

Beatrix Potter: Master Gardener

Kathleen Quinn, MGV 2017

Did you see the clues in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902) that show Beatrix Potter's knowledge and love of gardening? The reader sees Peter munching on carefully drawn carrots and being caught in the gooseberry net as he runs away from Mr. McGregor. You see Mr. McGregor kneeling by a cold frame, carefully transplanting cabbage seedlings. In other books, such as *The Tale of the Pie and the Patty-Pan* (1905), there are numerous drawings of clematis, phlox, and snapdragons -- plants she is known to have grown in her gardens.

Beatrix Potter (1866-1943) was born in London to a Victorian upper-class family. Her early experiences in nature included keeping numerous pets such as frogs, tortoises and the occasional rabbit or mouse caught in the gardens where her family vacationed in England's Lake District and Scotland. These trips instilled in her a love of nature. By age eight, Beatrix was filling sketchbooks with animals and plants which were keenly observed.



Her first serious exploration of plants was in her twenties, when she studied fungi, both by drawing and under the microscope to aid classification. She often visited the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew to meet with experts in mycology. This was a highly unusual interest for a young woman of her class.

Her work as a children's author began in 1890, when she began to include in letters to the children of her last governess stories full of drawings of plants and animals. Annie Moore, the former governess, encouraged her to put the stories in book form. In 1901, Beatrix self-published *The Tale of Peter Rabbit and Mr. McGregor's Garden*. Mr. McGregor was

modeled on the Scottish gardeners who worked the Potters' many country estate stays. The garden was influenced by the kitchen garden at the country house, Lingholm, in the Lake District where the Potters stayed for ten summers. The book's drawings showed an astute observation



of realistic horticultural practices such as clay pots full of carefully labelled geranium cuttings and a cold frame of cucumber plants with layers of manure and soil.

Beatrix became an active gardener in 1906 when she bought Hilltop House and its 34-acre working farm in the Lake District. The purchase was in part funded by her royalties from her books. The purchase of Hilltop was her declaration of independence from the expectations of her parents and London society, so she could live the life she wished. Her first garden was a typical cottage garden with hardy perennials mixed with bulbs and fruit trees as well as vegetables. She was influenced both by the gardens of her childhood as well as designs popularized by Gertrude Jekyll emphasizing natural building materials, informal dense plantings, and a mixture of ornamental and edible plants. She favored letting plants such as snow drops naturalize. "That is why I have an untidy garden," she wrote in a letter. (McDowell, p. 162)





Trumpet Vine

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Beatrix shared the traits of many devoted gardeners. During her first summer at Hilltop, she carefully observed what plants sprouted and then began to add new plants -- often from divisions by other gardeners. She was active in her own gardens -- planting, thinning and applying fertilizer -- even though she had hired help. Her continued publishing funded her gardening interests. "Gardening can be described as a hole one digs in the ground into which to shovel funds." (McDowell, p. 105) She was also known to pilfer desired plants or seeds, as she wrote, "...stolen plants always grow." (McDowell, p. 63)

Like many avid gardeners, she was always looking for more space. By 1909, she bought a second property, Castle Farm, where she moved with her husband, William Heelis. She had a keen interest in land conservation. At the time of her death in 1943, she left 4,000 acres to the British National Trust.

References:

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Potter, B. (1992) *The Great Big Treasury of Beatrix Potter*. Avenel, New Jersey: Derrydale Books.
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