

Little Enclosures

Hard Won from the Forest

FRONT DOORYARDS WERE WHERE WOMEN TRADITIONALLY TENDED THEIR MOST PRECIOUS GARDENS.

By Gregory LeFever

For two hundred years, on farm homesteads and throughout young American towns and villages, the little piece of land at the front of the house was considered precious. It was the domain of the woman of the house—her most carefully tended garden.

Originally called the front dooryard—later shortened to simply “front yard”—here she grew medicinal plants to fight disease, vegetables for her family’s sustenance, seasonings to improve her meals, and a variety of flowers that provided beauty against a backdrop of wilderness and frequent hardship.

English colonists arriving in the New World during the 1600s brought the tradition of the dooryard—derived from the medieval English word ‘yerd’ for enclosure—from their homeland, where dooryards had been popular since Elizabethan times. In England, a fence and gate bordered the typical dooryard, and the same happened here.

“There seemed to be a law which shaped and bounded the dooryard,” wrote the historian Alice Morse Earle in her 1901 classic *Old Time Gardens*. “The side fences extended from the

corners of the house to the front fence on the edge of the road. Often the fence around the front yard was the only one on the farm; everywhere else were boundaries of great stone walls; or if there were rail fences, the front yard fence was the only painted one.”

Earle, who was born in 1851 and wrote of her many memories of beautiful, flowering dooryards in her native New England, called them “little enclosures hard won from the forest.” Since no drawings or written descriptions exist of the earliest colonial gardens, historians have relied on archaeological evidence and the letters and diaries of colonists from as early as the 1620s.



(Photo by Jill Peterson at Colonial Williamsburg)

Planting Inside the Fence

Typically, a rugged wood fence with a center gate enclosed the dooryard. The purpose was to protect plants from both wild and domesticated

animals, only later becoming a decorative feature of the homestead. In the dooryard’s simplest form, a central path went from the road, through the gate and straight to the home’s front door. Plants were grown inside the fence, on either side of the path, sometimes in raised beds made of roughhewn boards and stakes, or



(Courtesy Colonial Williamsburg)

otherwise planted directly in ground plots. More elaborate gardens featured several lateral paths that intersected with the main path and defined more beds for growing plants.

“In very early gardens, the paths would have been of tamped earth or stones from the beds,” stated Mary Riley Smith in her 1991 book, [The Front Garden: New Approaches to Landscape Design](#). “Espaliered fruit trees and shrubs with small fruits, such as currants or blueberries, ranged around the perimeter of the garden.”

As early as the mid-1600s, an Englishman named John Josslyn was visiting Boston when he wrote in his diary about the many dooryards he’d strolled past, many of them lush with marigolds, lunaria, dianthus, hollyhocks, roses, and herbs such as spearmint, coriander, dill, and comfrey.

Historical research has shown that the colonial dooryard beds were densely planted, with several dozen species of herbs, vegetables and flowers grown from European seed. The great variety of medicinal plants was necessary because the isolated environments in which most colonists lived required the mother to treat her family’s inflections with herbal concoctions from her garden.

As the American countryside became more populated and prosperous throughout the 1700s, the need for homegrown medicines declined and the dooryard’s focus changed. “Modest houses retained their simple dooryard gardens, but as wealth increased, some people had the means and interest to plant large, fashionable gardens for enjoyment,” Smith commented.



Previous Page Bottom: Varieties of herbs and medicinal plants were required for a mother to treat her family's afflictions.

(Photo by Jill Peterson at Colonial Williamsburg)

Right: Attractive fences replaced the roughly hewn versionsthat previously protected dooryards from meandering livestock.

(Courtesy Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

Below Right: Houses in colonial towns usually displayed more formal dooryard gardens than their rural counterparts, with more clearly defined paths and planting beds.

This example of an 18th century dooryard is at Colonial Williamsburg.
(Courtesy Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)



Wherever possible, picket and other attractive fences replaced the roughly hewn versions that had protected the dooryards from meandering cattle and other creatures. Historians have thoroughly documented, for example, the extravagant dooryard gardens at estates such as the Governor's Palace at Williamsburg and at George and Martha Washington's Mount Vernon, both in Virginia.

A More Formal Dooryard

In time, many homes also moved vegetables and herbs out of front dooryards and established them in kitchen gardens, closer to the part of the home where meals were prepared.

