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Iowa's gardens of the past

Iowa's Gardens of the Past

Vintage garden images show how Iowans have gardened over the years



The seven-block-long Keokuk gardens of starch manufacturer J.C. Hubinger, overlooking the Mississippi River in the 1890s, included large artificial lakes and mounded Victorian-style "pincushion" beds, like the imaginative one at foreground shaped like a starfish and edged with shells. *Photo courtesy of Keokuk Public Library*

By Beth Cody

For gardeners who also happen to be history buffs, vintage garden photos and seed catalogs show us what our grandparents' gardens looked like, the flowers they loved, and the garden tools they used.

Old garden photos are deeply nostalgic due to the fragile nature of gardens—unlike historic buildings, nearly all historic gardens are now long gone, just like the gardeners who made them. Only photos of them remain, preserving fleeting moments of garden beauty, frozen in time for us to enjoy many years later and to imagine how they were enjoyed by those who visited them.

Old pictures of Iowa gardens found in library and online archives, old magazines, postcards and photos on

Ebay, and historical atlases, reveal that Iowans have made numerous lovely gardens, preserved in evocative vintage images. In 2020, I published "Iowa Gardens of the Past: Lost & Historic Gardens of Iowa, 1850-1980" to document those many beautiful spots.

Grand, impressive landscapes certainly existed on the moneyed estates of Iowa's captains of industry, like the Keokuk garden of J.C. Hubinger, which was seven blocks long with two large ornamental lakes, a flower-covered island, and imaginative Victorian-style "pincushion" flower beds. Or Joseph Bettendorf's 17-acre estate overlooking the Mississippi River during the 1910s, with formal gardens, a massive greenhouse, ponds, fountains and a 120-foot-long rose pergola.

But it isn't always the grandest gardens that are the most appealing—often it's photos of proud gardeners in modest flower gardens, in small towns and on turn-of-the-century farms, that are the most touching to modern Iowans.

And a number of historical gardens were created by Iowa garden writers, plant hybridizers, and horticultural entrepreneurs who influenced gardening nationally. Other Iowa gardeners established groups to encourage gardening or to promote specific flowers. Passionate Iowa gardeners of all backgrounds have made numerous gardens of great beauty for more than 150 years that we can delight in viewing, a lovely part of our state's history.

Following is a brief overview of how Iowans have gardened over time.

MID-19TH CENTURY

The very earliest Iowa settlers, of course, were too busy establishing themselves to plant many ornamental gardens. Although some brought with them seeds and peony roots from their eastern homes, what newcomers really wanted



Mahala Gutshall was illustrated in 1875 watering the flowers planted along the front path to the door of her farmhouse (with husband Jacob perhaps pictured driving his buggy), in Dallas County. Potted plants have been brought outside for summer from the attached sunroom seen at left, and numerous small trees and shrubs were planted directly in the neatly clipped front lawn by Jacob, a conifer enthusiast. Photo courtesy of 1875 *Andreas Illustrated Atlas of Iowa*

was fruit trees hardy enough to survive Iowa winters. The Iowa State Horticultural Society was founded in 1866 to share growers' discoveries and knowledge concerning the trees and plants that could grow well in Iowa.

After the railroads arrived, it became much easier to obtain building materials, and by the 1870s, Iowa residents were upgrading their log cabins to wood frame houses, giving them a sense of permanency that encouraged the planting of trees and flower gardens.

Seeds and plants became easier to obtain via the railroads, too, first from eastern seed company catalogs,

and then from the nurseries that were established in Iowa beginning in the 1840s. By the 1870s, many nurseries and seed companies operated in our state, making trees, plants, and seeds easy to obtain. The Iowa Seed Co. in Des Moines and Cole's in Pella were prominent early suppliers, and numerous companies were established after the turn of the century, the most famous of which were Earl May and Henry Field, both in Shenandoah.

In the mid-19th century, most gardeners sought to create a park-like setting of trees and shrubs planted in lawns (lawnmowers, invented in England in 1830, became widely available by the 1860s). Limited varieties of flowers were planted in small beds near the house or along paths.

LATE 19TH CENTURY

By the 1880s, many new plants and flowers had been discovered by plant hunters in South America and Asia, and hybridized in Europe and the U.S. to have larger flowers in more colors. Iowa gardeners fell in love with the tropical plants and hothouse flowers that were widely available in catalogs and nurseries by the 1890s. And professional gardeners created mounded pincushion flower beds (like those in the Hubinger garden) for wealthy clients and the new public parks being established in cities.



An 1895 photo by Iowa City photographer Bertha Horack of her mother in her garden, filled with tropical plants: a potted fan palm, elephant ears, climbing vines and nasturtiums. Photo courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City

EARLY 20TH CENTURY

By the 1910s and 1920s, when more than half of Iowans had moved from farms to cities, people began to look back in nostalgia to what they perceived as simpler times—despite enjoying the modern conveniences of electricity, telephones and automobiles.



Old-fashioned garden styles like this Davenport garden, with formal layouts, sundials and planted with roses and other perennial flowers, became fashionable in the 1910s and 1920s. Photo courtesy of Putnam Museum

The mania for exotic flowers and tropical plants waned, and enthusiasm was renewed for “old-fashioned” flowers: hardy perennial and biennial flowers that colonial settlers might have grown. Formal gardens with geometric layouts, sundials and birdbaths provided the perfect settings to plant “Grandmother’s gardens” filled with roses and old-fashioned blossoms.

