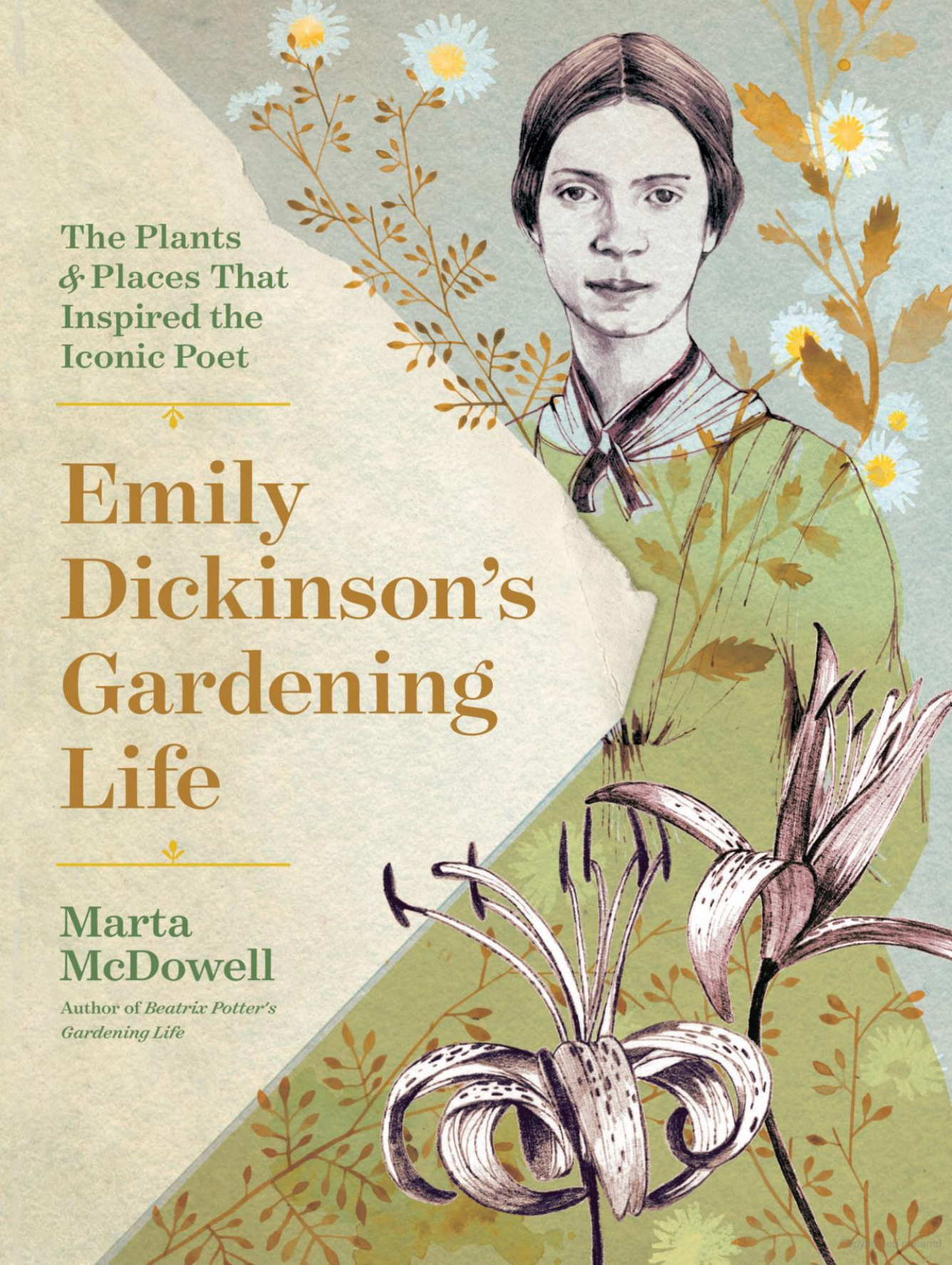
The Plants & Places That Inspired the Iconic Poet

Emily Dickinson's Gardening Life

Marta McDowell

Author of *Beatrix Potter's Gardening Life*



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Marta McDowell

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FRONTISPIECE The single authenticated photographic image of Emily Dickinson, circa 1847.

