

Philadelphia: a Legacy of Horticulture

Nicole Juday Rhoads



Philadelphia, PA.

There is no evidence that Pennsylvania founder William Penn was a gardener. When he first laid out the plan for Philadelphia in the 1680s, he envisioned a rationally laid-out city different from European capitals, whose maps conjure broken spiderwebs. Punctuating the grid would be five central squares of open green space, creating a “greene cuntry” town which will never be burnt and always be wholesome.” Penn would have known of the great estates in England with their well-planned grounds, but in the 1600s European cities did not boast public green spaces.

Many of Philadelphia’s earliest streets were named for native trees—Spruce, Pine, Sassafras, Locust, and even Vine. It’s unknown if this reflected Penn’s admiration for the natural world, but that he chose trees as the unifying theme for navigating his emerging city indicated a respect for their importance to the new Commonwealth.

Indeed, Penn arrived in America acutely aware that for Pennsylvania to become a financial success, it must exploit its natural resources for export to Europe. The fertile soil, favorable aspect, temperate climate, and adequate rainfall of the Philadelphia region certainly contributed to the economic success of the colony, which was soon exporting lumber products, seeds, and grains overseas.

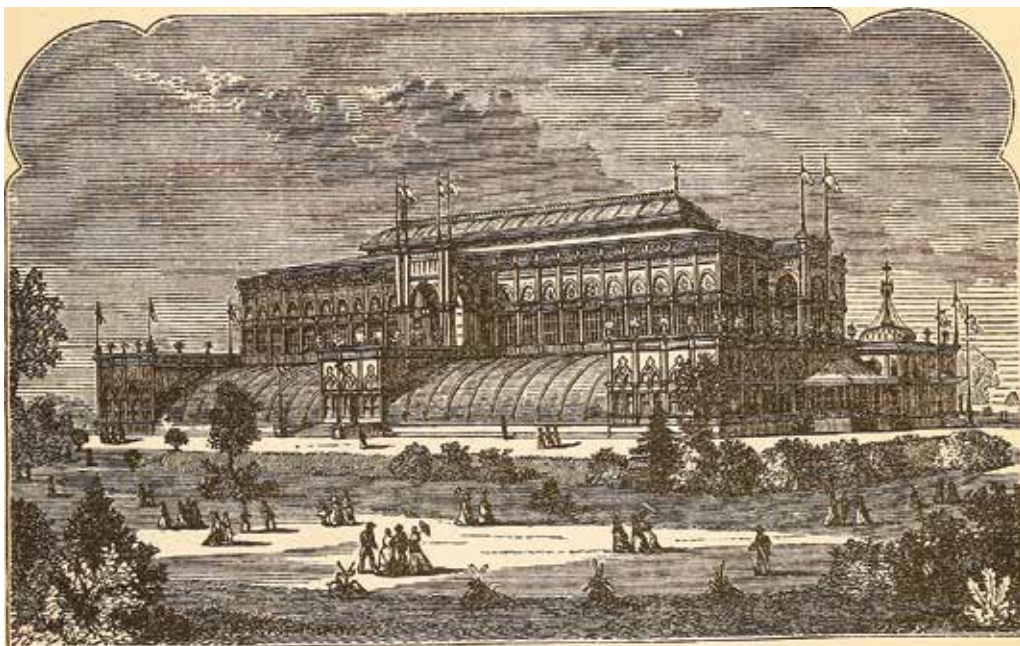
Besides an amenable climate, an ideological factor may have contributed to Philadelphia’s early resonance with nature, if not horticulture, compared with early settlers in other regions. Although colonized 50 years earlier, the Puritans of New England never developed the tradition of great horticulture that became such a feature in Philadelphia. Puritan writings consistently conflate nature with “wilderness” and its associations with being lost and alone in the face of evil. Nature is portrayed as dark and scary, the domain of savages, wild beasts, and the devil himself.

