

## The Colonial Landscape: Flora and Fauna

When you think of colonial America, the first things that come to mind are ground-breaking events such as the Boston Tea Party and the American Revolution, and inspirational figures such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson, that fostered the birth of a nation. However, triumphantly providing the backdrop for colonial life, from beginning to end were flora and fauna, or, plants and animals, if you will. As trivial as this topic may seem, plants and animals played a significant role in everyday colonial life, providing nourishment, beauty, companionship, and more importantly economic stability. “Just as naturally as the colonists brought with them to America their household belongings, their kitchen utensils, their tools and books, so many of them packed away in their baggage seeds, bulbs, and, cuttings of their favorite plants.” (Taylor 1).

During colonial times, almost every colonist had some type of pet. Dogs were domesticated to make wonderful companions and were also trained to be hunting animals. Cats were also great companions and were used to keep rodents away. Among this list of household mainstays was the squirrel. A common pet among the upper class was the bird. They provided cheerful music and were taught to imitate the sounds they heard. In fact, it is believed that the name “recorder” came from a term for a bird repeating its tune or “recording” it. The colonies exported many cardinals and mockingbirds to England. Imported birds, such as canaries, mynas, and parrots, represented grandeur as the first myna bird exported to England belonged to the Duke of York.

While some animals represented grandeur and companionship, they also provided nourishment. Livestock was the basis of the colonial diet. Venison was originally a food of the upper class, but as deer hunting became more widespread, it became popular among the masses. Seafood, such as oysters were seen as a food of the lower class. Farmers also used fowl such as hens and chickens for meat and eggs. During the colonial period there was also a heavy reliance on mutton but as time elapsed, there was a transition to beef and pork.

As vital as animals were in the home through domestication, they were also the cornerstone of agriculture. All small farms had a milking cow and at least one other animal to interact with, as these milking cows were very sociable animals. These milking cows had to be well maintained, needing to be milked twice a day. Cattle were classified according to their breeding status. Oxen and steer were castrated and used for work, pulling plows, and meat. Bulls were used for breeding stock. Another important animal to a colonial farmer was the sheep. There were numerous breeds that provided fur to be spun into wool and meat for nourishment. The most majestic breed of sheep during the colonial era was the Longwool. It originated in England and was seen as the pioneer breed. It soon extended to America and elsewhere. The Longwool is described as having a “long healthy coat which falls in ringlets”. Their wool was sheared and sold to be made into clothing. Goats were also common, as they provided milk and meat. Because branding with hot irons was nonexistent, colonial farmers marked their livestock with ear and nose notches. These notches were recorded at the local courthouse so that each herd could be properly divided. Farmers also had great amounts of fowl that provided meat and eggs. Hens were important for producing eggs and roosters were necessary to

maintain a population of chickens. They were also used as a form of entertainment, as cockfighting was a pastime of many. One of the first breeds of chickens developed in the United States was the Dominique Chicken. They were a spectacular breed of chicken to colonial farmers because their heavy feathers protected them from the harsh winter temperatures. The epitome of domesticated fowl was the English Game Fowl. The English Game Fowl was renowned for producing meat and eggs of the finest quality. If a chicken could be a symbol of status, the English Game Fowl could be a representative of the highest social order.

The flora of colonial U.S. provided a succulent fragrance to combat the foul air of civil disturbance. They possessed a beauty that withstood the arsenals of war that rested on the horizon. They maintained a sense of tranquility in an era that was, in fact, in disarray. Undaunted by the perils of the country, mainstays such as the carnation and the holly proudly stood erect. As we transition from colonial animals to colonial plants, it should be noted that scientific names, in the modernly accepted form of genus and species, only date back to 1753, when the first form of *Species Plantarum* appeared, discovered by Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus. He developed this system of binomial nomenclature to eliminate the use of long individual descriptions.

The Carnation (*Dianthus Caryophyllus*) was frequently referenced in the American colonies. It is possible that the name was derived from the word “coronation” since the flowers were used for wreaths. Characteristically, the leaves are narrow and have a pale green-gray color. The flowers vary in color, ranging from pink, white, purple, and red. The flowers are arranged in clusters if three on the stems have coarse and fringed petals.

The Fig (*Ficus carica*) was first introduced to the English in 1848 but, it is possible that it was grown in that region as early as Roman times. By the early 1600s the fig was introduced to the colonies. The Fig is characterized as having clusters of three to five leaves. These leaves are large and hairy. The fruit has a pear shape; about two inches long and is hollow. The name “Fig” is derived from the French *figue*, which is from the Latin *ficus*. *Ficus* originally came from the Hebrew *feg*. The species name *carica* relates to Caria, a region in southwest Asia, which is believed to be the origin of the species.

The Holly (*Ilex opaque*), is an American native that extends along the east coast from Massachusetts to Florida westward to Texas. The Holly is identified as having stiff and glossy green leaves with red berries. Holly is a derivative of *holegn* an Anglo-Saxon name for the English holly. It is legend that Thomas Jefferson planned a burial plot that was to be surrounded by holly. It is evident that this magnificent piece shrubbery is often associated with figures of greatness.

A vision of beauty, the Hydrangea (*Hydrangea aborescens*) is a native of the eastern part of the United States. It was introduced into England by way of Virginia in 1736. The leaves alternate between a heart shaped and oval pattern long stems. The flowers bloom in early summer, forming large, flat clusters. Some of these flowers may be sterile. The flowers that are fertile are smaller and have eight to ten protruding stamens.

John Bartram (1699-1777), called the greatest natural botanist in the world, was a Pennsylvania farmer who received many European plants from Transatlantic pen pals. He traveled via all modes of transportation to visit, explore, and experience gardens from Canada to Florida, and into the Ohio Valley. Plants used by the colonists are categorized

as such: 1) Local native plants with showy flowers; 2) Native plants from further south; 3) Native plants with some special usefulness; 4) European plants imported with characteristics that were cherished in the home country; and 5) Exotics from other countries that were exported to England and America.

The colonial period saw the plant population flourish greatly due to the importation of European plants. Companionship, nourishment, and economic stability were provided by the wide variety of animals, both domestic and imported. Flora and Fauna was an intricate backdrop on the landscape of the colonial nation, the precursor to the twenty-first century conservatories. Just as the forefathers and the noted historic events of our country are immortalized for the importance of them, so are flora and fauna. Aesthetically, aromatically, and tactilely, the plants, animals, and, birds of the colonists filled the landscape for that time and forever more.

### Bibliography

- Taylor, Dale. Everyday Life in Colonial America. Cincinnati, Ohio. Writer's Digest Books. Copyright 1997. page 1 cited
- Taylor, Raymond L. Plants of Colonial Days: A Guide to 160 Flowers, Shrubs, & Trees in the Gardens of Colonial Williamsburg. Williamsburg, Virginia. Colonial Williamsburg , Incorporated. Copyright 1952.
- Various Authors. The Role of Domesticated Animals in Colonial Williamsburg. [[www.resnet.wm.edu/~jtyedo/](http://www.resnet.wm.edu/~jtyedo/)] Copyright 2001.