

The Herb Garden

*The lizard, an exemplar of the small,
Spreads fine, adhesive digits to perform
Vertical push-ups on a sunny wall;
Bees grapple spikes of lavender, or swarm
The dill's gold umbels and low clumps of thyme.
Bored with its trellis, a resourceful rose
Has found a nearby cedar tree to climb
And to festoon with floral furbelows.*

*Though the great, heat-stunned sunflower looks
half-dead
The way it, shepherd's crook-like, hangs its head,
The herbs maintain their modest self-command:
Their fragrances and colors warmly mix
While, quarrying between the pathway's bricks,
Ants build minute volcanoes out of sand.*

-----Timothy Steele



Our herb poem this month is a clear evocation of the poem's setting, a pleasant remembrance that we all can share. A souvenir from a past experience. Now that the poet has awakened our memories, are we forgetting the splendor of our natural surroundings in favor of the commonplace thrust upon our lives?

The poem features **dill's** gold umbels, spikes of **lavender** and clumps of **thyme**. The herbs and flowers on the "sunny wall," grown for their fragrances and colors, are actually living, natural images of plants, shrubs and flowers. A poster of life, pure and wholesome, to be captured by the eye rather than a camera or paintbrush.

The natural garden was created in the Romantic Period (18th century) in England. It featured scenic vistas, winding paths, ancient overgrown walls, and rustic retreats, just a few of the captivating naturalistic features of the outdoors. The Romantic era sought to express the inherent beauty of nature to turn our intimate world into a poetic creation of our imaginations.

The picturesque landscape style was largely confined to the rich and titled; common persons used similar concepts to create the Cottage Garden. The best expression of this style is the "Secret Garden" the story of orphaned Mary Lennox who has been sent to live with her uncle in a gloomy house in Yorkshire, England. Mary stumbles upon a neglected garden and enlists the help of a local boy, to bring it back to life, creating a magical and healing place.





The cottage garden uses an informal design, traditional materials, dense plantings, and a mixture of ornamental and edible plants. The cottage garden depends on grace and charm rather than grandeur and formal structure. The earliest cottage gardens were more practical than their modern descendants — with an emphasis on vegetables and herbs, along with some fruit trees, perhaps a beehive, and even livestock. Flowers were used to fill any spaces in between. The traditional cottage garden was usually enclosed, with a wooden fence or brick walls.

Romantic poet William Wordsworth said it best with “The Tables Turned,” urging us to avoid the harsh world of our making and turn to nature instead.

*... One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.*

*Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Misshapes the beautiful forms of things--
We murder to dissect.*

*Enough of Science and of Art,
Close up those barren leaves;
Come forth, and bring with you a heart
That watches and receives.*

--William Wordsworth

On a final note, true to the poet’s intent, let’s not savage the tasty herbs but gently pull the flower petals instead, to revive our meals with a delicate herbal favor and a touch of elegance, leaving the “Sunny Wall” intact and to let “*The herbs maintain their modest self-command:*”

Dill - Tangy; like their leaves, but stronger. Use yellow dill flowers as you would the herb to season hot or cold soups, seafood, dressings, salads and dips.

Lavender - Sweet, floral flavor, with lemon and citrus notes. Flowers look beautiful and taste good too in a glass of champagne, or as a garnish for sorbets or ice creams. Lavender lends itself to savory dishes also, from hearty stews to sauces. Add petals to cookies and cakes.

Thyme - Milder version of leaf. Use sprigs as garnish or remove flowers and sprinkle over soups, salads, chicken etc. Use thyme anywhere an herb might be used. Tasty addition to breads and biscuits.



After falling out of favor for many years, cooking and garnishing with flowers is back in vogue once again. Almost all of our common herb blossoms are edible and worth trying. Hopefully you will discover your favorites. One of the easiest ways is to use the flowers in salads with a mild dressing.