

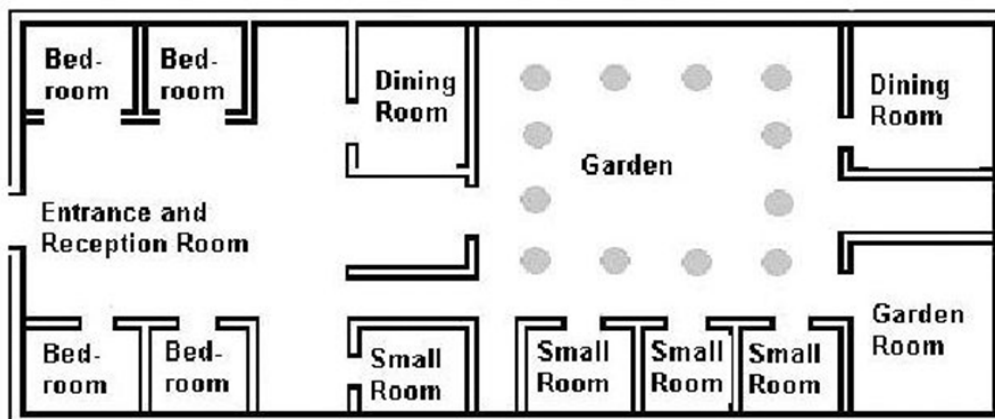
The Gardens of Pompeii: Lost and Found

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Did you know that, as a lover of plants, you share a great deal with the ancient Romans who lived in the city of Pompeii? In late August of 79 A.D., the volcano Vesuvius erupted, covering Pompeii in nearly 20 feet of ash, freezing the city in time. It is the preservation of the houses and gardens that make Pompeii a unique ancient city to study. Contrary to previous descriptions of Pompeii by modern scholars as a crowded, overbuilt city, we now know that Pompeii had many open green spaces including interior courtyard gardens, several vineyards within the city walls and many gardens attached to public buildings. To date, 450 gardens have been found. Wilhelmina Jashemshi (1910-2007), a professor of ancient history and an avid gardener, excavated the gardens of Pompeii for 25 years and founded the field of garden archeology.



We now know that the people of Pompeii lived much of their lives outdoors. Their homes had an inward orientation with the house surrounding the garden for privacy. Here, the last meal of the day was eaten. During the day, the women of the household spun and wove wool in the garden. In every garden Dr. Jashemski studied, she found loom weights. These gardens included fruits and vegetables for everyday use, trees such as plane trees (*Platanus orientalis*), pomegranates, figs and vines for shade, and scattered flowers such as Campana roses, Madonna lilies and poppies, as well as spices such as rosemary and thyme for cooking. Once water from aqueducts was piped into the city, much of the water was directed to the gardens, showing their importance to the people of Pompeii.



How do we know what type of plants were in these ancient gardens? Scientific study of pollen at Pompeii shows an abundance of olive trees. Carbonized plant fragments have been identified as fava beans, filberts, laurel and peach pits. Other clues included study of the many wall paintings of nature scenes placed to make home gardens appear larger. Study of these frescos has permitted the identification of the different types of grapes grown in Pompeii for wine production -- an important industry in ancient times. DNA analysis and consultation of ancient texts have confirmed these grape varieties.

Dr. Jashemski also pioneered the study of root casts to reconstruct the gardens of Pompeii. Large roots left a cavity in the volcanic ash when they decayed. On excavation, these cavities have been used as molds to aid both botanists' identification of plantings as well as to reconstruct the exact planting patterns in the city vineyards. Today, many of the vineyards of Pompeii have been replanted with grape species grown in ancient times.



Finally, flowers played an important role in the lives of ancient Romans. Garlands of flowers were given to guests at dinner parties. Flowers were grown for their medicinal use as well as for making perfume. Associated with flower culture was also the production of honey -- the only sweetener that Romans knew.

So, this summer, when you eat outside, perhaps with a glass of wine or a bouquet of flowers on the table, reflect on the long history of the love of gardening over the centuries.

References:

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