

Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

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18th-Century Gardening Books

by Chizu Kraska

By the early 18th century, gardening already was becoming something of a pastime among the gentry in colonial America. Especially in the South, affluent colonists added to their property formal ornamental gardens of European style, in addition to vegetable gardens and orchards. Colonists such as John Carlyle would have ordered from Europe useful gardening tools, as well as vegetable seeds and herb seeds and certain fashionable flowering bulbs. In order to better design a garden and successfully grow plants, a colonial gentleman naturally would seek to acquire instructional gardening books for his library. At this time, bookmaking art was in its infancy in the New World, so many of the wealthier colonial gardeners sought to import elegantly bound and richly illustrated European gardening books.

There were considerable numbers of comprehensive gardening books published in Europe in the 18th century. The most widely circulated books include *The Gardeners Dictionary* (1731) by Philip Miller (1691-1771), *New Improvements of Planting and Gardening Both Philosophical and Practical* (1739) by Richard Bradley (1688-1732), *The Garden Vade Mecum* (1789) by John Abercrombie (1726-1806), and *Planting and Ornamental Gardening* (1785) by William Marshall (1745-1818). By far the most popular gardening book, however, both in England and in colonial America, was Miller's practical volume, *The Gardeners Dictionary*. Prominent colonial gentlemen such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson all owned copies of *Gardeners Dictionary*.

Miller's *Gardeners Dictionary* was first published in 1731. The book's complete title provides an ample description: *The Gardeners Dictionary: containing the methods of cultivating and improving the kitchen, fruit, and flower garden. As also, the physick garden, wilderness, conservatory and vineyard...Interspers'd with the history of the plants, the characters of each genus, and the names of all particular species, in Latin and English; and an explanation of all the terms used in botany and gardening, etc.* As the title suggests, the and



Plate CCXX, Ricinus. *Figures of the most beautiful, useful, and uncommon plants described in the Gardeners dictionary.* Philip Miller, 1775.

useful book covers every aspect of gardening, and descriptions are included for vegetables, fruits, herbs,

CARLYLE HOUSE

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and traditional European ornamentals to newly discovered ‘exoticks’ from around the globe. William Marshall, an agriculturist and philosopher, cautioned in his *Planting and Ornamental Gardening* that Miller’s works were “voluminous and expensive.” Indeed, a large edition of *Gardeners Dictionary* weighed 8 kilograms, or nearly 18 pounds.

Gardeners Dictionary came into such high demand in Europe that it was translated into Dutch, French, and German, and eight updated editions were published in Miller’s lifetime. Various additional formats became available as the book rose in popularity. A smaller calendar format with monthly advice was more affordable, and an abridged pocket sized edition could be used for easy reference in the field. Another book with beautifully illustrated drawings, *Figures of the Most Beautiful, Useful and Uncommon Plants Described in the Gardeners Dictionary* was published during the same period. This book contained three hundred fifty color plates illustrated by several artists, including Philip Miller.

The Carlyle House collection includes a copy of the 16th edition of Miller’s *Gardeners Kalendar*, published in 1775. The title page reads, *The Gardeners Kalendar: Directing the necessary Works to be done. Every Month in the Kitchen, Fruit, and Pleasure Gardens. As also in the Conservatory and Nursery...By Philip Miller...The Sixteen Edition...With a List of the Medicinal Plants, which may be gathered for Use each month.* The *Kalendar* is a massive book with leather binding and gilt tooling on the spine. The frontispiece has a cupid and human figures in garden setting.

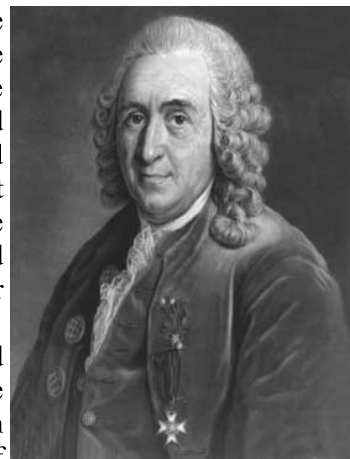
A celebrated horticulturist, Philip Miller is also known for his work as head gardener and curator of Chelsea Physic Garden. Located in London along the fertile banks of the Thames River, Chelsea Physic Garden initially was founded in 1673 as an apothecaries’ garden to train apothecaries to identify plants. To this date, the garden still exists in the same location as an important educational institution for the study of botany and horticulture.

Throughout its long history, the garden went through a series of crises and came close to closing. A British physician and a collector, Sir Hans Sloan

Chelsea Physic Garden, 2005.
Photo, Manuel Boss.



(1660-1753), who once visited the garden when he was a young apprentice apothecary, bought the land in the early 18th century and dedicated it to enhancement of botanical knowledge. He preserved the garden and appointed Miller as curator in 1722.



Library of Congress

Carl Linnaeus.

Miller skillfully turned the garden into one of the finest botanical gardens in Europe and the hub of international seed exchange.

