

# An 1860s Kitchen Garden

Before refrigeration, before easy transportation, a kitchen garden was essential for a family's nutrition, health and happiness.



**B**efore 1843, the typical couple who settled in the Willamette Valley was a French-Canadian man with a Native American wife. Their style of farming was a blend of their two cultures. Although the farm had the usual fields and pastures, it was also laid out to include wetland, woods, and prairie. In this way the wife could use her skills to find foods that grew wild. But 1843 brought the first of many large American wagon trains over the Oregon Trail. For the first time, Oregon was home to a significant number of American women.

Like Indian women, American wives were responsible for providing much of the family's food. But while an American might gather wild berries or nuts, most of her foods were carefully planted in a kitchen garden—so-called because it was usually

right outside the kitchen door—using precious seeds that she had probably brought over the Oregon Trail herself.

Today, when it is so easy to go to a store and buy nearly any fresh fruit or vegetable at any time of the year, it is hard for us to imagine the importance

## Key Concepts

- American settlers in the Willamette Valley relied on their own kitchen gardens to supply vegetables, herbs, and flowers.
- Kitchen gardens were the responsibility of women and girls, just as orchards were the responsibility of men and boys.
- Our kitchen garden is planted with heirloom varieties that could have been found in the Willamette Valley gardens of the 1860s.

of kitchen gardens. Meat, flour, sugar, coffee—these things could be bought.<sup>1</sup> But vegetables came from your own garden. If you had vegetables during the winter, it was only because you had preserved and/or stored what you yourself had grown the previous summer. If your garden failed, you would survive the winter, but your family would suffer from both poor nutrition and the drudgery of eating the same food every day.

Women grew three main categories of plants: vegetables to be eaten fresh or stored for winter, herbs for medicines, and flowers. The vegetables and herbs were for practical reasons, but many flowers were simply for the joy of color, or for the memories of homes left behind in the East.

### Mrs. Manson's garden

When you visit our 1860s Kitchen Garden behind the Visitor Center, you are seeing the recreated garden of Mrs. Felicité Manson. Or at least this is as close as we can come without knowing exactly what she grew or how her garden was arranged. By the 1860s, the Willamette Valley was completely claimed, towns were growing, and Oregon was a state. During that time, Donald and Felicité Manson lived on a farm on what is now park land. Their house stood about where the Visitor Center is today. The barn behind the Visitor Center is their barn. And it is nearly certain that

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1 Or more likely, these would have to be traded for. There was very little cash in the Willamette Valley until the 1850s.

Mrs. Manson grew her kitchen garden about where we are growing our garden today.

The plants you see are all heirloom varieties<sup>2</sup> that could be found in gardens of the 1860s. Today's gardeners will recognize carrots, tomatoes, beans, or rhubarb, although the varieties will probably be unfamiliar. (You may know beets, but do you know Yellow Eckendorf Mangle Wurtzle Beets?) On the other hand, most people have never seen anything like Colwart Cabbage, Salsify, or Valerian Root.



*Carrots, as they were in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Over the years, many vegetables and fruits have been altered almost beyond recognition.*

### Not your typical garden

This garden is not like the ones that would be found behind most farmhouses. First, the Mansons had more wealth and education than the typical settler. Also, Donald Manson had been an officer with the Hudson's Bay Company, which conducted agricultural experiments as part of its business. Because of this, their garden was probably fancier and

more varied than the typical kitchen garden, and we have chosen our plants accordingly.

Second, unlike the Mansons, we water the garden with hoses and sprinklers, which produces a nice crop of grass between the rows. (Also, our rows are spread further apart than usual to make access easier for visitors.) The Mansons, however, watered by hand after lugging the water from a well or up from the creek, and it's a safe bet that the water only went onto the garden plants, not between the rows.

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2 Garden plants can go out of fashion, like clothes or cars. Gardeners will often switch to a new variety of tomato or marigold simply because it is new—not necessarily because it's better—and then plant another, newer variety a year or two later. Because this has been going on for centuries, many older varieties have disappeared. An old, out-of-fashion plant, if it has been preserved, is called an "heirloom variety."

When you look at the garden, imagine dirt between the rows—mud in spring, then dust in summer.

Our garden is mostly tended by volunteers—men, women and children—often in t-shirts and shorts. So finally, you should also imagine women and girls covered up by long dresses and sunbonnets, although the girls have bare feet. Mrs. Manson supervises, or perhaps does some of the work, but

her daughters and the hired women do most of the gardening. Boys, too, are fully clothed with vests and hats, but are also barefooted. They haul the water, but that's the end of their involvement. Gardening is women's work.

*Ask for a list of the plants that are growing in our garden.*

## Good Fences



Like anyone else, settlers wanted to impress the neighbors. One way to do this was by putting up an expensive style of fence—at least where the neighbors could see it.

A white picket fence was most often seen by the house, parallel to the public road. But as the fence turned away from the road it often became a plain (and cheaper) board fence. Gardens and orchards near the house were typically enclosed by these plain board fences. Further from the house, split rail fences enclosed pastures and crops. In a land where wood was plentiful, split rail fences were the cheapest, as well as the easiest to put up.

Our white garden fence is not painted, but has been whitewashed. Whitewash is a combination of hydrated lime and water, and often has other ingredients such as salt or milk. Unlike paint, whitewash could be made on the farm. Where there's rain, it must be reapplied every year. But this is not a problem when labor is cheap, or, as in our case, there are plenty of volunteers.

## Apples from the 1850s

Because they are easy to grow, store, and preserve, apples were a crucial part of the American diet from colonial times into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Every farm had an orchard; the Mansons' apple orchard was approximately where the Visitor Center parking lot is today.

The park has its own small apple orchard near the kitchen garden. Planted in 1999, it contains eight different varieties, all in use during the 1850s. Only one, Spitzenburg, is still commonly grown today. The others, such as Carolina Red June, Summer Rambo, and Westfield Seek-No-Further, are preserved only as heirloom varieties.

Just as gardens grew by the labor of women and girls, the planting and tending of orchards was the job of men and boys.



## Further Reading

- Hatchet, Hands & Hoe: Planting the Pioneer Spirit by Erica Calkins, Caxton Press, 1996. Includes both pioneer plants and recipes.
- Champoeg: Place of Transition by John A. Hussey, printed by the Oregon Historical Society in Portland, 1967. This book is our primary source of historical information about Champoeg, including Donald Manson, Felicité Lucier Manson, and their farmstead. Although out of print, it can be found in libraries and in used book stores such as Powell's Books.
- Into the Eye of the Setting Sun by Charlotte Matheny Kirkwood. Available in the Visitor Center, or search on the web. Charlotte Matheny came over the Oregon Trail in 1843, when she was five years old. This reminiscence covers her childhood until marriage. Writing when she was an old woman, she had a phenomenal memory, and her writing style is excellent. Although the book has only been published by the family, it is a must-read for anyone interested in the details of Willamette Valley life in the 1840s and '50s.

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