

OUR GARDENING HERITAGE

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I've always been fascinated by my heritage . . . Who were my people? Where did they come from? Where did they live? What did they grow? Why do I like to garden so much? I like to think I've inherited a little from all my ancestors. And a mixed lot I have.

My dad's Grant clan came from Scotland, ended up in Georgia, then Arkansas, and East Texas. Mom's Ximenes ancestors were from Mexico and settled in Louisiana and then East Texas. I got a scattered dose of English, German, American Indian, and more Scottish once their numbers expanded. Now that's a lot of heritage to live up to.



In Heirloom Gardening in the South (Texas A&M Press), Dr. Bill Welch and I explore gardening influences of each of the groups that settled in the South, including Native Americans. Indian gardens in America often centered round what is called "the three sisters," corn, beans, and squash, all American in origin.

As the Spanish settlers brought all the cultivated goods from Europe, the Indians soon adopted peaches, watermelons, and of



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course horses. And likewise, European settlers to America quickly adopted the bounty it offered up.

Early settlers in Texas were much more worried about eating and surviving, not ornamental landscaping. Flowering plants purely for show would have been rare. Field corn would have been grown both for feeding the livestock and for making corn meal and grits. After drying on the stalk, the ears would have been harvested and stored in corn cribs. I have three restored corn cribs that I cherish. According to my Uncle Noel, you didn't have to shuck the ears when feeding it to the horses as they could accomplish that task themselves.

However, shucking was required for the cows, pigs, and chickens. Some "roasting ears" would have been pulled for fresh eating when they were young and tender. Like most gardeners, today I grow mainly sweet corn. My family's favorite is the bi-colored Sweet G-90, which is reported to have a bit of field corn in its ancestry. That would explain the vigorous growth.

Cotton became the primary cash crop and filled fields across Texas. Although mostly wooded today, my Grandmother Emanis said almost every inch of the land between her home and the next town used to be corn and cotton. Corn was for feeding themselves and livestock, while cotton was grown for what little money it provided.

Sweet potatoes became a staple crop in the South as well. As a matter of fact, after a riding his horse across Texas and later publishing reports of the trip in a wonderfully informative book (A Journey through Texas) in 1857, the famous landscape architect,



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Frederick Law Olmsted, said folks in East Texas seemed to live exclusively off of sweet potatoes, coffee, cornbread, salt pork, and molasses.

After being harvested in the late summer, sweet potatoes were “bedded in” for storage through the winter and the following year. When it warmed up in the spring, new slips were started from last year’s sweet potatoes for planting the current year’s crop. All the old timers I grew up around talked about carrying cold sweet potatoes to school for lunch in their syrup bucket “lunch pails.” They also had them for snacks when they got home. Sweet potatoes are much better for you than Irish potatoes and are supremely adapted to our heat and humidity.

Most rural residents in the South grew sugar cane for making syrup. The only people that didn’t grow their own were those that had syrup mills and those that who were wealthy enough to purchase syrup. Those with syrup mills often traded their services for a cut of the sweet sticky molasses. Today it’s hard to imagine how prized that syrup was.

But with most country folks either having no access to granulated sugar or no money to buy it, ribbon cane syrup was a valued staple for making candy, pies, cookies, and for sopping homemade biscuits in each morning. Several people, including my dad, talk about butchering a hog and having fresh spare ribs and biscuits the next morning, both covered in ribbon cane syrup.

In the hot humid South, peas from Africa soon replaced beans as the staple across the region. Whether purple hull, cream, or crowder, almost everybody grew peas as they were both easy and productive. They could be stored dry and cooked like dried beans.

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Like my ancestors, I always grow a bunch of peas. We eat all we can fresh, plus my mom freezes enough to last until next year's harvest. I also save dried ones for seed stock. Typically I grow pink-eyed purple hull for weekdays, zipper cream for weekends and holidays, and black crowder, my Papaw's favorites. He said black crowdies were for working people.

As country folks got food on the table, farmer's wives eventually had a few easy to grow flowers in the yard. Some likely choices in East Texas would have been — l to r below — Rose of Sharon (althea), roses, crape myrtle, spirea, flowering almond and cape jessamine



Early farm wives would probably have also planted honeysuckle, daylilies, cannas, daffodils, narcissus, jonquils, crinum lilies, St. Joseph's lily, and Byzantine gladiolus.

Today I grow my garden in the same patch where my grandparents grew theirs, on the same property where my great-great grandparents lived. I grow the same crops of corn, peas, and tomatoes just like my grandparents did. I till and make the rows just like my Papaw showed me, and irrigate the rows in the same furrows he did—just like his



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Spanish ancestors did. For those that embrace it, heritage is a powerful and comforting force. It's nice to have roots.

For more information on our Southern gardening heritage, consider joining the Southern Garden History Society (southerngardenhistory.org). They have wonderful annual meetings in a different Southern town each year with many members from Texas including me and Dr. Welch.

Growing fruit is the easiest way to incorporate edible plants into your landscape. Take this list, shop, buy, plant, and enjoy! Gotta get Growin'!