Peter Collison (1693-1768), one of the most influential supporters of plant exchange between England and colonial America, reports in a letter on 19th July 1764, “Mr. Miller of the Physic Garden, Chelsea, has made his great abilities well known by this work as well as this skill in every part of gardening and his success in raising seeds produced by a large correspondence. He has raised the reputation of the Chelsea Garden so much that it excels all the gardens of Europe for its amazing variety of plants of all order and class and from all climates as I surveyed with wonder and delight this.”

There is a chief difference between the editions of the *Gardeners Dictionary* published before 1768 and those published after 1768. The editions after 1768 list the plant names written in a binomial (“two-term”) system, which is a scientific naming system still used today. The binomial system was developed by a Swedish naturalist, Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) and he first used it in his two-volume work *Species Plantarum*, published in 1753. Miller was, however, reluctant to use the newly reformed classification until the 8th edition of *Gardeners Dictionary*, which was published in 1768. Miller received a copy of Linnaeus’ *Species Plantarum* in 1754, so we can surmise that Miller was aware of the newly reformed classification system. For more than 10 years after Linnaeus’ *Species Plantarum* was published, Miller still preferred to use an older classification system developed by a French botanist, Joseph Pitton de Tournefort (1656-1708), and an English botanist, John Ray (1627-1705).

According to William T. Stream, in his 1975 article in *Garden History* titled, *The Chelsea Physic Garden 1673-1973: Three Centuries of Triumph and Crises. A Tercentenary Address*, Miller received an unidentified plant native to Madagascar from the famous garden, Jardin des Plantes, in Paris in 1757. Miller recognized it as a type of periwinkle, and named it using a now abolished polynomial system which used multiple words



to describe the organism. Miller named the plant, *Vinca folis oblongo-ovatis integerimis, tubo floris longissimo, canle ramoso fruticoso*. Stream suggests that, being a conservative botanist, Miller may have been reluctant to adopt the new classification system developed by a younger contemporary. Ironically, Linnaeus later renamed the same plant, *Vinca rosea*, in 1759, and it is now called *Catharanthus roseus*. As you may guess, the plant is known to us under the common name, Madagascar periwinkle, a familiar summer garden plant.

In addition to the description of individual plants and methods of cultivation, Miller's *Dictionary* also included general gardening advice. Under the letter "K," for example, there is an entry for "Kitchen-Garden." It says, the "Kitchen garden should always be situated on one side of the House, so as not to appear in sight, but must be plac'd near the Stables for the Conveniency of the Dung; which ought always to be in the Disposition of the building, and the laying out of the Garden: for if this Garden be plac'd at a Great distance from the Stables, the Labour will be very great in wheeling the Dung, and such Expences should ever be avoided, if possible." Miller has similarly practical advice on the topics of fences, pruning, nursery, hedges, water and many other aspects of gardening, and much of this advice is still useful to this day.

Although Miller's *Gardeners Dictionary* was comprehensive, practical and informative to gardeners in England, American gardeners often had difficulty applying the advice to gardening in the New World. In response to the increasing need of gardening books written for American soil, climate and cultural conditions, a number of pamphlets, calendars, remarks, and hints were printed in America during the 18th century. The first American kitchen gardening book, *The Treatise on Gardening by a Citizen of Virginia*, may have been written by an attorney general for Virginia, John Randolph (1727-1784). Another book, *Gardener's Calendar for South Carolina and North Carolina* (1778), was written by a Charleston nurseryman, Robert Squibb. John Carlyle's inventory in 1780 indicated over 235 books, magazines, and pamphlets. Since he is believed to be an architect of his estate in the town of Alexandria, he most likely used Miller's *Gardeners Dictionary* as a chief reference in designing his gardens, as well as small pamphlets or magazines with gardening articles as additional guidance.

A gardening book, however, as comprehensive and informative and as distinguished in appearance as Miller's *Gardeners Dictionary* was not published until the early 19th century, more than 20 years after John Carlyle had passed away. Bernard M'Mahon (1775-1816), was a Philadelphia nurseryman and the author of

the first substantial American gardening book, *The American Gardener's Calendar Adapted to the Seasons of the US* (Philadelphia, 1806). It became a standard encyclopedia in America for many years and went into 11 editions. M'Mahon expressed in his book, the need for American gardeners to have American gardening books in their new country. "[In] a country which has not yet made that rapid progress in Gardening, ornamental planting, and fanciful rural designs which might naturally be expected from an intelligent, happy and independent people, possessed so universally of landed property, unoppressed by taxation or tithes and blest with consequent comfort and affluence...the attributed to various causes, among the most prominent of which, is the necessity of having reference for information on those subjects, to adapted to climates, by no means according with ours, either in the temperature or course of the seasons, and in numerous instances differing materially in modes of culture, from those rendered necessary here, by the peculiarities of our climates, soils and situations."

Sources

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John Carlyle's early letters reveal a curiosity about the natural features of the New World and George Carlyle's desire to experiment with Virginia's native species:

"A Young Docter in this place has Promised Me his Assistance & you May Expect this Fall to have Sum Specimens &c. from hence tho' do Ashure you I have not time to make any great Collection My Self."
John Carlyle to George Carlyle, August 4, 1752



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