

Sweet Herbs
and Sundry
Flowers

MEDIEVAL GARDENS
AND THE GARDENS
OF THE CLOISTERS



TANIA BAYARD

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Medieval
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the Gardens of
The Cloisters



by
Tania Bayard

The Metropolitan Museum of Art
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The gardens at The Cloisters change from year to year. For recent diagrams of the gardens and lists of the plants grown in each, please write to The Gardens, The Cloisters, Fort Tryon Park, New York, New York 10040.

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Ful gay was al the ground, and queint,
And powdred, as men had it peint,
With many a fressh and sondry flowr,
That casten up ful good savour.

From *The Romance of the Rose*,
translated by Geoffrey Chaucer





FOREWORD

If you have walked through a wood of wild ginger, forget-me-nots, and unfurling ferns, or wandered in a meadow of strawberries, yarrow, and oxeye daisies, you have had the opportunity to admire medieval plants. *Sweet Herbs and Sundry Flowers* is an introduction to medieval plants and gardening practices by way of the gardens of The Cloisters. In her work as assistant horticulturist at The Cloisters, Tania Bayard has become aware of the many questions visitors ask about medieval gardening. Tania addresses those questions here, providing a list of the plants in The Cloisters' gardens. Her book has long been needed, and I am pleased that Tania, who left a career in art history to become a horticulturist, shares her knowledge and experience with us.

Gardening is an art shaped by the gardener, using a palette of light, water, soil, special living matter, and time. For modern medieval gardeners historical time is also a factor. Plant lists from medieval sources must be consulted and plant names checked against those found in taxonomic encyclopedias and guides to European flora. At The Cloisters, seeds for medieval annuals, biennials, and perennials are ordered from North American seed companies and through seed catalogues from European botanic gardens. We are not always easily able to find what we need. Some seeds are hard to locate and are therefore in our "rare" category; other medieval species of seeds are not commonly grown and are unavailable from regular commercial companies; still other plants may have no long-term ornamental



value in a display garden, may be of a sprawling rampant nature unbecoming in a small garden, or may have special requirements that make them difficult to grow.

Seed orders are completed during the months of December and January. The seeds are sown in flats in a greenhouse, and after the last spring frost the young seedlings are planted in the cloistered gardens. Once the plants come into bloom their flowers, leaves, and fruits are gathered for comparison with medieval plant descriptions. Frequently a fake — a plant assumed, until it flowers, to be a medieval species — is found. Several years ago we planted seeds for the clove-pink carnation (*Dianthus caryophyllus*), which has a lovely clove-scented flower that is depicted in the Unicorn Tapestries. When the plants came into bloom their flowers were deep pink with dark burgundy centers. Clearly here was a different species. Our search for the true seed had to begin again.

Many people want to grow medieval plants in their own gardens, where they can enjoy the smells, textures, and colors throughout the growing season. Whether your “garden” is a shady plot of sweet woodruff and primroses, a sunny backyard of Madonna lilies, cabbage roses, and lavender, or only a pot of parsley, you can easily grow and enjoy medieval plants. Take note of the Latin and common names of plants that attract you; a catalogue of old varieties of seeds and a gardening book will guide you the rest of the way.



The delight in reading *Sweet Herbs and Sundry Flowers* is the realization that the modern gardener's experience is not unlike that of gardeners one thousand years ago. Then, as now, garden plots were selected for adequate light and water drainage, the soil was prepared in the spring, noxious weeds and stones were removed, the ground was tilled and raked, and cow manure was added for fertilizer. Seeds and young plants were lovingly tended. When the plants were mature, roots, stems, leaves, flowers, and fruits were harvested for food, medicines, and various household uses. Following the fall harvest, the ground was readied for winter, and thoughts of spring were always present. How wonderful it is that we share with the medieval gardener the same labors and joys, getting our hands dirty with soil as did the ninth-century monk, Walahfrid Strabo.

