

Emily Dickinson: Master Gardener

**“The lovely flowers embarrass me,
They make me regret I am not a Bee”
(F809) Emily Dickinson**

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Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) is well known as a prolific poet who wrote nearly 1800 poems. However, fewer than a dozen of her poems were published in her lifetime. Instead, to her neighbors in Amherst, Massachusetts, she was known as a reclusive eccentric as well as an accomplished gardener on her family's 14-acre property called The Homestead. She often sent bouquets to neighbors and friends that included her poems. After her death, her sister-in-law listed Emily's first attribute as “*Lover of Flowers.*”

In her poems, she mentions plants over 600 times. The rose is the most frequent of her 350 references to flowers. These allusions to plant life are not just for symbols and metaphors. Study of her poems, her letters and accounts by family and friends also paint a picture of an avid and skilled gardener.

In childhood Emily loved to walk outside finding the “beautiful children of spring,” her name for wild flowers such as Adder's Tongue and yellow violets. Wildflowers remained her most favorite flowers throughout her life. By age 12 she was helping her mother, also an enthusiastic gardener, in maintaining the family flowerbeds. During most of her life, Emily continued to plant, water, deadhead and prune these beds.

Emily never detailed the plan of her gardens, but others described the beds as a “cottage garden” with flowers mingled with roses and other flowering shrubs. She tended the Greville roses her mother brought to Amherst upon her marriage. Emily often chose plants for their fragrance, such as lemon verbena. She had a particular fondness for the succession of spring bulbs such as Star of Bethlehem, crocuses, and daffodils. Indeed, in a letter (L823) she called herself “a Lunatic on Bulbs.” Her contemporar-

ies admired her skill in being able to grow woodland plants such as trillium and columbine in the family beds. She also grew exotic plants such as *Amaryllis formosissima*, a native of Mexico.

She obtained much of her knowledge of plants from her studies of botany at Amherst Academy, which she attended for seven years beginning in 1840. Her love of plants was also concretely displayed in her construction of a herbarium, a book of pressed plants — many labelled with both common and Latin names. Her herbarium contains over 400 specimens. It is preserved at Harvard's Houghton Rare Book room in Boston.

In 1855 Emily's father built her a conservatory, allowing her to garden all year round, enjoying maidenhair ferns, jasmine, camellias and heliotropes — even in winter. She forced bulbs in soil in the conservatory. Ongoing archeological excavations at the Homestead have identified the foundation of the conservatory, and there are plans to reconstruct it.

One of Emily's favorite plants was the Indian Pipe (or ghost plant) *Monotropa uniflora*, a white herbaceous perennial. Because it does not contain chlorophyll, it can grow in dark environments. Like her favorite plant, Emily wore white and, after age 30, withdrew to her father's property. The importance of plants continued even after Emily died. Her sister placed heliotrope as well as violets in her coffin.

When Emily's poems were published posthumously, on the book cover was the Indian Pipe.

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Indian Pipe *monotropa uniflora*



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