Iowans learned about garden styles and flowers from magazines like *Better Homes & Gardens* (published in Des Moines starting in 1922), as well as through the numerous local garden clubs that were established during the 1920s.

THE 1930S

The 1930s were a height of gardening enthusiasm, despite the Great Depression. Garden club meetings, visits to local gardens, and growing flowers from seeds were affordable activities for many Iowans despite the tough times.



Rock garden ponds were all the rage by the early 1930s as seen in this 1932 photo published by *The Des Moines Register*. Photo courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines

A growing awareness of the importance of conserving nature—now that it had been mostly controlled in towns and cities—led to a craze for naturalistic rock gardens and lily ponds, which could be built with inexpensive concrete, found rocks and the gardener’s own labor.

THE 1940S AND WORLD WAR II

The big story of the 1940s was, of course World War II, in which a quarter million Iowans served. And those who stayed home worked very hard, too. Iowa farmers were able to double their agricultural production in order to feed the world, and gardeners contributed as well. By 1944, an incredible 70 percent of Iowa households grew Victory Gardens, more than 475,000 gardens at an average size of one-fifth of an acre—that’s the size of an average house lot now.

The emphasis on productive gardening meant that ornamental gardening was de-emphasized. Iowans either maintained their existing garden designs, or they just planted simple, cheery flower beds and window boxes to help maintain morale during the stressful time of war.

Both productive and ornamental gardeners faced shortages and rationing of garden supplies that made gardening more difficult: shortages of seeds and fertilizers, restrictions on new tools and lawnmowers, and most noticeably, the near absence of flower bulbs such as tulips and hyacinths. German occupation of the Netherlands had cut off the world’s supply of Holland’s most famous crop, until liberation in 1945.

After five years of war and shortages, by the end of World War II Iowans were ready to enjoy the modern age of peace. (And the 'Peace' rose, with its dramatic story—being sent from its French hybridizer to the U.S. on the last plane before German occupation, and named so beautifully just as Berlin fell—became the best-selling rose of the 20th century and symbolized the spirit of the age.)

MID-CENTURY IOWA GARDENS

After the war, the end of rationing together with war bonds savings allowed Iowans to finally buy what they wanted, including new homes. Gone was the nostalgia for Grandmother's garden and her big farm kitchen. New houses with efficient, modern conveniences were the order of the day.



The Davenport rose garden of Dr. A.A. Plagman (1897-1959), pictured here showing his roses to visitors. Plagman served as president of the Iowa Rose Society and his garden included more than 900 roses of 140 varieties, set off by companion plants and perfect green lawns. Photo courtesy of *Household* magazine, February 1954, Iowa Women's Archive

And after planting all those Victory Gardens, most Iowans wanted low-maintenance patios around their modern houses. Landscaping returned to adorn the lawns and trees of the mid-19th century, but with shrubs planted against foundations (unlike during the previous century, when house foundations were typically bare). Even non-gardeners took pride in keeping their lawns perfectly weed-free and green.

But there were still gardening enthusiasts who planted an occasional exuberant farm flower garden or sophisticated city garden, and garden clubs experienced a surge of membership—Iowa had more than 200 garden clubs by the 1950s—for both men and women.

A number of men were serious hobbyist gardeners, often specializing in growing one kind of flower, such as roses, dahlias, or tuberous begonias, at competitive levels. Most Iowa men no longer farmed, but many had grown up in or near farming communities and regarded gardening as a link with the agricultural past of their fathers or grandfathers. They joined or started specialist horticultural societies like the Iowa Rose Society, which was very active during the 1950s with many men as members. The rose hybridizer Griffith Buck (1915-1991) of Iowa State University in Ames, served as one of the group's presidents (ISU now has a noted collection of Buck roses at the Reiman Gardens).

Roses were likely the most popular flower of the 1950s and 1960s. Other garden trends included new chemicals like DDT and 2,4-D (which were much safer than Paris green and other highly toxic early garden chemicals); and plastic pots and seed trays, which changed the horticultural industry in the 1960s and made purchasing plants far more convenient for gardeners.

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THE MODERN AGE

In the last 40 years, gardening has become far easier: numerous garden centers offering inexpensive plants already in flower in lightweight plastic containers; the explosion of full-color garden book publishing that enabled Iowans to easily learn about gardening; followed by the rise of the internet in the late 1990s, which has made the spread of gardening ideas and knowledge almost free, and enabled the purchase of nearly any plant or seed in cultivation.

Gardening styles have continued to change, too, marked by island beds (a return to the Victorian flower beds

of the 1890s); the popularity of hostas and daylilies—the acceptance of both plants encouraged by Iowa garden writers like Helen Field Fisher and longtime *Better Homes & Gardens* editor Fleeta Brownell Woodroffe (1894-1990); the New Perennials style of prairie flowers planted in drifts, which is highly suitable for Iowa's prairie terrain; the growing interest in organic gardening and heirloom seeds; the challenge of recycling or reusing all those tremendously convenient plastic pots; and dealing with destruction by invasive pests such as Japanese beetles and the emerald ash borer.

Countless Iowans have been enthusiastic gardeners, from the 1870s settlers and turn-of-the-century flower gardeners ordering from Iowa seed catalogs, to our own age when we buy our seeds and plants online. We Iowans still love our flower gardens just as much as our grandmothers (and their grandmothers) did. ■

(Garden historian Beth Cody, who gardens in Amish country south of Iowa City, is the author of "Iowa Gardens of the Past" and other garden history books. Her books and articles and more vintage garden images are available at lowagardens.com.)