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CONTENTS

PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION 9
INTRODUCTION 12

THE TURNING OF THE YEAR

Early Spring: A Gardener's Home and Family 15
Late Spring: The Education of a Gardener 30
Early Summer: A Gardener's Travels 58
Midsummer: A Gardener's Ground 73
Late Summer: A Hedge Away 97
Autumn: A Gardener's Town 126
Winter: Requiem for a Gardener 153

A POET'S GARDENS

Planting a Poet's Garden 180
Visiting a Poet's Garden 187
An Annotated List of Emily Dickinson's Plants 200

AFTERWORD 231
SOURCES AND CITATIONS 234
A NOTE ON THE BOTANICAL ARTISTS 249
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 251
PHOTO AND ILLUSTRATION CREDITS 253
INDEX 255

Locations around Amherst connected with Emily Dickinson, overlaid on an 1873 map.

PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

EMILY DICKINSON WAS AN ACCIDENT—for me, at least—in terms of her gardens and my writing. It occurred in my corporate phase, a two-plus-decade career that had sprung up, unlikely but fully clothed, after college graduation. A forty-something me in the guise of diligent insurance executive was driving solo to agencies across New England to deliver the latest management message.

It was midafternoon in summer, the 1990s, between a lunchtime meeting in Framingham, Massachusetts, and an overnight stop in Springfield. Westbound on I-90, the Mass Pike stretched across the middle of the state, shimmering in the heat. I was in dire need of caffeine. Turn signal. Ludlow Service Plaza. The rest of the day yawned ahead with the anticipated solitary dinner, anonymous hotel, and too much email. But as with interstate rest areas from sea to shining sea, a literature rack beckoned with local tourist offerings. My eyes lit on a brochure for the Emily Dickinson Homestead.

The heart of a liberal arts major still beat in my suit-clad frame. Bits of Dickinson's poems fluttered in distant memory, their own things with feathers. As the museum's brochure listed the last tour at 4:00 p.m., I called from the pay phone, which now seems unspeakably quaint. A woman with the inflections of mid-Massachusetts said that yes, I would be able to make it to Amherst in time.

The drive north was bucolic—the Connecticut River with the Calvin Coolidge Bridge, rolling farmland, an absence of strip malls

and traffic lights. The shady common of downtown Amherst was quiet mid-week in summer with its college students away.

The Dickinson Homestead was an encounter that seemed, well, transcendental. I learned from the guide that, like me, Emily Dickinson was a gardener. Here was her collection of pressed plants, or at least a facsimile. A photograph of her conservatory was framed on the wall of her father's study, the same wall that used to open onto a small glass room with her shelves of potted plants. Stepping out into the wide expanse that was her garden, I started on a much longer road. Her garden became a way for me to learn, to think about her life and her poems in the context of her pursuit of plants. It was Dickinson who brought me to garden writing.

I have Tom Fischer to thank twice for smoothing the way to my pursuit of Emily Dickinson's gardens. It first came in the form of a refusal, in 1999, of an article submission to *Horticulture*, a magazine he then edited. He sent me the nicest rejection letter, suggesting I send the proposal on to David Wheeler at *Hortus*, a British gardening journal for which I still write. Almost twenty years later Tom, by then at Timber Press, and his colleague Andrew Beckman suggested this revised edition.

It is great to have a do-over for anything in life, including a book. For those familiar with the first edition, now long out of print, you will note new material and color illustrations throughout. Revisions incorporate scholarship and research since the first edition, and of course, correct and amend along the way. The new edition is reorganized. The first part of the book focuses on Emily Dickinson's life as a gardener in step with the progression of a year in her garden. The second part includes a visitor's guide to the Dickinson landscape, including the Emily Dickinson Museum, which has seen major changes in the past twenty years. I hope you get a chance to visit or visit again. If you arrange your trip to coincide with one of the museum's garden weekends, perhaps you will come work in the garden with me. If you want to plant a poet's garden of your own, you'll also find an annotated plant list.

