

Creating colonial landscapes

The restoration of a colonial garden demands authenticity if the site is part of a museum or other place open to the public.

However, on private property the owner must decide whether he wants authenticity at the expense of improved varieties of flowers and shrubs. Will it be sufficient to create a "colonial feeling" without being entirely authentic?

One thing to avoid is forsythia. It was not introduced in American gardens until the 1830's and its use is a dead giveaway that the user doesn't know his plants. Lilacs, however, came to America with the earliest settlers and have been used ever since.

Avoid many evergreens such as yew rhododendron and juniper. They were used more extensively in the Victorian era. The colonial period specialized in roses, flowering quince, flowering almond, snowberry and sweet shrubs. Heavy plantings were not the order of the day in colonial times.

Most of the small trees and shrubs used in colonial landscaping had a dual purpose. They were planted to provide fruit for the table. Blossoms and fall color were incidental.

If you want a feeling of colonial authenticity, don't use a foundation planting. That also arrived in the Victorian era when foundations were high. In colonial times, foundations were close to the ground.

Herbs were rarely used in a special garden except in churches, monasteries or medical schools. Instead, they were usually mixed in with flowers and vegetables in the regular garden.

Colonial landscape plants were functional. Gardens were placed where they would capture spring sun or summer moisture, not with an eye to where they looked best. Walks were usually the shortest distance between two points.

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