

DOORYARD GARDENS IN EARLY ILLINOIS

by Daryl Watson

The literature of Illinois is replete with volumes on the state's political, social, and economic history, but little has been written about the ubiquitous nineteenth-century dooryard garden. Trees, shrubs, and flowers at our doorways, gardens, and streets are fundamental and representative parts of our historical development. Their existence is as important to us as our individual homes with their varied architectural styles, building materials, and levels of workmanship. Despite the dooryard's importance, accurate restoration or re-creation is difficult because of the many forces guiding the landscape's evolution.

Subject to the same historical forces that shaped the social environment, the Illinois landscape evolved rapidly after the state's initial settlement. As American settlers moved down the Ohio River in the early 1800's and settled the forested part of Illinois, trees and other indigenous plants were largely eliminated to make way for crops and buildings. Rarely were forest trees left near the log cabin. "The fears of the woman," reported one settler, "that some unlucky tree might crush in its downfall the rude hut were speedily dissipated by the prostration of all from which such danger could be apprehended."

Typically, once field and garden crops were planted, cuttings from lilac, rose, or snowball bush were placed near the door. Fruit trees, considered both useful and ornamental, were given more attention during those early years than

any other kind. The first recorded orchard was planted in 1818 near Edwardsville, and the first commercial nursery was founded in 1843 near Alton. However, the Shakers living north of Vincennes, Indiana, had an orchard by 1814 and were the source of vegetable and flower seed for many settlers.

Surprisingly, many of the first trees planted for shade and ornament were not indigenous to Illinois. It is a common misconception that settlers

1780's. Like all poplars, the Lombardy grew rapidly in almost any situation, and a sterile tree was easily propagated from cuttings. Because of its unique upright shape, European origins, and ease of culture, the Lombardy was extensively cultivated by the country's first nurserymen. Indeed, the tree helped develop the modern ornamental nursery as we know it today.

The Lombardy Poplar proved popular in the West, too. It was planted



Left: The John Kinzie homestead in the City of Chicago (c. 1820) indicates that even pioneers landscaped the prairie. The four Lombardy Poplars were a sign of "the Village Inn" to early travelers. [*Harper's reprint*]. *Right:* The J.C. Foote home in Alden Township, IL, with its straight walkways, lack of foundation plantings and shrubs, and wooden rail fence to guard against cattle, was typical of a farm's dooryard "garden" of the 1840-1860's, but for the updated croquet lawn. Note the Lombardy Poplars at right. [*1872 Atlas of McHenry Co.*]

transplanted only trees and shrubs from nearby forests. In fact, the planting of certain exotic species was sometimes the rule rather than exception. One of the first trees to be planted in river towns along the Ohio and its tributaries was, for example, the Lombardy Poplar. Originally from southern Europe, the tree was fashionable in Europe prior to its introduction in America in the

in settlements along western migration routes for it quickly lent a civilized look to any dwelling or town. Early travelers noted that the tree marked "indubitably the site of the Village Inn." John Kinzie's trading post at what is now Chicago displayed four Lombardy Poplars as early as 1820. The longevity of the poplar as part of our ornamental landscape was short-lived, however,

because in 1820 voracious worms attacked the trees, devouring their leaves with disastrous results. The Poplar was also plagued by brittle limbs and disease, and its roots clogged sewer lines.