Before we begin, a word about spelling, grammar, and punctuation. The poems and quotes from letters that you'll read in this volume are

taken from editions by two Harvard scholars: Ralph W. Franklin—the numbers after the poems are from his edition—and Thomas H. Johnson, who carefully deciphered Dickinson's manuscripts to use her original words, transcribed directly from her pen. If the punctuation is peculiar or the spelling unusual, know that it was as she wrote it.

And now, to begin. Again.

INTRODUCTION

EMILY DICKINSON WAS A GARDENER.

When you hear the name "Emily Dickinson," it may bring to mind a white dress or a well-known image of a sixteen-year-old girl staring boldly out of a daguerreotype. Poetry, of course. Probably not gardening.

Emily Dickinson as a gardener doesn't fit with the Dickinson mythology. The myths were based on real phobias of her later years and were also stoked by her first editor, Mabel Loomis Todd, to promote book sales. Since her death in 1886, she has been psychoanalyzed, compared to medieval cloistered mystics, and called "the madwoman in the attic." All she lacked was a cloister.

Beyond the stuff of literary legend, she was a person devoted to her family, with pleasures and pastimes and deep friendships. She shared a love of plants with her parents and siblings. To friends, she sent bouquets, and to some of her numerous correspondents—over one thousand of her letters have been found—pressed flowers.

She collected wildflowers, walking with her dog, Carlo. She studied botany at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke. She tended both a small glass conservatory attached to the front of the house and a long flower garden sloping down the spacious east side of the grounds. In winter, she forced hyacinth bulbs and in summer she knelt on a red blanket in her flower borders, performing horticulture's familiar rituals.

This book proceeds in calendar fashion, following the seasons. Welcome to Emily Dickinson's gardening year.

A daisy in Emily Dickinson's garden.

Answer July
Where is the Bee -
Where is the Blush -
Where is the Hay?

Ah, said July -
Where is the Seed -
Where is the Bud -
Where is the May -
Answer Thee - me -

Nay - said the May -
Show me the Snow -
Show me the Bells -
Show me the Jay!

Quibbled the Jay -
Where be the Maise -
Where be the Haze -
Where be the Bur?
Here - said the Year -

667, 1863

The TURNING of the YEAR

Early Spring

A GARDENER'S HOME AND FAMILY

Violets painted by Clarissa Munger Badger, from a book that Emily Dickinson owned.

IF YOU TAKE A SHORT WALK from the center of Amherst and stand in front of the Homestead, you'll need to use your imagination—what Dickinson called "reverie"—to summon up the landscape as Emily Dickinson knew it in the mid-1800s.

Main Street is an unpaved road. Today's sidewalks, utility poles, parking signs, and fire hydrants disappear, as do the boards that announce this house and its neighbor as destinations for tourists and literary pilgrims. Replace the drone of car engines and tires with the clomp of hooves and the click of tack. Add sleigh bells if the road is packed with snow. Breathe in to catch a trace—more if the day is warm—of earthy, animal odors.

The property of number 280 is separated from Main Street by a double line: a stylish fence of square wooden pickets, painted a shade of ochre to match the house, and a hedge of clipped, evergreen hemlocks. From the front gate, some steps above the ruts of the street, you look south. Houses and businesses vanish, and you gaze over a wide stretch of stubble that each summer will fill in to earn its name, the Dickinson meadow. Beyond that, there is a clear view of Amherst College.

