

By the time I was 5,
I could name the flowers
in our small city yard
the way some kids
can recite Mother

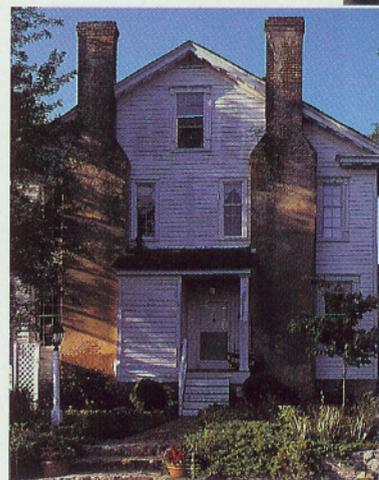


Growing Memories

HEIRLOOM PLANTS ARE MORE ABOUT HERITAGE THAN GARDENING. THEY'VE BEEN PASSED DOWN FROM ONE GENERATION TO THE NEXT OR SIMPLY PASSED OVER THE BACK FENCE.

Goose — phlox, columbine, snapdragon, sweet William. Even now, when my columbines fade from graceful, spurred blossoms into those familiar, curiously shaped brown seedpods, I think of my mother, who first taught me about flowers. Together she and I would crumple those dried pods, ritualistically scattering shiny black seeds everywhere we wanted flowers to be next spring. When I perform this same act in my own garden today, I do it through a child's eyes. My mother's lesson has stuck with me — with columbine, once you have it, you probably always will.

Today I know that the plants in our little city garden were "old" plants, and they did not become antiques in my lifetime. Many of them had been grown by dedicated plantmen like Thomas Jefferson, more than 200 years before me. The rather nebulous term *heirloom plants* is defined many different ways. Heirloom plants are usually more about memories



BY HILDA J. BRUCKER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK HUTCHISON

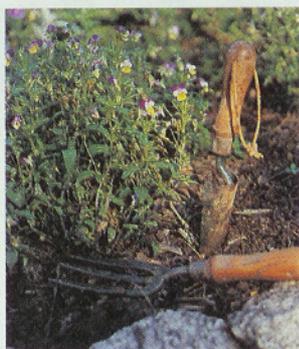
than about gardening. They are plants that have been passed down from one generation to the next or simply passed over the back fence. They're plants you can't forget. Plants you can describe perfectly — so why doesn't the nursery staff know the name for it that you do? Plants you shared with a favorite friend, after he shared his advice on how to grow it. Memories, people, tradition and experience — include a few personal heirlooms in your garden, and you will never be without a story to tell your visitors.

A GRANDMOTHER'S GARDEN

Master Gardener

Joyce Thomas literally grew up with heirloom plants, some of them passed down for four generations. "I remember hearing my grandmother talk about her grandmother's hollyhock seed, or her aunt's this or that.

They just kept collecting seed over the years and growing the old varieties." In Thomas' Decatur garden sweet William and hollyhocks still survive — from seed that can be traced directly to her grandmother, Margaret Rogers Thomas. Thomas simply collects seed and saves it in the freezer from year to year.



Viola tricolor.

Thomas has grouped her heirloom plants together, separate from other plants in the garden. She fondly refers to this area as her "grandmother's garden." Planted with a mixture of annuals, perennials and old roses, it also contains such classic Southern bulbs as gladiolas and cannas. The garden is laid out in a circular pattern, much like a traditional herb garden, with a birdbath in the center.

Other parts of her garden include new cultivars of old favorites and plants that don't necessarily have historical signifi-

cance.

GARDEN TALES

Do you remember crashing your bicycle into the thorniest rose bush on the block? Holding the water bucket while your grandmother cut peonies to take to the cemetery? Ask anyone which plant they remember most vividly from their childhood, and they're likely to have a story to tell, whether they are a gardener or not. Most of the following tales have been told by Atlantans who are *not* gardeners:

- Mary Maughon Malcolm, of Doraville, laughingly recalls a vine she once knew as "maypop." After the vine's purple flowers faded, green fruits followed. While playing in Lawrenceville's Shadowlawn Cemetery, where the vine grew wild, Mary and her childhood friends would often stomp on the fruits to hear them pop loudly. The vine is *Passiflora incarnata*, a variety of passionflower, and its fruit is a kissing cousin to the tropical passion fruit that goes into punch drinks. It is a Southeastern native, worthy of being cultivated for its unusual flowers.