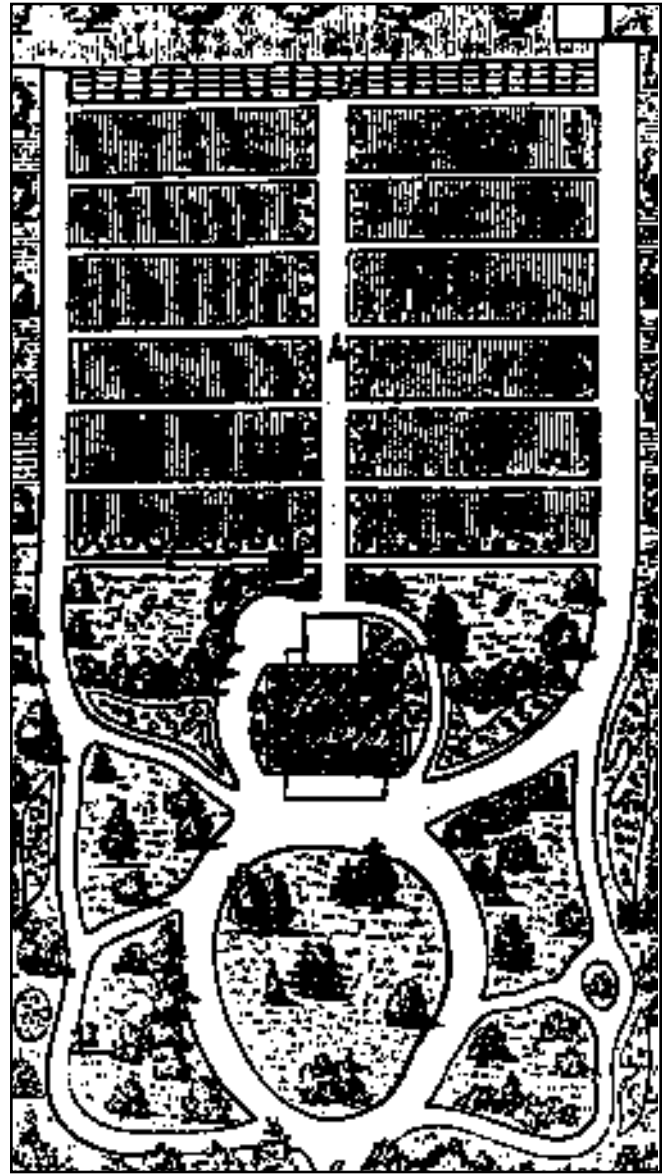
The Poplar was largely extinguished in Illinois by the 1830's, but the movement of settlers and plant materials into and within the state was greater than ever. The *Galena Advertiser*, in 1830, made note of a Fulton County man who offered for sale two wagons of some twelve hundred apple trees and a "goodly number of peach, cherry, Dawson, and Quince trees."

That same year a local Galena proprietor offered a selection of garden seeds that differed little from what is available today — cabbage, beets, carrots, cucumbers, lettuce, melons, onions, radishes, spinach, squash, peas, turnips, parsnips, and herbs. Though the seeds were from a large eastern seedhouse, another supplier was happy to report that his were "raised in Jo Daviess County." Garden seeds from the "Shakers of Kentucky" were advertised in Galena and other Illinois towns.

Early newspapers are one of the better sources of information on what people were planting near their homes. The *Galena Advertiser*, in 1838, carried this announcement: "Dahlias! Dahlias! Just received a large assortment of that rare and beautiful flower, consisting of seventy-seven varieties..." The first nurseryman to offer ornamental trees for sale in Galena, in 1834, was William Kenrick of Boston. He placed an ad for trees and shrubs that appeared in newspapers across the country. Though he promoted fruit trees he also sold other species — Horse Chestnut, Weeping Willow, Catalpa, Mountain Ash, Ailanthus, Scotch Larch, Silver Fir, Venetian Sumac, Altheas (Rose of Sharon),

Snowball, Lilac, Honeysuckle, Rose, Peonies, and double Dahlias. The ailanthus and horse chestnut were advertised in a later ad as ornament "either for street or door yard or lawns."

Andrew Jackson Downing's plan for the grounds of a suburban cottage featured curvilinear lines amidst clumps of trees and shrubs, which created new vistas as one strolled about the grounds. This plan was taken from Downing's book, *Cottage Residences*, published in 1868, but his 1849 book, *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, was a best-seller and was reprinted several times.



The first periodicals to deal exclusively with horticulture also appeared during the 1830's. Not surprisingly, the editors were often the same people growing and marketing the nursery stock. One of the most influential purveyors of plant selection and garden design was Andrew Jackson Downing.

Downing's father started the family nursery along the Hudson River in 1803. Young Downing passionately studied the plants and gardens of his father's affluent neighbors. He quickly found the stiff, formal geometric lines of the older gardens oppressive and

adopted a new, naturalistic style of gardening that was popular on larger estates in England. English writers who rejected the formality and harshness of the increasingly industrialized and urbanized landscape favored ornamental grounds "inspired and embellished by art, and yet the art so blended with nature as hardly to be distinguished."

