

AMERICA'S ROMANCE WITH THE ENGLISH GARDEN.  
By Thomas J. Mickey. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2013)  
272 pp: illus. £24.95/\$26.95 (paperback)

This learned but eminently readable book tells the story of American gardening in the nineteenth century through the lens of nursery and seed catalogues. Not surprisingly, the cross-pollination between America and Britain was a major theme during those productive years. The influence of William Robinson's books, for example, played an important role in American gardens as did those by Gertrude Jekyll. As one nurseryman wrote, 'we are indebted to this great champion of hardy flowers for some of the ideas advanced here, culled from [Robinson's] numerous works on gardening, which have done much to make English gardens what they are – the most beautiful in the world'. More to the point, English-style carpet-bedding presented a framework for displaying plants collected by British plant hunters and later sold to American nurseries. And, likewise, important American plant introductions found their way into British nurseries and gardens on both sides of the Atlantic, including Robinson's Gravetye Manor.

Tom Mickey's romance with American gardens was enhanced immeasurably when he spent a year studying the Smithsonian Institution's vast trove of seed and nursery catalogues as well as horticultural journals. While thumbing through the pages he was struck by the firms' clever marketing techniques appealing to a mass audience, particularly women, throughout the nineteenth century and even earlier. In 1845, when most Americans were still living on rural farms, the *Genesee Farmer* described the garden as a means of profit, a source of products for the family and, lastly, as an 'innocent recreation'. By 1870, however, seed catalogues and advertising began preaching how essential the garden was to enjoying middle-class status, especially if it had a whiff of England about it. English-style gardening, with its manicured form and effusive plantings, dominated American garden aesthetics throughout the century and persuasive catalogue descriptions and colourful images promised much. Seed companies competed with

one another for the largest, brightest and cheapest way to achieve stunning results in the flower garden. As consumers grew more sophisticated, the catalogues began introducing advice on the essential lawn as well as offering complete landscape design services.

Some of the leading American nurseries at the time were Vick (and their publication, *Vick's Illustrated Monthly*), Peter Henderson, Park Seed, Joseph Breck, and Robert Buist. The Philadelphia nurseryman Thomas Meehan, whose magazine *Gardener's Monthly* was widely distributed in the States, preached: 'The garden is the mirror of the mind, as truly as the character of a nation is the reflex of the individuals composing it'. According to Mickey, this was at a time when the garden became a cultural symbol for the middle class. No sooner did a catalogue extol a particular plant than it was sold out. In the mid-1890s, the catalogues were all trumpeting 'Crimson Rambler' rose, which had recently been introduced from England. Its appealing bright red colour soon made it an important addition to American gardens.

As the nurserymen vied with one another, their catalogues became more elaborate and relied heavily on cheap chromolithograph illustrations. Some depicted sentimental vignettes of women gardening among a jumble of towering plants or children joyfully digging and watering gardens. Later the catalogues began featuring line drawings of suggested layouts to utilise a vast number of plants. Aside from the marketing aspect, the nursery industry's quest for novelty plants was growing by leaps and bounds. As an example, Robert Buist, who had trained at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, happened upon *Euphorbia poinsettia*, a new introduction which he deemed the most magnificent of all tropical plants. He gave a plant to James McNab, director of the botanical garden, and thus *Poinsettia pulcherrima* was introduced to Britain – and today one finds this in every flower stall or supermarket at Christmas. Nurserymen had to count their losses also, such as William Kenrick of suburban Boston, who failed miserably in his attempt to grow mulberry trees for a silk trade.

This book is greatly enhanced by many colour plates and promotional quotes taken from catalogues. Vick Seed Company

promised that home property values would rise with a garden. 'What we do in the gardening way is done for the appearance, the respectability of the thing, done for the same reason that we have a coat of paint put on the house, or renew the wall-hangings.' This book tells the story of how catalogues sold a particular form of gardening to middle-class Americans who wanted to outshine their neighbours. By buying seeds and plants from a catalogue, the home-owner could envisage a beautiful lawn or garden of colourful flowers. As the author concludes, catalogues sold dreams and hopes as they still do today.

JUDITH B. TANKARD