Imagine Emily Dickinson

By Marta McDowell

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For me, Emily Dickinson was an accident. Driving solo across western Massachusetts on a business trip in 1998, a free afternoon intersected with Amherst. Stopping for coffee at the Black Sheep cafe, I came across a pamphlet for the Emily Dickinson Museum (then known as The Homestead). In the spirit of full disclosure, I must say that while I had taken American Lit in college, I never completely understood Dickinson’s poetry. But the museum, located on the property where Dickinson lived, sounded interesting, and writing poetry appealed to my inner romantic. When I arrived, the curator, Cindy Dickinson (name tag read “no relation”), charmed me with the story of a real woman with family, friends, flowers, and a garden. As a gardener myself, I finally had a hook into a poet and her work.

To imagine Emily Dickinson, picture a woman sitting with pen and paper, writing poems. She would probably be alone, as she is well known as a recluse, at least in her later years. Think of her in a white dress, her chosen attire, with her dark-reddish hair pulled back in a bun. To be accurate, you would need to surround her with plants and flowers.

Emily Dickinson was a gardener. That fact grounds her life and work. As a gardener, you share something basic with this celebrated if sometimes enigmatic American poet. Nature looms large in your garden as it did in hers: the seasons and the weather, birds and insects, trees and especially flowers. Her solitude makes more sense in the context of gardening. You can visualize her in the garden musing on words and phrases, poems germinating in her mind as she attends to the many repetitive tasks that horticulture demands.

“I was reared in the garden, you know,” Dickinson once wrote (J 206). She was born into a family passionate about plants. Her mother, also named Emily, loved flowers and was famous around Amherst for growing figs, an achievement given western Massachusetts winters. Austin, Emily Dickinson’s older brother, planted trees. As a boy he planted a grove of pines. As an adult he consulted on landscaping for much of the town—for its streets, its town common, and for the campus of Amherst College. Her younger sister Lavinia, or Vinnie as she was known, gardened with enthusiasm, as she did everything in life. Edward Dickinson, their father, had a gentleman’s orchard and built a conservatory, a “garden off the dining-room,” when he remodeled the family home in 1855 (J 279).

All three children went to school. In a day when advanced education was uncommon for girls, Emily Dickinson attended Amherst Academy, a co-educational secondary school, and later went away for a year to Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in nearby South Hadley. Among classes like Latin and history, she studied botany. She propagated botanical terminology into her poems, comparing the sun to a flower’s corolla, observing a calyx splitting into a flower in the same way that emotions might.
Dickinson collected more than words. “I was always attached to mud,” Dickinson once wrote (J 492). Exploring the stream banks, woodlands, and meadows around town, often accompanied by her large dog, Carlo, she was alert for new flowers. She pressed the specimens and added them to her growing collection. Creating a herbarium was popular with girls in the mid-1800s, the way that a teenager today might assemble playlists for their i-Pods or collect friends on Facebook. Emily Dickinson glued down each pressed flower into a leather-bound album with tiny strips of paper, labeling each with the genus and species.

Dickinson’s large brick house, known as the Homestead, is painted soft yellow with green wooden shutters. It sits on a knoll on Main Street; a stylish picket fence and hemlock hedge surround the three-acre property. From her front window, Emily Dickinson looked past tall pines to the 11-acre meadow across the road that was part of her father’s property. From her west window, she faced the center of town and her brother’s home, the Evergreens. Edward Dickinson built it next door to the Homestead as a wedding present for Austin and his bride, Emily Dickinson’s dear friend Susan Gilbert.

The Evergreens was landscaped in the romantic style popularized by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, who designed Central Park and visited Austin and Susan several times. Flowering trees and shrubs framed the house and the evergreens that lent their name to the elaborate Italianate home. Benches were set along curving paths and lawn. The path between the two houses was, in Emily Dickinson’s words, “just wide enough for two who love.”

If you walked with Austin and Susan toward the Homestead, you would have seen grounds laid out in a practical style, more gentleman’s farm than country villa. Behind the house a large barn housed the family’s livestock—cows, pigs, and chickens—as well as the carriages and horses. Grapes grew up trellises on the barn. Mrs. Dickinson’s figs enjoyed the warm microclimate along the barn’s south-facing foundation. The flower garden unrolled down the gradual slope to the east of the house, alongside the orchard and in front of a large vegetable bed.

There are no drawings or photographs that show Emily Dickinson’s garden in her day. But her letters and poems and her niece’s descriptions paint a picture of it. Beds overflowed with flowers. In spring, lilacs and peonies perfumed the air. Describing herself as a “Lunatic on Bulbs,” Dickinson enjoyed crocus, daffodils, tulips, and lilies in their season (J 823). Foxgloves invited bees, honeysuckle tempted hummingbirds. Dickinson once boasted, “In childhood I never sowed a seed unless it was perennial—and that is why my garden lasts” (J 989). Allowing for a poet’s hyperbole, we know that her garden also included annuals like nasturtiums and biennials such as sweet williams.

Roses held center stage in summer. Her mother brought roses with her to Amherst from her childhood home in Monson, Massachusetts; the Homestead’s garden had a summerhouse trellised with roses. One of Dickinson’s earliest poems distills a rose to “A sepal – petal – and a thorn” (F 25). Roses appear more often than any other flower in her poetry, and many different species grew in the garden. Thorny damask roses (*Rosa damascena*) opened with clusters of flattened rosettes. The Seven Sisters rose (*Rosa multiflora grevillie*) astonished with individual flowers in a variety of shades from pale-pink to magenta. These contrasted with the striped blooms of *Rosa gallica* ‘Versicolor’.
They filled June afternoons with heady fragrance.

Dickinson was economical. She used flowers as metaphors for herself and in her poems. She introduced herself with a daylily. She called herself “Daisy.” In a letter of 1859 she defines mortality with a parable of the seasons. (Note that gentians are fall-blooming wildflowers in the Amherst environs.) “We must have summer now, and ‘whole legions’ of daisies. The gentian is a greedy flower, and overtakes us all. Indeed, this world is short, and I wish, until I tremble, to touch the ones I love before the hills are red—are gray—are white—are ‘born again’! If we knew how deep the crocus lay, we never should let her go” (J 207).

In winter, Dickinson retreated to the small conservatory. Floor-to-ceiling windows, three to the south, one to the east, provided sunlight. White shelves lined the walls. There, Dickinson nurtured flowering plants—primroses, heliotrope, and fuchsia among others—cared for tender plants like oleander that spent their summer on the Homestead’s veranda, and forced bulbs. Hyacinths were a favorite. She brought the rooted bulbs from the conservatory up to her bedroom to savor the blooms. In a letter she once described “hyacinths covered with promises which I know they will keep.” (J 969)

A letter from Emily Dickinson might include a pressed flower. She might send a nosegay of her favorite blooms or a cake decorated with blossoms. Her poems are bouquets of words, arranged carefully, poignantly.

My Garden - like the Beach -  
Denotes there be - a Sea -  
That’s Summer -  
Such as These - the Pearls  
She fetches - such as Me  
(F 469)

Dickinson’s life was far from serene. But her garden remained, fetching pearls each summer.

Like any good gardener, Dickinson watered new plantings, battled insect pests, and marked the seasons. In her correspondence, she complained about housework, but never about gardening. That, I find truly sympathetic. Though I wonder how she managed to garden in a white dress, I do not doubt that she did.

References