Downing adapted such English gardening theory to American conditions. He talked of large expanses of lawn with natural looking groups of trees and shrubs; houses set well back from the

road with serpentine drives; and curving walks with clumps of trees at each bend to reveal new vistas as one approached the house. The privacy of the grounds was maintained with boundary plantings of belts or thickets:

“This will enable you to feel at home over your place, and to indulge your individual taste in walking, riding, reciting your next speech or sermon, or wearing any peculiarly rustic costume, without being suspected of being a ‘queer fellow’ by any of your neighbors.”

Though Downing frequently wrote for the more affluent gardener, he caught the fancy of the general public with his *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* in which he emphasized the use of native trees over exotics, thus appealing to the national pride of a young nation. His 1849 book advocating the natural style became the standard for the next half century.

One of the trees Downing and the nation came to cherish was the Black Locust. Native to many parts of the country, the Black Locust was recognized as a member of the legume family and thought to be beneficial to the soil. It could be propagated by seed or sucker, was a rapid grower with fragrant white flowers, and provided excellent wood for fence rails, firewood, and similar necessities. Though the Black Locust was adopted nationwide, it was most planted on the treeless prairie of Illinois.

One of the Black Locust’s champions was John S. Wright of Chicago, publisher of the influential farm journal, the *Prairie Farmer*. A tire-

less advocate of public education and horticulture, he marveled at the locust’s combination of beauty and utility. While traveling from Chicago to Naperville in 1847, he noted that Black Locusts provided shade and ornament for almost every dwelling. Other writers found the tree dominant in Ottawa, Jacksonville, Freeport, Alton, Rock Island, and elsewhere.

No sooner had the Black Locust become universal than a wood-boring insect, *Cyllene robiniae*, struck with devastation unequaled until the appearance of Dutch Elm disease a

Other trees were sought as replacements for the popular Locust. The American Elm and Silver Maple were substituted in many places, including Chicago, but in that city plants of all sorts fell victim to rampant speculation in lots. Reported one writer in the *Prairie Farmer*, “The magic ideas connected with such phrases as ‘corner lots’, ‘rents’, ‘double in value’, ‘going up’, are too much for ‘trees’, ‘shrubbery’, and ‘roses’.”

Tree peddlers brought wagon loads of trees to local markets. Dug from nearby forests, the trees were neither



The S. S. Gates House in Algonquin Township, IL, shows the influence of Andrew Jackson Downing’s landscape theories, which dominated from the 1850’s through the 1870’s. Walkways are now curving, paths separate new flowerbeds from lawn, and shrubs have been introduced.

Downing, however, would have disliked the straight lines of trees, and definitely would not have had trees next to the foundation. Wooden fences have been replaced with cast iron fences, which Downing might have thought appropriate to this country landscape although he would have preferred the separating use of natural-looking thickets. [1872 *Atlas of McHenry Co. IL*]

century later. It hit Illinois in the 1850’s and in ten short years ravaged virtually every town in the state.

transplanted nor pruned properly, and most died a slow death. Peddlers were spurned by John A. Kennecott, proprietor of the Grove Nursery (in Glenview, IL) and editor

Landscaping in the Fashion of Andrew Jackson Downing

1) Andrew Jackson Downing disliked Greek Revival architecture, but agreed that classical rectilinear designs with strong central axes linking the garden with the house were appropriate. He preferred Tudor, Italianate, or Gothic design, believing that they blended better with natural style. His objective was to create the perfect interplay of the grass-covered ground with trees and water (remember that he was from the Hudson River Valley of New York).

2) The landscape would be treated as distinct spaces: the approach to the house, the lawn area next to the house, the service area, a wooded walk, an orchard, a vegetable garden, and the barn. These should be separated with thickets of shrubs. The driveway should be curved, perhaps with a center island containing evergreens, and be made of gravel.

3) Favorite shrubs for thickets include: Mockorange, Lilac, Arborvitae, Daphne, Cornelian Cherry Dogwood (*Cornus mas*), Flowering Quince, Hawthorn, and Euonymus.

4) Flowers should be included, in circular beds near the house. The beds should be surrounded by turf rather than gravel walks. They should be planted with low annuals, one variety edged with another. Borders near the edge of the property (in front of a belt of shrubs) should have a curved edge ("arabesque"). Foundation plantings would not be used.

