup family. These are white or purplish flowers that usually bloom on Christmas Day, hence the name. The contrast of the beautiful flowers against the dark green foliage is magnificent. However, the plant is highly poisonous. Beautiful, but deadly, can describe the Christmas Rose as it can cause vomiting, convulsions, and can interfere with the breathing process.

These are some of the brave winter plants that brighten the cold, gray, winter season. Colonists took advantage of nature's surprise plants and valued their uniqueness. These colorful trees and plants helped them to escape the dreariness of winter.

Our winter has not been dull or dreary at all here at the Geddy House. We recently enjoyed our annual Christmas party for our Junior Interpreters. Once again Jennifer and Noel opened their home, the Talliaferro Stable, and hosted the event. Doc and Mike mulled our Wassail and we wassailed our way through Williamsburg blessing the trees and the garden on our way. We took a special detour through the Colonial Garden to insure continued success to the growth of the plants in Wes' and Terry's nursery. At the party the Secret Santa's were revealed and we all enjoyed good food and drink and Christmas cheer.

Let me wish all of you Happy Holidays!

*Janet Guthrie*