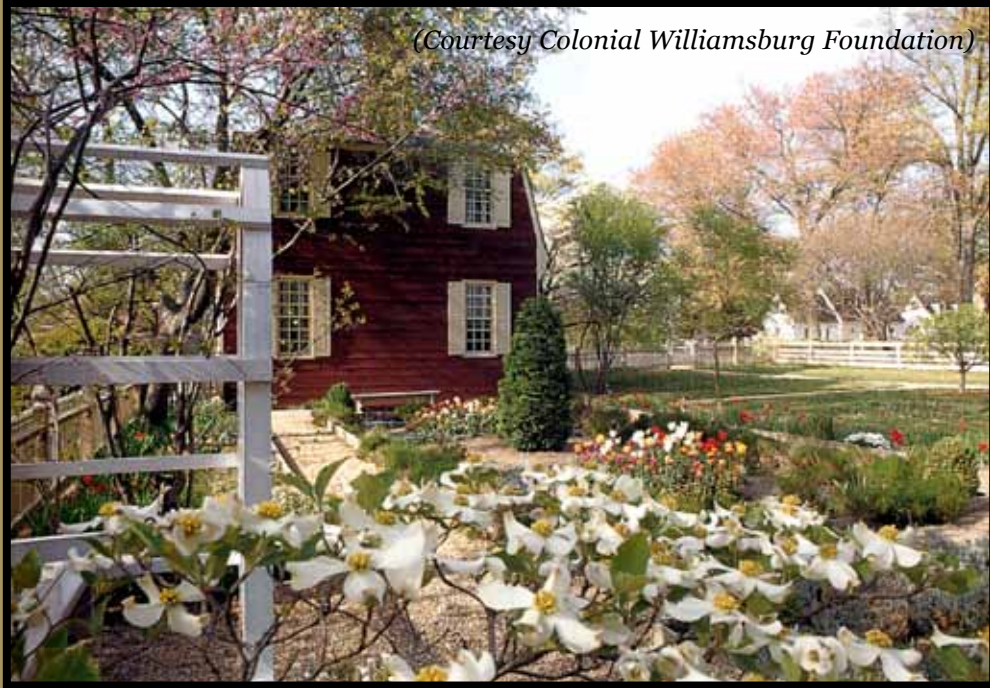
“At the side of the house or by the kitchen door would be seen many thrifty blooms: poles of scarlet runners, beds of portulacas and petunias, bunches of marigolds, level expanses of Sweet Williams, banks of cheerful nasturtiums, tangles of morning-glories and long rows of stately hollyhocks, where they were admired but seldom seen in the front yard,” Earle wrote. “Weeds grew here at the kitchen door in a rank profusion which was hard to conquer.”



With the development of the kitchen garden to satisfy the need for culinary plants, the dooryard in the late 1700s and early 1800s became tidier, even more of a formal, flowering showcase. “One marked characteristic of the front yard was its lack of weeds,” Earle noted. “Few sprung up and none came to seed-time. The enclosure was small, and it was a mark of good breeding to care for it well.”

By this time, dooryards often were resplendent with more sophisticated plantings. “No old-time or modern garden is to me fully furnished without peonies,” Earle said, noting that the ancient

(Courtesy Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)



Greeks considered the peony to be of divine origin, while the ancient Chinese regarded it as the queen of all flowers. She also included tiger lilies, phlox, tulips, hyacinth, daffodil, Canterbury bells, white and blue day lilies, daffodils, and lily of the valley, among others.

Of course, lilacs have long been considered essential to the beauty of the front dooryard, and are immortalized as such in Walt Whitman's famous elegy "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" composed in the aftermath of the April, 1865, assassination of Abraham Lincoln.

As America headed into the Victorian age, etiquette enveloped the dooryard. "The front yard was never a garden of pleasure; children could not play in these precious little enclosed plots, and never could pick the flowers," Earle recalled. "Front yard and flowers were both too much respected."

"That Dreary Destroyer"

As Victorian manners and protocol gained influence in America, society tightened its grip on the dooryard. In cities and towns, entrance into the dooryard often was restricted to formal visitors, such as the parson and his wife, a suitor, or guests for tea or dinner—while other visitors called at the home's side or rear entrances. Entering the dooryard, visitors were



Eighteenth-century dooryard gardens, such as this replica in Colonial Williamsburg, often presented a variety of flowers, herbs and vegetables. During the 1800s, many homes developed kitchen gardens for vegetables and herbs, focusing the dooryard gardens on more sophisticated flowers.

(Photo by Jill Peterson at Colonial Williamsburg)

expected to open and close the gate carefully and to walk between beds of flowering plants to the front door, where they used the brass knocker and then were shown into the parlor.

“It can be seen that everyone who had enough social dignity to have a front door and a parlor, and visitors thereto, also desired a front yard with flowers as the external token of that honored standing,” Earle wrote.

This garden in Colonial Williamsburg shows the profusion of blooming plants found in many dooryard gardens. Historians have determined that some of these colonial-home gardens contained nearly 100 different species of plants. (Courtesy Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)



The dooryard began to disappear as a household fixture in America in the latter half of the 19th century due to what Earle called “that dreary destroyer of gardens,” the grass lawn. Changing tastes in home architecture—such as the tall foundations of many Victorian homes—called for plantings that hugged the foundation instead being confined to a dooryard. And the invention of the push lawnmower in the 1870s prompted people to prefer an expansive carpet of grass surrounding the home.

In her own brief elegy for the dooryard, Earle views its disappearance alongside the changing role of women in American society.

“The sanctity and reserve of these front yards of our grandmothers was somewhat emblematic of woman’s life of that day: it was restricted, and narrowed to a small outlook and monotonous likeness to her neighbor’s,” she wrote. “But it was a life easily satisfied with small pleasures, and it was comely and sheltered and carefully kept, and pleasant to the home household.”