- David J. Williams, a midtown creative director, associates snapdragons with his childhood. He remembers picking individual flowers off plants at his parents' Chamblee home. By squeezing gently on the back of the flower, he could make its "mouth" open and then snap closed. The snapdragon (*Antirrhinum majus*) has been grown in North America since the early 1700s.

- The sweetness of honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*) is a vivid memory for Lora Pyo, a Doraville social worker. She remembers how she and her three sisters would pull the flowers apart to suck out the honey. At their childhood home in Kentucky they also picked the flowers of trumpet vine (*Campsis radicans*) and wore one on each finger like large orange thimbles. Trumpet vine is a rampant grower and a favorite of hummingbirds throughout the Southeast.

- You might say the common hydrangea changed Penny McHenry's life. More than two decades ago Penny looked down at her back yard from an upstairs window and was hit by a revelation. The only things that were blooming profusely were two blue hydrangeas. Knowing a good thing when she saw it, Penny learned how to propagate hydrangeas at home — some might say she went hydrangea crazy. Today she is the founder and president of the American Hydrangea Society, and her hydrangea garden has been featured in magazines nationwide.

cance. "There's a place for the old and the new. I don't try to eradicate the past or the present," Thomas states, citing the common pansy as an example. "I would plant pansies around my mailbox, but not in the grandmother's garden." Although the large-flowered pansy made its appearance in the early 1800s, it was hybridized from the tiny wildflower known as the Johnny-jump-up (*Viola tricolor*). Many heirloom plant enthusiasts prefer this less showy but delightful viola, which often reseeds. The hollyhock hybrids that sport double flowers are another classic example of an "improved" version of an old standby. "Everybody wants big and flashy today," says Thomas. "But double hollyhocks are just not the same to me."

WHY HEIRLOOM PLANTS?

Four acres of gardens at Oak Grove Plantation, in Newnan, feature mostly old-fashioned plants. "Some people need one of everything rare and unusual," says owner Liz Tedder. "But I like plants I don't have to fuss over." By relying on heirlooms like hollyhocks, Johnny-jump-ups, daisies and four-o'clocks, Tedder avoids the usual chores of spraying and fertilizing at the restored 1830s plantation. "We plant them, we mulch them and they're on their own," she says, also noting that she doesn't even do much watering except in extended hot or dry spells. When the borders begin to overflow, Tedder passes on her heirlooms by offering the extras for sale.

Chances are you already have a few Southern heirlooms in your garden, although you may not have chosen to group them together in a special area. There are compelling reasons to expand your collection. Felder Rushing, co-author of *Passalong Plants* and a self-described "seventh generation Mississippi gardener," describes heirloom plants as "the things that are left over when people move on." These plants do seem to have staying power and are often found growing neglected around old country homesteads. As with antique roses, heirloom plants can be mostly pest free, requiring no spraying or special care, coming back year after year, says Thomas.

Newer versions of old-fashioned plants may have also lost their fragrance. Modern sweet peas (*Lathyrus odoratus*), for example, have been hybridized to make compact, bushy varieties, which do not have much of a scent. But try this — ask a senior citizen to describe the perfume of sweet peas blooming on a fence in the cool

days of early spring. Better yet, seek out an old variety and experience it for yourself.

Then there's nostalgia — the chance to have a living, growing piece of your past right in your own back yard. Pass on a tradition, and who knows how many generations it will ripple through. "Maybe when I smell four-o'clocks, I'm experiencing the same thing that Thomas Jefferson experienced," muses Rushing. "That's a neat concept."

SOURCES AND RESOURCES

PLANTS AND SEEDS

Barnsley Gardens Plant Shop

597 Barnsley Gardens Road
Adairsville
(770) 773-1659

Habersham Gardens

2067 Manchester St.
(404) 873-4702

Hastings Nature & Garden Center

2350 Cheshire Bridge Road
(404) 321-6981

Center for Historic Plants at Monticello

(mail-order seeds and plants that Thomas Jefferson grew; send legal-sized, self-addressed, stamped envelope for catalog)
P.O. Box 316
Charlottesville, VA 22902

Oak Grove Plantation and Gardens

(open seasonally and by appointment; call first)
4537 Highway 29
Newnan
(770) 463-3010 or (770) 463-0135

Woodlanders

(mail-order rare and hard-to-find heirloom plants)
1128 Colleton Ave.
Aiken, SC 29801
(803) 648-7522

INFORMATION

Passalong Plants, by Steve Bender and Felder Rushing (University of North Carolina Press, \$16.95), features witty descriptions of many Southern heirlooms, with sources listed for each.

The American Hydrangea Society

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