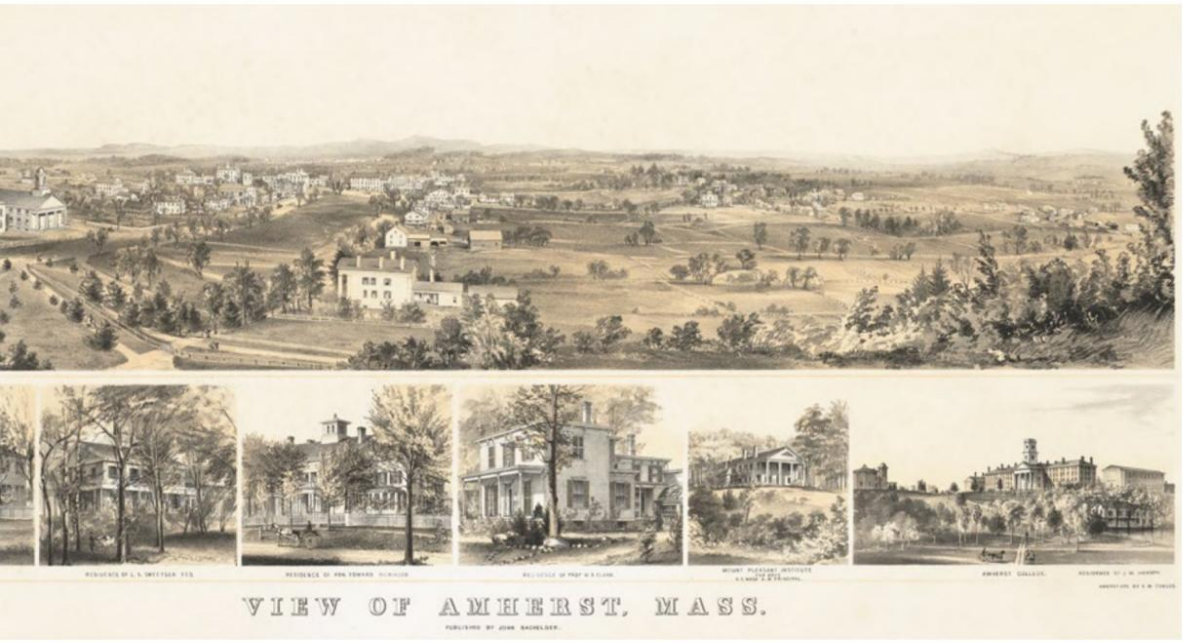
The Dickinson Homestead on Main Street in Amherst, Massachusetts.

The painted brick house behind the fence and hedge is imposing. The Homestead, as it is called, perches on a knoll. The carriage drive curves around it on the west side. A grove of trees along the drive shelters the house from hot winds of summer and Arctic blasts of winter. If you came calling in later years, you would notice the house that Edward Dickinson, Emily's father, built next door for Austin—her older brother—and Austin's bride, Susan.

Emily could look out her bedroom window along the path that connected the two houses and see her niece, nephews, and the neighborhood children playing in the carefully tended grounds of Austin's home. A bed of "Sister Sue's" hollyhocks edges the path in summer.

Behind the Homestead, a large carriage house and barn take up the rear of the property, shaded by large trees. Horses, cows, chickens, and pigs occupy it, providing the household with transportation, milk, and meat. In front of one wing of the barn, Mrs. Dickinson grows her prize-winning figs. Grapes are trellised there too. A substantial orchard of fruit trees—apples, pears, and cherries—grows down the slope.

Continuing past the barn, you finally see Emily Dickinson's flower garden on the east side of the house. A path of heavy granite flagstone