The early Quakers that came with Penn to establish the colony had an entirely different relationship with the natural world. Nature was perceived as the source of economic independence but also as something of great beauty and spiritual nourishment. In a colony founded on religious tolerance, nature and the sects that worshipped it were not cast aside.

The earliest botanical garden in America was started before 1700 on the banks of Wissahickon Creek by nature-worshipping mystic German Pietists living in hermit caves. This garden included medicinal plants brought from Europe as well as native plants that the native Lenni Lenape people taught the hermits to cultivate for medicinal purposes.

As a young man, Philadelphia’s most famous horticultural figure John Bartram (1699-1777) learned about botany and native plants from his mentor Christopher Witt, who had been associated with the hermits of the Wissahickon and was familiar with the mystics’ reverence for plants and nature.

Bartram became well-known in his time and is still so today for both his garden and his business exporting American seeds, bulbs, and roots to his English patron, Lord Robert James Petre, 8th Baron Petre of Thorndon Hall, Essex, who was at that time the foremost collector of North American trees and shrubs in Europe. He also enjoyed a lively correspondence of both letters and plants with the Englishman merchant Peter Collinson, a fellow Quaker and a member of the Royal Society, who shared Bartram’s new plants with friends and fellow gardeners. During Bartram’s career, many American plants were introduced to Europe and many European



Horticultural Hall at the 1876 Centennial Exposition.

plants became established in Philadelphia gardens. Among the plants he introduced to England was *Rhododendron maximum*, native to Southeastern Pennsylvania and which is still found growing wild within Philadelphia's city limits. A talented botanist, Bartram and his son William both made significant contributions to the field of natural history, the observation-based study of animals and plants typically presented in popular rather than academic form.

By the 18th century, Philadelphia's wooded Schuylkill and Delaware riverfronts were being cleared for country houses of the emerging wealthy class. Usually only inhabited during the summer months, these estates offered healthful breezes and fresh air not always experienced in the city. The most famous of these was the Woodlands, the home of William Hamilton. Hamilton had visited the great country houses of England as a young man and came back to Philadelphia determined to replicate their grandeur in the still provincial New World. Thanks to his large fortune inherited from a wealthy family of colonial lawyers and politicians, he was able to build an extensive heated hothouse, create parklike grounds with a walking circuit, and acquire plants just arriving in America from all over the world, including the first Ginkgo tree (*Ginkgo biloba*) and the first red rose. Thomas Jefferson called Woodlands "the only rival I have known in America to what may be seen in England."

Other families who collected plants had entirely different motivations. With natural history growing as a popular pursuit, particularly for those with means and leisure, Philadelphia emerged as the center of this field in America, drawing many prominent botanists, naturalists, and plant explorers who deposited their findings in several institutions there devoted to science.

The Painter brothers of Media were among the many who amassed collections of minerals, rocks, and herbarium plants before converting part of their farm to an arboretum in 1825, with space to hold 1000 tree and shrub specimens. Today vestiges of their collection are still intact at what is now the Tyler Arboretum.

Arguably one of the great events for horticulture in Philadelphia occurred in 1876. The Centennial Exposition's World Fair brought exhibitors from across the world, most notably Japan, which had just opened to the West. Open for seven months, the Centennial exposed Americans for the first time to culture, design, and plants from all over the globe, and spurred a new excitement for exotic plants and gardens, particularly those from Asia. The Centennial Exposition was also America's introduction to rhododendrons as garden plants, as hybrids of the native *R. catawbiense* were planted throughout the Exposition grounds.

Perhaps because of the Centennial's influence, early 20th century American gardens focused their collections on plants from around the world. Siblings John and Lydia Morris's estate "Compton" (now the Morris Arboretum) was designed to display plants in groups from different geographical regions, and Asian garden sculptures adorned the grounds along with a great number of exotic species.



Jenkins Arboretum, Devon, PA



The Barnes Arboretum, Merion, PA.