Susan Taylor Moody
Horticulturist, The Cloisters





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I should like to thank the many people who helped in the preparation of this book. Above all, I owe a debt of gratitude to Charles D. Webster and the other members of the Garden Committee of The Cloisters, without whose enthusiastic support *Sweet Herbs and Sundry Flowers* would never have come to be. I am also deeply indebted to my good friend Susan Moody, Cloisters Horticulturist, who labored with me for many hours over the plant list, read the manuscript several times, and offered constant reassurance, always with a sense of humor. Other members of The Cloisters staff — William Wixom, Jane Hayward, Timothy Husband, Nancy Kueffner, Carl Koivuniemi, and Robert Goldsmith — read the manuscript and made helpful suggestions. David Kiehl of the Department of Prints and Photographs at The Metropolitan Museum of Art made several excellent recommendations concerning the illustrations. Frank Anderson, honorary curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts at the New York Botanical Garden, and John Harvey, president of the Garden History Society, read the manuscript with great care and advised me on a number of points. Steven K-M. Tim, director of Scientific Affairs at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, and Holly Shimizu, curator of The National Herb Garden, checked the plant list and made recommendations concerning the taxonomy. I am extremely grateful for the help all these people have given me.



I consider myself fortunate to have worked with two very special people in the preparation of this book. Linda Florio, the designer, has been delightfully inventive with the illustrations, and Barbara Anderman, my editor, has guided me through the publication process with rare intelligence and patience.

Special thanks are due to my husband, Robert Cammarota, who carefully read and reread the manuscript. His good judgment and meticulous attention to detail have been invaluable, as have his understanding and good humor. I dedicate this book to him.



CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Gardening in the Middle Ages	5
The Uses of Herbs in the Middle Ages	17
The Gardens of The Cloisters	31
The Cuxa Cloister Garth Garden	37
The Bonnefont Cloister Herb Garden	47
The Trie Cloister Garden	69
Indoor Plants: The Saint-Guilhem and Cuxa Cloisters	79
Notes	85
Suggestions for Further Reading	91
List of Illustrations	96





And all thy cloisters smell of apple
orchards,
And there are lilies white and small
red roses,
And every bird sings in the early
morning. . . .

Lament for Alcuin,
ninth century¹



INTRODUCTION



The gardens of The Cloisters bloom in a unique museum, a division of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, designed to suggest the layout of a medieval European monastery. Planted in reconstructed Romanesque and Gothic cloisters, the gardens resemble those that provided bodily sustenance and spiritual refreshment for monks of centuries ago.

The gardens help to set the tone of the Museum. The Cuxa Cloister garden, a haven of sunlight, brightly colored flowers, bird song, and splashing water, is the focal point of the main-floor galleries. The Trie Cloister contains a garden of plants depicted in the Unicorn Tapestries that hang in the Museum; here small birds come to drink from a fountain just as they do in the late-Gothic hangings after which the garden was designed. The Bonnefont Cloister garden is fragrant with the household herbs grown in the gardens of the Middle Ages. The views over the walls that border the Bonnefont garden on two sides are spectacular, revealing the Museum's dramatic situation on ledges high above Fort Tryon Park and the Hudson River. The Cloisters, like its medieval predecessors, is walled and self-contained. Within the monastic enclosure, gardens were essential for survival.

The gardens enhance the setting in which The Cloisters' collection of medieval art is displayed and broaden the visitor's understanding of life in the Middle Ages. James J. Rorimer, curator of the Department of Medieval Art at the time The Cloisters was planned and built, took an active interest in the gardens and super-



vised their design and the choice of plants. He was aided by Margaret B. Freeman, who did extensive research on the history and symbolism of the plants of the Middle Ages. When the Museum opened in 1938, with Mr. Rorimer in charge, the gardens were one of its major attractions, and they continue to be so today.

With the exception of some of the flowers in the Cuxa Cloister, where modern varieties have been included to ensure continuous bloom throughout the summer, all the species of plants in the gardens were known in the Middle Ages — a time period extending roughly from the fourth century to the early fifteenth century in Italy and to the early sixteenth century in northern Europe.

The gardens are maintained by a horticultural staff engaged in research as well as gardening. As new information on gardening practices and plants of the Middle Ages becomes available, the gardens are further developed. Containing over two hundred and fifty species of herbs, flowers, and trees, the gardens of The Cloisters comprise one of the most important specialized plant collections in the world.



GARDENING
IN THE
MIDDLE AGES



If you do not let laziness clog
Your labor, if you do not insult with
misguided efforts
The gardener's multifarious wealth,
and if you do not
Refuse to harden or dirty your
hands in the open air
Or to spread whole baskets of dung
on the sun-parched soil —
Then, you may rest assured, your
soil will not fail you.

Walahfrid Strabo,
ninth century²