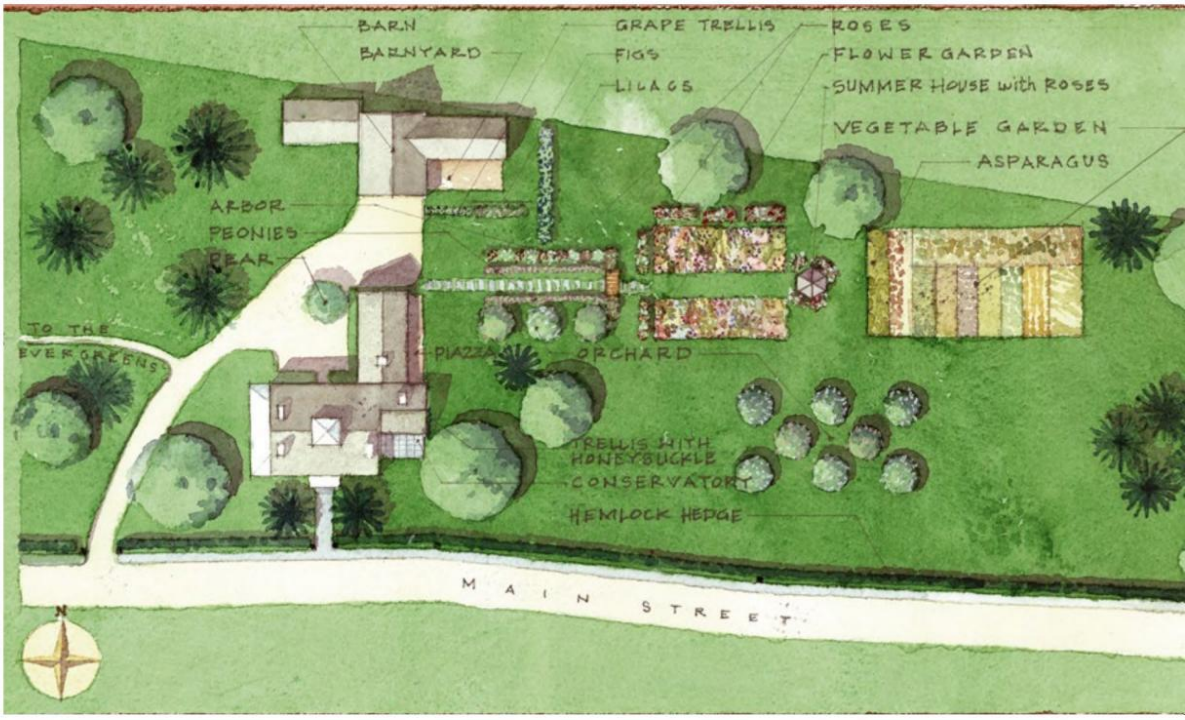


ABOVE The town of Amherst as seen from the Amherst College hill, circa 1857.

RIGHT The Evergreens, home of Emily Dickinson's brother and sister-in-law and their three children.

leads down a modest slope through the lawn, alongside fruit trees and flower beds. Lily-of-the-valley carpets some borders, perfuming the spring. Hedges of peonies lend their massive display to May. Honeysuckles sweeten the air from trellises. Roses, awaiting their June cue, clamber over a summer house. Masses of spring bulbs, hyacinths and daffodils, are followed by a profusion of annuals and perennials: sweet peas, nasturtiums, lilies, and marigolds, to name a few. Her niece, Mattie, described it as "a meandering mass of bloom."

A piazza overlooks the west side of the property, just outside the parlor; glass doors open onto it. Today we might call it a deck, but then the style was Italian and romantic. Potted plants like oleander and pomegranate, which would have withered outdoors in a



A conceptual map of the Homestead landscape, based on Emily Dickinson's descriptions and the recollections of friends and family.

Massachusetts winter, blossom there in summer. It is easy to picture the Dickinson sisters, Emily and Vinnie, sitting on the piazza in fine weather. They enjoyed the ultimate gardener's reward—those rare moments of surveying one's handiwork after the hard work is done, like the Creator's seventh day enumerated in their King James Bible.

A GARDEN EXISTS IN A PLACE. Amherst, Massachusetts, was the backdrop for Emily Dickinson's garden. The first people of the land—Pocomtuc, Wampanoag, Mahicans—encountered European fur traders in the 1600s exploring the broad reaches of the Fresh River, as the Dutch called the Connecticut. Known today as a college town, Amherst was founded in the mid-1700s by agrarian colonists who appreciated its alluvial soils in what is aptly called the Pioneer Valley. Emily once told her brother that Amherst "seems indeed to be a bit of Eden."

Plants flourish here, in addition to poets. Amherst lies on a fertile fan of land due east of the Connecticut River, eighty miles inland from Boston. In the nineteenth century, it was a landscape of hills and streams, wildflowers and fields.

The fields were farmed. Dickinson's Amherst was a market town, and many of her neighbors were farmers. Everyone who had the means, including gentlemen like her father, planted an orchard and vegetable garden to enrich the summer table and the winter larder. In her first published poem, a valentine, Dickinson wrote:

> Put down the apple Adam
> And come away with me
> So shal't thou have a pippin
> From off my Father's tree!
>
> From 2A, 1852

Built in proper Federal style in 1813 by Edward's father, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, the Homestead was the axis of Emily's world. She was born in one of its upstairs bedrooms, lived and gardened there for forty of her fifty-five years, and died there. It temporarily passed out of the Dickinson family after her grandfather went bankrupt, overextending his credit in establishing a new school—Amherst College. In 1840, when Emily was nine years old, Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross moved with their three children and set up housekeeping in a spacious white clapboard home on North Pleasant Street. That house was demolished in the 1920s.

