

Something Old, Something New

The first cultivation of land for food dates to 8000BC in Jericho, Palestine and in the development from grain to bread and grapes to wine, food plants eventually shared space with flowers. Medicinal herbs have a long history: there is both a Sumerian herbal record from the third millennium BC and a Chinese one from about the same time and the Sumerians developed the irrigation system needed to water them. Over 700 herbs were thought to have been grown but the numbers diminished as the Greek herbalist Dioscorides recorded only 500.

The Egyptians are credited to be the first to grow plants just for their flowers and once gardens became a place for beauty as well as study the art of flower painting flourished. As long as people have been admiring the complexities of the simplest flowers, there have been talented artists drawing them.

The history of gardening extends as far back as the flowers along the Nile in the ninth century BC, but although there are pictured records of plants in early civilizations the surviving pictures showing detailed analysis of plant parts would suggest that this study began in classical Greece. However, art with floral designs is found on ancient pottery world wide to attest to the attention given to the structure of plants in every culture.

From the ninth century AD the Arabs were prominent in herbal knowledge that came to Europe by way of Spain. Gardens also flourished in pre-Columbian America. The Incan Empire was based more on successful horticulture rather than on large-scale agriculture. According to one history, they grew plants for medicine, contraception, dyes, and poison. W.H.Prescott, in his "History of the Conquest of Peru" mentions parterres of not only real flowers but artificial plants of gold and silver. (Perhaps plastic shrubs in parking lots are not such a new idea?) Prescott in "Conquest of Mexico" also mentions the roof gardens thickly planted with flowers on Aztec houses, but nothing survived the Spanish conquest.

In England the earliest flower books were modeled on those developed on the continent, many predating the invention of printing and therefore nearly a life's work. Curiously enough, as newer books depended on older ones for the identification and classification of plants, the mistakes were also preserved for posterity.

John Gerard's "Herball" was first published in 1597, with a revised edition by Thomas Johnson in 1623. The early 17th Century was a time when upper class Englishmen were sending people to the far reaches of the known world to find new and exotic plants for their expanding homes and gardens.

Our native spiderwort bears the name of one such plantsman, John Tradescant the Elder (c1570-1638). Named Tradescantia for the elder John Tradescant it was brought back to London from Colonial Virginia on one of the three trips John the younger made to the colonies. John Tradescant the Younger (1608-1662) inherited his father's garden and the museum in Lambeth on the south side of the Thames known as the Ark. Treasures amassed by the Ark became the

foundation collection of the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford. (You can still visit the museum and garden in the Lambeth section of London.)

Living at the Ark with the younger Tradescant family in 1641 was Alexander Marshal, the creator of "Florilegium", his own book of flower paintings. Marshal was also the artist of an earlier work on the plants in the Tradescant garden, of which no trace remains.

An exquisite small book was given to me recently called "Mr. Marshal's Flower Book" and published by Viking Studio, a member of the Penguin Group, Inc. Divided by season, there are spectacular paintings of tulips in the spring section. At the time Alexander Marshal was painting, Continental Europe was in the throes of 'tulipmania' when vast sums were spent on tulip bulbs: John Tradescant the Elder was one of many who invested – and lost .

The flaming broken colors, some striped with purple and other reds that made bulbs such a compelling 'surprise' were caused by a virus that weakened the bulb and meant that the bloom was unpredictable, or even missing, which made them even more sought after.

Modern photography is an admirable achievement, but there is still unsurpassed beauty in the careful capture of a flower's nature on paper with eye and hand and paint.