

Home/Garden

Taking a look back at colonial herbs

While I was visiting Vermont this summer I spent an afternoon at The Shelburne Museum, which has one of the best collections of Americana in New England. Besides the restored buildings, quilts, dolls, paintings and china, there is an enormous round barn and the elegant 230-foot steam paddle wheeler, the S.S. Ticonderoga which used to chug up and down Lake Champlain until it came to its final dock at the museum.

Before I sampled all these delights I had to see the Museum's gardens. I was particularly fascinated by the small herb garden with its carefully labeled plants. In addition to a selection of culinary herbs, thyme, sage, dill, lovage and spearmint, there was an interesting assortment of herbs used in dyeing.

It wasn't until after the mid-1800s that chemical dyes were invented. Before that, spinners, weavers, housewives, anyone who was responsible for providing yarn, fabric and clothing had to rely on natural substances like dried insects and the leaves and roots of plants to give any color to their textiles.

Dyeing with natural substances was a lengthy and complicated process. And unless you were very skilled the results were sometimes undependable and likely to fade quickly.

Blue has always been a favorite color for textiles but not because blue is an easy dye to make. For cen-



turies blue came from the indigo plant which was first grown and imported from India and Egypt.

The colonists could buy indigo blocks, but woad was probably the

first blue dyestuff grown and produced by the colonists. Samples of this three foot plant with its toothed leaves are cultivated at the Shelburne Museum. Woad grew well in

New England. It was the long fermentation and drying process that made it difficult to manufacture.

In the United States you cannot think of blue dye without thinking of red. The safflower plant (Carthamus tinctorius) is a member of the thistle family and the flower heads produce a pink-red dye. One of the early uses of the red dye was to color the cotton tapes used to tie together legal documents - this is the original red tape that we still battle today.

The roots of lady's bedstraw (Galium verum) can also be used to make a red dye, although large quantities are required. At one time the English even used the leaves and stems which produced a yellow dye as a hair dye which accounted for the nickname, maid's hair.

Yellow dyes were much easier to manufacture and can be produced from many more plants. Flowers that are still common today, marigolds, coreopsis, yarrow and goldenrod, were all used to make dyes in the yellow and gold shades. Finally, the soft green color that we often as-

sociate with colonial times could have been produced from hyssop leaves, sweet cicely or the young shoots of tansy.

The manufacture of the dye could be an involved process, but trouble still had to be taken during the dyeing itself. It was vital that only soft water be used. Hard water which contained minerals resulted in a spotting when the dye was absorbed unevenly.

Also, most natural dyes bleed and fade rapidly unless the fabric is treated with a mordant, a chemical which helps fix the color to the fiber. The most common mordants used were aluminum potassium sulfate (alum), potassium dichromate (chrome), ferrous sulfate (copperas) and tannic acid. Mordants help bind the color to the fabric, they also affect the color. It is possible to use the same dyestuff, but get two different colors by using two mordants.

For instance, marigold flowers will dye wool a brass color when used with a chrome mordant, but the color will be a dark yellow tan when an alum mordant is used.

The colonists certainly weren't blind to the beauty of the plants and flowers in their garden, but their first concern was for their utility, whether in caring for the sick, cook-

ing, or preparing yarn or fabric for their clothes, blankets and quilts.

The Shelburne Museum is located right on Route 7, seven miles south of Burlington. It's open daily from mid-May to late October, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Adult admission is \$9.50 and entitles you to two days of touring.

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