5) Evergreens (Larch, Balsam Fir, White Pine, Hemlock, and Norway Spruce) should be mingled in groups of mixed deciduous trees. A few trees (Osage Orange, Magnolia tripetala, and Maple) should be planted singly. A unified whole despite much variety was achieved by repeating key plants to give skeletal structure, and then by varying secondary plants. Coordinated color of flowers and autumn foliage was also important.

6) Meandering walks would include rustic benches, vine-covered summerhouses, waterfalls, vines planted on trees, fountains, empty cast iron or masonry urns and sundials on pedestals. Downing disliked rocks, covering them with vines. The ornamentation would always be placed within the bed or thicket, never in the open lawn.

7) Open lawn was the order of the day. Except for a few specimen trees, all else was contained in thickets. Fences were largely unnecessary because belts or thickets were used, except where marauding animals [Editor: or neighbors] were a problem.

Reprinted with permission from Rudy and Joy Favretti's *For Every House a Garden: A Guide for Reproducing Period Landscapes* (University Press of New England, Hanover, N.H.) 1990. While in city planning school, I took a class from Prof. Favretti. I don't remember A.J. Downing, but I do vividly recall being stumped by the question, "Like cows, what follows the path of least resistance?". Oh, well, so I got one wrong. Guess that's just water over the dam.

of the *Prairie Farmer*. In 1853, Kennicott called on his readers to patronize legitimate nurserymen and further urged everyone to buy and plant evergreens. Difficult to transplant and ship long distances, evergreens had been used sparingly prior to the 1850's. Originally thought too somber for most applications, writers began extolling the evergreens' virtues for prairie planting because of their ability to supply warmth, shelter, and diversity.

Many of Kennicott's records still survive, and they reveal that a number of people ordering plant material left the decision-making up to the nurseryman. A physician from Chicago, for example, wanted fifty dollars worth of "silver maples and such trees as will grow fast, give shade, and be suitable for Prairie Ground." Some customers asked only for "choice evergreens," while others simply supplied a sketch of their grounds and told Kennicott to decide what should be where. During the period 1857 to 1863, Kennicott sold more Norway Spruce than any other tree. Next came the Mountain Ash, Silver Maple, Scotch Pine, Austrian Pine, Balsam Fir, Arbor Vitae, and the American Elm.

As has become the norm throughout American garden history, Midwesterners were slow to adopt new gardening theory. Most homeowners lacked the space, money, and knowledge to engage in any type of elaborate garden design, preferring instead to use simple plans dominated by straight lines. The average homeowner simply placed the evergreen on either side of a straight walk leading to the front door, as were flower beds; deciduous shrubs were placed at corners of the house; and shade trees lined the street in front. Remaining yard space was frequently filled at random with an excess of specimen trees or large-growing shrubs, and large expanses of lawn requiring cutting were avoided.

[TWG Editor: This is the case with our home (see box below) built in 1852 by a Scot named William A. McConnell. This Greek Revival home had been owned by the McConnell family until we purchased it in 1986. The dooryard landscaping we found would have dated from early times: a straight central walkway leading from the front door toward the street, a line of silver maples planted along the street and east side of the house at regular intervals, a tall spruce on the west side of the walkway, a weeping mulberry on the east side, a bridal wreath [*Spirea vanhoutteii*] on the corner, and a grape climbing the front porch. The old wire gate we found in the barn. In other words, Downing's books were not read here.]

Indeed, the *Illinois Farmer*, published in Springfield prior to the Civil War, offered such traditional horticultural advice to homeowners. The *Farmer* urged its readers to avoid cluttering the grass plots in front of houses with large trees. They were instead urged through editorial and ads to plant shrubs and flowers such as Persian Lilac, Dwarf or full-size Syringas (Lilacs), Japan Quinces, small Spireas, and Perpetual Roses. Only a couple of evergreens were to be used (Balsam Fir, Norway Spruce, or Black Spruce), with a running rose or twining honeysuckle (Belgian or Chinese) for the house.

The *Prairie Farmer* [not to be confused with the *Illinois Farmer*] published, in 1865, a similar list of shrubs, but included hardier species

more suitable for northern Illinois: Rose Acacia, Smoke Tree, Honeysuckle, Lilac, Privet, Japan Quince, Snowball, Snowberry, Spirea, Syringa, Tamarisk, and Wiegela. In more exposed areas, the Snowball, Lilac, Honeysuckle, and Rose appear to have been most commonly planted.

