English Garden Style: Landscape Design According to the Nineteenth-Century American Seed and Nursery Catalogs

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Frank Scott, a sketch artist from Ohio, loved landscape design and as a student spent a summer in New York with the foremost nineteenth-century landscape designers Andrew Jackson Downing and Calvert Vaux. In 1870, Scott wrote *The Art of Beautifying Home Grounds*, a book primarily for the suburban home owner. Architect and historian David Handlin calls it the commuter’s manual. Scott relied heavily on the English picturesque garden style in the book, which he introduced with these words: “In the specialty of decorative gardening, adapted to the small grounds of most suburban homes, there is much need of other works than have yet appeared.” In that short line, Scott indicated the need for homeowners to learn about landscaping or what he called “decorative gardening.” His book informed generations of American gardening, but his own inspiration came from across the Atlantic. American landscape designers like Scott and Downing readily admitted the superiority of English gardens, which had taken a distinctive style by the early nineteenth century.

For all their prominence, however, it was not elite designers who popularized the English garden in nineteenth-century America; it was their commercial brethren, seed and nursery companies, who conveyed their ideas to middle-
class consumers who were hungry for instruction on how to create artful or tasteful landscapes. In his magazine *Gardener’s Monthly and Horticulturalist*, Philadelphia nurseryman Thomas Meehan hailed the new edition of Scott’s book (Figure 1) when it was published in 1886: “It is a work of which American horticulturalists have cause to be proud. Its influence on landscape gardening must be very great, and now, where there promises to be a revival in the lovely art, its presence is particularly timely.” Scott was not alone in teaching the homeowner landscape design. Seed and nursery catalogs took his messages and broadcast them widely.

The landscape recommended in the catalogs was predominantly the English style, which throughout the nineteenth century took several forms, such as the naturalistic view, the gardenesque layout, Victorian carpet bedding and the wild garden and a more formal trimmed look; but in all cases the landscape included a lawn. American seed and nursery companies took on the role of a reliable source from which the middle class could learn how to landscape the home lot, no matter what the size. A homeowner who wanted to design and plant his own home landscape could look to the catalog for both instruction and support and, of course, where to purchase grass seed and plants.

As early as mid-century, the seed and nursery companies wrote about the importance of home landscapes for everyone, not only the wealthy estate owners. Overman and Mann said in 1862: “It is now deemed rational to adorn and beautify the surroundings of house, however humble. And what more sensible idea can the owner of the soil entertain than to draw in his mind from its wanderings, and to surround his family with the cheap comforts and delights of home?” Home symbolized a sense of national identity as the country entered the Civil War. That same Overman and Mann catalog of 1862-63 said: “The foregoing is premised upon the fact that notwithstanding the hard times, and the horrors of war, no former season has been so characterized by the tree planting spirit as the past. Everywhere the prevailing disposition seems to be to circumscribe ambition and concentrate its energies within the domestic circle — to make home what it should be.”

After 1870, the advances of industrialization brought about larger seed and nursery inventories, easier shipping, cheaper printing and increased advertising and allowed the garden to assume a central role for middle-class homeowners. Seeds and plants from national companies enabled homeowners to create landscapes much like the ones pictured in their catalog, as in Henderson’s in 1886 (Figure 2). Through his landscaped grounds the homeowner felt linked with other Americans of the same status. While the wealthy needed gardeners to tend the landscape on their large estates, middle-class home gardeners – often referred to as “amateur gardeners” – could, according to the catalogs, easily maintain home gardens without hired help on their smaller parcels of land.

Like so many other mail-order garden catalogs, the Lovett nursery in 1882 gave the homeowner lessons in landscaping. “[This] is a handbook of all that is necessary to aid in improving and adorning the home grounds, with a complete catalogue of species and

Figure 2. Henderson in this catalog cover of 1886 shows the home landscape with lawn, water garden, and carpet beds, which imitate the English garden of that time. Warshaw Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.
varieties, naming and describing them so fully and accurately and in such a clear and instructive manner that it is a task of ease and pleasure to make judicious selections and to plan out intelligently the proposed improvements. Nothing has been neglected that will teach the reader how to lay out home grounds to advantage.”