The DuPont family of Wilmington, Delaware, pursued gardening on a scale almost unparalleled anywhere in the country. With their vast gunpowder and chemical fortune, this large, extended family lived on nearly contiguous properties, and invested in sophisticated and elaborate gardens, often with a French influence inspired by their ancestors. Pierre DuPont acquired his estate "Longwood" from the Pierce family, Quakers who had built a small arboretum on 15 acres (six ha) of their farm, providing the foundation for one of the most extensive living plant collections in the country today.

The fabulous estates of the golden age of American horticulture famously ran on "money, manpower, and manure."

World War II and the changes in the American economy and society brought this golden age to a close. Cheap labor, once plentiful around cities, disappeared as manufacturing increased, and fuel to heat private greenhouses was in short supply. Consequently, many were shut down permanently after their inhabitants succumbed to the elements.



Longwood Gardens, Kennett Square, PA:

As the region transitioned to a more democratic expression of horticulture, organizations like the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) took up the cause of gardening as a means to address social issues including urban blight and food insecurity resulting from a rapidly urbanizing city. Founded in 1827 and the creator of the oldest and largest flower show in the world, the PHS transitioned from a cloistered private society to a community development organization responsible for many of the public landscapes, tree planting initiatives, and community gardens that are part of the fabric of Philadelphia today.

When attempting to answer the question of why of all the early cities in America, it was Philadelphia that created the richest legacy of horticulture, evidence leads directly to the roles of science, religion, and money. The emergence of natural history and its pursuit to understand the natural world through

observation of species, and the Quaker principle of religious tolerance and the belief that becoming close to nature allows one to be closer to God, created a favorable environment for plant collecting and gardening. Thus, almost all the great 18th and 19th century American gardens were established by Quakers, creating the foundation for the great gardens established by the industrialists of the early 20th century and paving the way for gardening as a pursuit available to all today.

Historic Gardens and Arboreta with great Rhododendron Collections

The Barnes Arboretum, Merion, PA:

Perhaps inspired by the woodlands of Winterthur, Laura Barnes built a horticultural collection to rival her husband Albert's storied art collection, which includes many rhododendron species and cultivars.

Jenkins Arboretum, Devon, PA:

The most extensive collection with over 5000 rhododendrons, azaleas, and hybrids from around the world, including a large number of native species. The blooming season begins in late March with *R. dauricum* and *R. mucronalatum*, and ends in late July with *R. prunifolium*.

Longwood Gardens, Kennett Square, PA:

The original owner Pierre S. du Pont was enamored with hybrid azaleas and planted them extensively throughout his estate. Today the collection has been expanded to include deciduous species native to the USA. For those that can't visit in person, Longwood also has an excellent online database of its collection.

Morris Arboretum, Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, PA:

The site of an ARS Test Garden in the 1950s and home to many Dexter hybrid rhododendrons, this grand estate-turned public garden also has an azalea meadow with descendants of many of Henry Skinner's wild collected native azaleas.



Morris Arboretum, Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, PA:

Mt. Cuba Center, Hockessin, DE:

With a collection focused on plants native to the mid-Atlantic piedmont region, Mt. Cuba is a wonderful place to study native azaleas and rhododendrons in both woodland and formal settings.

Scott Arboretum, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA:

Founding director of the Scott Arboretum John C. Wister was passionate about rhododendrons. Today, the collection numbers over 350 species and cultivars, some of which

were Wister's selections.

Tyler Arboretum, Media, PA:

See the O'Dell article on the Tyler Arboretum's Wister Rhododendron Garden on P. 32.

Winterthur, Winterthur, DE:

Eight acres (3.3 ha) of this large estate are devoted to the Azalea Woods, considered Henry Francis du Pont's masterpiece. The collection started over 100 years ago with Kurume azaleas and has expanded with many other species and cultivars over the years, including a collection of *R. kaempferi*. (See Eirhart 2018).

Reference

Eirhart, L. 2018. Azaleas and rhododendrons at Winterthur. *J. American Rhodo. Soc.* 72: 175-180.

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