Flowers offered for sale during this period were similar to those of today except new and improved varieties were continually appearing. Even so, there were favorites, particularly among the perennials. Kennicott sold large numbers of Dahlias, Tulips, and Peonies. Also popular were the Day Lily, Iris, Phlox, and Narcissus, all frequently advertised in newspapers of the day. [TWG Editor: Recall that in 1847, 800 Hollanders emigrated to the U.S., with some set-



The William A. McConnell Homestead, Richmond, IL. McConnell built this Greek Revival home on 1,200 acres he amassed following his arrival in 1837, when he erected a log cabin under a white oak tree that still dominates the property across the street. When he retired, McConnell once again crossed the street and built a smaller Greek Revival in the shade of the oak. He deeded the home in the picture to his son, John, and the house is often called the John McConnell house. Either way, note the traditional landscaping: straight lines everywhere. At some time, however, the driveway was turned into a large circle, in which we have now placed a classical garden.

ting in Holland, MI and others going to Pella, IA. With them, came the tulip.]

By the Civil War, the initial settlement of Illinois was complete. Houses had been built, and trees, shrubs, and flowers had been planted. But the ornamental landscape was still undergoing transformation as the forces affecting the selection, use, and replacement of plant material continued unabated. ##

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TWG Editor: In the Winter, 1996 issue, TWG will continue its "Period Gardening" series by examining the evolution of Illinois landscape design after the Civil War and as far forward to the present as documentation allows. If you feel you can contribute information to this effort, it is gratefully accepted. Also, if you are a designer of "period gardens" or are at least willing to help with your expert advice, please call: I am compiling a reference list of you for TWG subscribers.

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Sources of Heirloom Garden Plants

Many catalogs list dates of introduction. Some of the better references about the history of plants are:

Daffodil Mart
(800) ALL-BULB

Klehm's
Champaign, IL
(800) 553-3715

Milaeger's
Racine, WI
(800) 669-9956

Old House Gardens
Ann Arbor, MI
(313) 995-1486

Pickering Roses
(905) 839-2111

Seed Savers Exchange (Flower
& Herb Exchange)
(319) 382-5990

Select Seeds Antique Flowers
180 Stickney Hill Rd.
Union, CT 06076
(203) 684-9310

Thomas Jefferson Center for
Historic Plants PO Box 316
Charlottesville, VA 22902
No phone listed. Send \$2 plus
long SASE for catalog.

Underwood Gardens
Bensenville, IL
(630) 616-0268

American Forests sponsors a great program called 'Famous & Historic Trees' through which they collect seed from famous trees and then sell 2-year old seedlings for \$35 each. You can get Frank Lloyd Wright's famous Ginkgo Tree! Call (800) 320-TREE for a catalog.

Antique Annuals of Garfield Farm

The Garfield Farm Museum in LaFox (Kane County), IL, dates from the 1840's. Few references in over 2,000 Garfield family documents shed light on the annual plants grown on the farm. Here, however, is a selection of flowers selected for the gardens at Garfield Farm because their dates of introduction have been authenticated. Volunteers from the Pottawatomie Garden Club in St. Charles lend time to these gardens, and *The Natural Garden*, a nursery in St. Charles, has donated plants to the effort.

Cultivated before 1800

Calendula officinalis: (the first
"Marygold"!)

Cockscomb

Four O'Clock (*Mirabilis jalapa*)

Globe Amaranth (*Gomphrena globosa*)

Heliotrope (*Heliotropium arborescens*)

Johnny Jump Up (*Viola tricolor*)

Larkspur (*Consolida orientalis*)

Nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*)

Scarlet Pentapetes (*Pentapetes phoenicia*)

Tassel Flower (*Emilia javanica*)

Scarlet Runner Bean (*Phaseolus coccineus*)

Small Flowered Zinnia (*Zinnia pauciflora*)

Cultivated before 1850

Angel's Trumpet (*Datura innoxia*)

Love in a Puff (*Cardiospermum halicacabum*)

Nuttall's Weed (*Coreopsis tinctoria*)

Marsh Mallow (*Alcea officinalis*)

Painted Tongue (*Salpiglossis sinuata*)

Silver Cup Lavatera (*Lavatera trimestris*)

Spider Flower (*Cleome hasslerana*)

Cultivated before 1900

Basket Flower (*Centaurea americana*)

Flowering Tobacco (*Nicotiana*)