If it was important for them to landscape the home property, homeowners also knew that nurseries and seed companies would supply the necessary plants. In 1894, Lines and Coe of New Haven, Connecticut, wrote about how necessary the landscape was: “Through the zeal of the collectors [plant collectors, often from England, who supplied the nursery], nature’s scattered excellencies are now available. Instead of being restricted to the varieties that grow native about us, we have the whole flora, practically, of the world at our command, as well as the greatest number of the varieties that have been fostered into existence by much care and painstaking.” Seed companies and nurseries helped their suburban middle-class readers enjoy exotic plants that at one time only the wealthy could cultivate. Now middling Americans could show off their own Chinese shrubs on the lawn, Japanese vines clinging to the walls of their houses or South American alternanthera plants in containers or carpet beds. In 1898, Boston seedsman Joseph Breck illustrated the importance of the home landscape at a time when the middle class was becoming wealthier (Figure 3). He wrote in his catalog: “As this country grows in taste and wealth, the importance of the house and grounds, which together constitute the home, making an harmonious whole, is becoming more and more apparent, and these remarks are as applicable, if not more so, to the lot containing five or ten thousand square feet, as to the great estate comprising many acres.”

The picturesque, and later the gardenesque, English style demanded first a lawn, and then the careful placement of trees and shrubs, so that the lawn would keep its sweeping look and not be lost by the overuse of trees and shrubs. In his book’s introduction, Scott credited John Claudius Loudon and Edward Kemp with teaching landscape gardening to the English. He saw his task as providing Americans the principles of English landscape gardening. Although Scott recognized that, compared to the English, “we are yet novices in the fine arts of gardening,” he considered the well-kept lawn as the essential element in the American domestic landscape. To the English, the lawn was a status symbol by which one was judged by his peers. The lawn, Scott suggested, should be open so that neighbors and passers-by could see and enjoy it. His book presented landscape plans along with a listing of trees, shrubs, and vines suitable for the suburban home landscape. In his book Scott borrowed from New Jersey seedsman Peter Henderson’s book Manual of Floriculture in recommending the amount of seed needed for a lawn. The lawn was the essential ingredient of the home grounds because it created a picturesque, park-like look. The lawn connected one house to the next by its placement at the front of the property, along the street and sides of the house. Thus one property seemed to flow right into the next, forming a sense of neighborhood.

Discussion of the English lawn as the basis of the home landscape was quite common in the seed and nursery catalogs. In 1886 the seedsman C.A. Reeser wrote: “A beautiful lawn, it is hardly necessary to say, is one of the most satisfactory and pleasing outside adornments that can be procured, and is rightly deemed a most essential adjunct to rural and suburban homes.” Verdant, sweeping front lawns began to appear in the early nineteenth century among the homes of wealthy Americans but later became a symbol of the middle class. The lots in the Maryland suburb Takoma Park, for example, included a large setback from the street to provide for a lawn.

The seed companies, of course, offered lawn seed. They were happy to tell the reader the amount of seed needed for the size of a particular property. Downing in his book wrote about the lawn in these words: “We advise him who desires to have speedily a handsome turf, to follow the English practice, and sow three to four bushels of seeds to the acre.” In his 1873 catalog, Rochester seedsman James Vick echoed the words...
of Scott: “In the first place, I would remark that the space in front of the house, and generally the sides exposed to view from the street, should be in grass. No arrangement of beds, or borders of box, or anything else, will look so neat and tasteful as a well kept piece of grass.”

