

Creating a colonial garden

Though the process of creating a colonial-style garden may seem intimidating, certain design elements found in modern gardens have been adapted from these gardens of the past. Even if gardeners decide not to create an entire colonial garden, they can still incorporate certain colonial attributes that appeal to them.

American colonial gardens: The history

Although the colonial period ranged from 1600 to 1775, American and European garden designs did not change very much from the 1600s to 1840. During this time, colonists were preoccupied with independence, and few new gardening books were published. that Available books originated in Europe, with very few published in the Colonies.

Colonists and Europeans often exchanged plant material. Species from the “New World” were shipped to England, and plant material that originated in areas such as Mainland China traveled through Europe before making the trip across the Atlantic Ocean. Plants brought to the Colonies included fruit trees, vegetables, herbs, and flowering bulbs. They were placed in gardens with plants native to the United States, including tobacco, corn and other vegetables, trees, flowering shrubs, vines, and wild flowers.

Colonial gardens in the United States were quite diverse, influenced chiefly by the regions from which the colonists immigrated. Early immigrants brought many of their garden designs with them. Colonists of French heritage created gardens with a French influence. Colonists from England and the Netherlands created gardens that reflected their traditions as well. But despite these differences, all European and colonial gardens developed from Tudor and Medieval gardening styles.

Colonial garden design

Colonists did not develop or use garden plans as landscape designers do today. Instead, gardens differed depending on the colonists’ needs.

- The size of the garden was proportional to the size of their family.
- Gardens planted in more rural areas were planted around structures such as buildings, fences, livestock pens, walkways, and surrounding work areas.
- Most colonists did not place plants around the foundation of the home; this practice emerged during the Victorian era.
- Gardens that contained small vegetables (leeks, onions, garlic, carrots, and cabbage), herbs, and flowers were placed near a house door to allow quick and easy access.

Typical colonial garden layouts included:

- Square- and rectangular-shaped raised-beds framed with tree saplings. The shapes allowed gardeners to reach all plants in the gardening space.
- Tightly packed rows to make the most of available space.
- Hedges or picket fences surrounding the garden to protect plants from animals and damaging wind. Plant hedges were often used as a cheaper alternative to wooden fences.

- Walkways created from soil, gravel, or crushed clamshells, and surrounding each bed
- A larger, central walkway leading to the focal point in the garden that was usually a well or similar stone feature

Herbs used for cooking, medicine, and fragrance were mixed in with vegetable plantings. The only exception to this arrangement was for pungent herbs; these were separated from vegetables, hence, there were no true “herb gardens.” As gardens evolved, fruit trees were also slowly incorporated into the garden from outside edges to focal points in the center of the garden squares or rectangles. Larger vegetables such as snap or green beans, maize, and pumpkins were grown in large, outlying fields. Colonists took advantage of hills on their property and planted crops such as peas, lettuce, and radishes earlier in the season on southern-facing slopes to take advantage of the warmer soil.

Working-class colonists who lived in town on small, rectangular lots had gardens that were smaller in scale than those in rural areas. Colonists who were wealthy had more elaborate gardens. Layouts were formal with symmetrical gardens framing walkways. Wealthy landowners motivated changes in garden style since they had the resources and time to experiment with new arrangements.

Modern-day gardeners need to work with the size yard that they have and incorporate square- or rectangular-shaped beds that allow room for walkways and focal points such as wells, fountains, or seating. Keep the scale in proportion by including a few trees, but do not crowd the garden area. Lists of plant material that were grown by colonists are quite extensive. To develop a plant list for your garden, consult a book on colonial plants that contains descriptions of the plants, the genus and species, and examples of how plants were arranged in the garden. Some suggested books are listed below. A few of the books are out-of-print; consult your local library for a copy.

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