Edward, a prominent attorney like his father and treasurer of Amherst College, reacquired the Homestead in the 1850s. The property included two and a half acres surrounding the house and barn, and a large open tract across the road. As proof of his success, Edward Dickinson remodeled the Homestead extensively. The red brick exterior received a coat of paint, a pale-yellow ochre. Like a good Victorian, he also added a small conservatory for the cultivation and display of plants.

As a young man Edward Dickinson had planted trees and was especially interested in the kitchen garden. "The strawberries are abundant here," he wrote to Emily Norcross, his future wife,

Emily Dickinson's father, Edward, painted by Otis T. Bullard in the 1840s.

Emily Norcross Dickinson, the poet's mother and namesake.

"& cherries & currants are nearly ripe. The whole vegetable kingdom now appears in its greatest beauty." Later on, he also did some of the legwork for his daughters' garden. "Tell . . . papa to come with the sweet-williams," Emily ordered in 1859.

Emily Norcross Dickinson was also a gardener. Her eldest daughter described her as busy, "with fruit, and plants, and chickens, and sympathizing friends, she really was so hurried she hardly knew what to do." A fine cook and homemaker, she decorated from her flower garden, cutting stems and arranging them in pitchers around the house. She gave her children a love of horticulture. Emily Dickinson once informed a friend, "I was reared in the garden, you know."

Emily, the middle child, was born in 1830. She followed a year and a half after the firstborn, William Austin. In 1833 Lavinia, the youngest, was born. This trio—Emily, Austin, and Vinnie—shared a passion for plants, a tight-knit relationship, and a lifelong occupancy of the Dickinson property.

Austin, like their father, was a great planter of trees. As a teenager, he planted a grove of white pines near their house. Dickinson reported their progress to her brother, then away at school. "We all went down this morning, and the trees look beautifully," she wrote. "Every one is growing, and when the west wind blows, the pines lift their light leaves and make sweet music." If you stand quietly under

Emily, Austin, and Lavinia Dickinson ages nine, ten, and seven, respectively.

a pine and wait for the wind, the needles—its light leaves—whisper. Susurrate.

Vinnie was her sister's lifelong companion. During Emily Dickinson's reclusive years, Vinnie dealt with the outside world. She was another gardener, described as making borders and training vines. And she wasn't afraid to dig—Emily once referred to her "subsoiling" in the garden. After her sister's death, it was Lavinia Dickinson's discovery of the cache of poems and her persistence in seeing them published that introduced Dickinson to the world.

In an early portrait with her siblings, Emily is nine years old, shown with red hair and a gentle smile. Though the three look stilted in typical period portraiture, the artist painted young Emily Dickinson holding a book and pink rose, the written word and a flower. In the language of flowers, the pink rose symbolized sweetness and innocence, desirable virtues for children of the day. Little did the artist know that Dickinson's voice would endure.

Early Spring in Emily Dickinson's Garden

"There is no more snow!" —From 30, 1858

DAYS ARE LENGTHENING toward the vernal equinox. While an occasional nor'easter still roars up the Atlantic coast, its counter-clockwise arms dumping snow in central New England, it is spring snow and short-lived. Gradually the snows diminish in Emily's garden. She observed one fine March day, "Mother went rambling, and came in with a burdock on her shawl, so we know that the snow has perished from the earth. Noah would have liked mother." (Though the dove from Noah's ark returned with an olive leaf when the floodwaters receded.)

As the ground thaws, the lawn gets greener and bare ground liquifies. Late in the winter of 1857 an editor in the *Amherst Record* described it:

Everything now seems to portent an early spring; not a patch of snow, but everywhere mud, and our friends, the sugar makers in our neighborhood, are improving this season of frosty nights and melting days to gather the luscious maple sap and manufacture the sugar, which needs no puff from our pen to make it go down.