Once planned and grown, the lawn had to be adorned. By the end of the century the cast iron garden vase or urn had become a sign of status for the middle class. Vick recommended in the *Floral Guide* of 1873 that on the lawn the owner place two vases, filled usually with annuals: “Of all the adornments of the lawn, nothing is more effective than a well filled and well kept vase. All the ornamental-leaved plants are appropriate for the top or center of the vase, while a few drooping plants should be placed near the edges and allowed to hang or droop at least half way to the ground. For this purpose the verbena or the petunia will answer. We often see several small vases scattered over the lawn, but the effect is bad. It is best to have one or two that command attention by their size and beauty.” Figure 4 shows two vases in this style on the lawn of a nineteenth-century middle-class residence in Gloucester, Massachusetts.

Beyond the lawn, ornamental trees were often recommended in the catalogs’ articles. The E.D. Putney Company from Brentwood, New York, wrote about the use of evergreen trees to give an all-year beauty to the property: “Where only deciduous trees are grown there is a lack of tone and character to the landscape. This is particularly so in winter, when the barrenness is really depressing. In bleak localities they are indispensable as wind breaks. Single specimens of Norway spruce, hemlock, juniper and the Retinisporas are very effective in small yards.”

As the country expanded into the west, Overman and Mann from Illinois wrote in their 1860 catalog about the importance of planting trees in the landscape:

> In our heart we pity the man who can dole out a lifetime, and rear a family on the bare prairie, without a vestige of a tree or a shrub, to shield his tenement from the scorching heat of summer, or the howling blast of winter. Such anomalies of the ‘genus homo’ we have seen, and their souls are as desolate as the arid desert their homes so aptly represent … It is the duty of everyone to plant trees — in the orchard — in the door-

The *Mina Lobata* Vine

The Currie Brothers Seed Company in Milwaukee had a successful business in the 1880s and 90s. Like other seed and plant companies, they published a garden magazine; theirs was called *Currie’s Monthly (CM)*. In an 1888 issue of *CM*, the editor mentioned a vine called *mina lobata*. “This is one of the most beautiful climbing plants we are acquainted with, and one that is well worthy the attention of all plant lovers. It was introduced into this country last year for the first time, and, judging from the reports we have received regarding it, no climbing plant has ever given more satisfaction.” This is high praise for a simple vine. English gardeners had acquired this vine as early as the 1840s when the plant was brought from Mexico and named after Mexican minister Don Francisco Xavier Mina. The Royal Horticultural Society of London featured it in its gardens, according to the *Botanical Register* of 1842. *Mina lobata* is easy to grow in any garden and features long colorful white, red, and orange flowers at the end of the summer. This vine is one that English gardeners first enjoyed forty years before it appeared in American gardens.
ing tree varieties: ‘That the utility and beauty of ornamental trees and plants are now becoming generally recognized and appreciated, no better proof is afforded than the great demand which has been created for them. They have become a necessity in the garden, and every one who has a garden must have

Thus English landscape design, with its lawn, carefully spotted trees, and grouped shrubs, became popular among nineteenth-century American homeowners. The M.V. Johnston Nursery in Ohio presented a before-and-after look to the landscape according to the nursery catalog (Figure 5). The home garden provided the middle class with a taste of the country. Well-tended grounds became a place of both connection to a rapidly disappearing rural way of life and isolation from the city and its disturbing chaos. Seed and nursery catalogs taught the middle class how to design home grounds themselves. The landscape they recommended – picturesque or gardenesque – followed the recommendations of English writers such as J.C. Loudon and his American followers, such as Downing and Scott. The nineteenth-century American seed company and nursery industry promoted the English model of landscape in the catalogs, books, and magazines they published. And we have loved that style ever since.

Thomas J. Mickey is a Professor in the Department of Communication Studies. This article is an edited excerpt from his book Seduction of the English Garden: The Story of American Gardening according to the Nineteenth Century Seed and Nursery Catalogs which the University Press of Kentucky will publish next year.

Figure 5. The Johnston Nursery from Ohio in the 1870s included this image in the book that their tree peddlers used to sell the nursery’s plants. Notice the dramatic change to the ‘Pleasant Home’ represents the English style of landscape. The D.M. Hewey Company in Rochester produced the lithographs for this collection. Courtesy of the Newton Historical Society, Newton, MA.