Renewal of the Boscobel Herb Garden

by Matthew Weigman

It started with some horticultural sleuthing through the 1788-1803 archive of States and Elizabeth Dyckman, original owners of Boscobel, one of the Hudson Valley's premier historic properties. Seeking clues to guide a replanting of the gardens, Jennifer Carlquist, Boscobel's executive director as of 2017, turned the list of trees, plants, and crops over to the Philipstown Garden Club (Zone III) team that maintains the herb garden. A Loyalist during the American Revolution, Dyckman had spent long periods in England before returning to build his dream house and plant its 250-acre farm in Westchester County, New York. The handsome Federal house, completed in 1808, remained in the family through most of the 19th century but faced years of tribulation - a succession of owners and demolition in the 1950s - until it was saved by local citizens, deconstructed, and transported north to Garrison. Opened as a museum in 1961, the house is situated on a promontory overlooking the Hudson toward West Point. At its opening New York State's then-Governor Nelson Rockefeller called it simply "one of the most beautiful houses ever built in America."

Four years later Boscobel's Herb Garden and Orangery were created, and for the past 47 years PGC has cared for it from early April through November. The plant lists gave a boost to an initiative by Boscobel to make the gardens integral to visitors' experience. And so, PGC members Felicia Saunders and

Matthew Weigman undertook a revision of plantings, restricting them to those likely to have been included in American gardens of the period.

There are many ways into a garden. For example, "notional" gardens might grow only plants mentioned in foundational works such as the Bible or Shakespeare. But a garden restricted to an historical period is more of a link to the people alive then. What did they eat? How did they take care of themselves, protect their health?

In an age when the garden was a sort of general store for the household, plants were used for culinary and medicinal purposes as well as for sheer enjoyment. Our research was a delightful trip through some of the most entertaining and informative works ever written about herbs and Anglo-American gardens. We began with classic English herbals: John Gerard's 16th-century *Herball* and Nicholas Culpeper's 17th-century *The Complete Herbal*. *Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book,* compiled in the 1940s, was another invaluable resource. Knowledgeable PGC gardeners contributed books by American scholars Ann Leighton and Rudy Favretti, *Gardening with Herbs for Flavor and Fragrance* by Helen Morganthau Fox, and Alma Hutchens's *Indian Herbalogy of North America*. Finally, we studied the plant list of Colonial Williamsburg.

A trip to GCA's New York headquarters library yielded an inspired suggestion from Julie Peet, Library Committee chair: we should visit Fairfield Garden Club (Zone II) member Whitney Vose at the accurately reproduced c. 1755 Ogden House Dooryard Garden. What a find! In addition to providing a good

map of the beds, Ogden House identifies plants with labels that include usage. We also studied the method of signage in the Bonnefont herb garden at The Cloisters in New York City. Ultimately, we prepared staked steel labels with the plants' common and botanical names, an accompanying reference list with each plant's first-known appearance in American gardens, and notes on specific uses.

There was joy in contemplating how beneficial a plant such as native bee balm (*Monarda didyma*) was to early Americans; it was made into a tea, put into potpourri, and used to attract bees and treat insomnia. Clary sage (*Salvia sclarea*) was a fixative in perfumes and a staple of an infusion to clear the eyes; added to beer, it promoted drunkenness. Flax (*Linum usitatissimum*) was the source of linseed oil and linen. Acrid-smelling Santolina (*Santolina chamaecyparissus*) repelled the insects that might destroy the linen. And if that linen became soiled, the leaves of soapwort (*Saponaria officinalis*), bruised and agitated with water, raised a lather that washed away greasy spots.

Some beloved longtime garden residents didn't make the cut and were potted up for PGC's yearly plant sale. Pineapple sage (*Salvia elegans*) entered North American gardens from Guatemala around 1870, so this valued source of late color had to go. Japanese anemone (*Anemone hupehensis*) didn't make it to England until 1840, so it too was eliminated. More painful still, tomatoes had to be excluded. Tomato (*Lycopersicon lycopersicum*), a Central American native, was not popularized until the arrival of southern Europeans in the late 19th century.

Off-setting such deletions, essential Colonial plants needed to be tracked down: the dye plant woad (*Isatis tinctoria*), the medicinal plant pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*), and the insect repellent herb-Robert (*Geranium robertianum*). These we found at Well-Sweep Herb Farm in Port Murray, NJ, an herb lover's mecca, which retails over 2,000 herbs.

There were other changes, too. Our visit to Well-Sweep convinced us to begin mulching the beds to ease maintenance and improve our soil. Using a vinegar-based natural weed killer recommended in GCA's spring 2019 "The Real Dirt" marked a sea change in maintaining our gravel paths. A hard-pruning last March of 12 boxwoods (*Buxus sempervirens*), which had spread over the raised beds, seemed a radical step but proved the right one.

The journey we had embarked on took us to places we hadn't anticipated. The herb garden at Boscobel requires a deer fence positioned four feet outside the perimeter of the rail fence. After the resulting border's daffodil show in spring, this area had always become one of the garden's messy bits. When visited by members of the Washington Garden Club (Zone II), member Marguerite Purnell praised our leaving this area "wild" to nurture pollinators; it is now a point of pride.

Ultimately our project changed our relationship with the garden and our understanding of the natural world. Weedy patches are part of nature's plan, synthetic additives are not, and so, while our priority had been historical fidelity, we ended by improving the health and performance of what we had previously taken the garden to be. And now, what might formerly have been seen mostly as a source of scarlet color has

become the plant that makes great tea, attracts bees, helps a house smell good, and, in a pinch, treats insomnia.