



So Fine a Prospect: Historic New England Gardens (Library of New England)

Alan Emmet

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“Oh, the comfort, the delight I have had in my garden,” an octogenarian grande dame of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, recalls in an 1888 memoir. Alan Emmet’s glimpse into more than two dozen gardens that graced New England’s towns and countryside from just after the American Revolution into the twentieth century has delights of its own. Drawing from diaries, correspondence, historical records, sketch maps, and paintings, Emmet treats the garden--ranging from small urban retreats to ornamental estates of thousands of acres--as an art form and examines its evolution from the utilitarian to the ornate. Along with the useful--greenhouses, peach walls, and pergolas--are found the whimsical and the idiosyncratic. She describes teahouses, topiary trees, fountains, mazes, marble nymphs, and a three-story viewing tower. And ever-present, of course, are the plants themselves: roses, lilies, tree peonies, orchids, even southern magnolias, as well as towering elms, massive lindens, peaches, pears, and boxwood.

But as Emmet delves more deeply into who built these gardens and why, another story unfolds. The gardens, it seems, parallel their owners’ lives, and embedded in their history is the saga of families and their rising and falling tides. We see great houses inhabited by gentle ghosts, the boom and subsequent decay of the port towns, the emergence of a mercantile class, the metamorphosis of the cities into sprawling urban centers, and the establishment of institutions like the Massachusetts Horticultural Society. Carefully chronicled, entertaining, and generously illustrated, Emmet’s garden tour is very much worth taking.

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