A late winter treat for young Emily was an excursion with friends to a "sugaring off" to see a vat of sap bubbling in a local sugar shack. Fresh maple syrup is a delight of the season.

She called March "that Month of proclamation." In Emily's garden, buds swell on the branches, elbowing into the longer, warmer days. Songbirds charm the trees. Dormant plants, metabolisms slowed during the long Massachusetts winter, wake up. The first flowers to bloom for her each year are the little bulbs.

THE EARLY BULBS, corms, and tubers flower, set seed, and manufacture adequate food stores in late winter and spring, then rest underground, unseen for the remainder of the year.

Glowing is her Bonnet -
Glowing is her Cheek -
Glowing is her Kirtle -
Yet she cannot speak!

Better as the Daisy
From the summer hill
Vanish unrecorded
Save by tearful rill -

Save by loving sunrise
Looking for her face.
Save by feet unnumbered
Pausing at the place.

106B, 1859

A SELECTION OF EMILY DICKINSON'S

Spring Bulbs

Snowdrop (*Galanthus nivalis*). Heralds of spring, the snowdrops lead the way, their nodding, bell-shaped flowers with their own proclamations. Each flower has three inner petals trimmed in green and three outer petals that descend in graceful curves. They are sweet-smelling and long-lived. As a bonus, snowdrops that are happy in their spot increase every year, carpeting an area with white. Sometimes it seems that they are on the move.

Snowdrops multiply and bloom amid "the punctual snow."

> New feet within my garden go -
> New fingers stir the sod -
> A Troubadour opon the Elm
> Betrays the solitude.
>
> New Children play opon the green -
> New Weary sleep below -
> And still the pensive Spring returns -
> And still the punctual snow!
>
> 79, 1859

Crocus. Dickinson termed the crocus a "vassal" of the snow. A member of the iris family, the crocus has a cup-shaped flower. Tradition dedicates it to St. Valentine since it blooms near his holy day. The 'Cloth of Gold' crocus has been cultivated since the sixteenth century. Other early crocus species that Emily might have grown include the "tommies," *Crocus tommasinianus*. Introduced into the nursery trade in the 1840s, tommies bloom pale to deep lilac with white throats.

A "martial" crocus salutes the day.

Crocuses grow from corms, swollen underground stems crowned by a growing bud. Planted in autumn in well-drained soil, they repay the effort in early spring. The flowers stand up from the frozen ground like straight soldiers. Dickinson also dubbed them "martial." After they bloom, they disappear, leaves and all.

Hyacinth (*Hyacinthus orientalis*). Dense, fragrant hyacinths followed the crocuses. Dickinson remembered a glance from a friend "in Hyacinth time." Gardeners often tell time by the bloom season rather than the calendar. In acknowledgment for a gift of bulbs, she wrote, "The Snow will guide the Hyacinths to where their Mates are sleeping, in Vinnie's sainted Garden." One wonders what conferred sainthood on Lavinia or, at minimum, canonized her garden beds. However, botanically speaking, Emily was accurate. Hyacinth bulbs are among the underground

The flower that bloomed "in Hyacinth time."

Some of these tulips wear carmine suits.

plant structures with contractile roots. That is, specialized roots pull the bulbs lower in the ground. Whether with a snowy guide or not, is subject to speculation.

Tulip (*Tulipa*). In another of Dickinson's early poems, a sort of schoolgirl puzzle, she described a bulb as asleep and forgotten, save by the gardener. Since the flower in the poem wakes up dressed in carmine and the number of red-flowering spring bulbs is limited, a tulip is the likely subject:

She slept beneath a tree -
Remembered but by me.
I touched her Cradle mute -
She recognized the foot -
Put on her Carmine suit
And see!

15, 1858

Beyond plants of the bulbous tribe, another flower that carpets Emily's garden is the pansy. One she grew was *Viola tricolor*, sometimes called Johnny-jump-ups as they pop up in unlikely places. They can also spread to the dinner table. As pansies are edible, they are lovely additions to salads and superb decorations for ice molds or cakes. When Emily baked gingerbread, she sometimes used them to decorate its shiny surface. Like many flowers of the season, they are diminutive.

A pansy is particular only about the weather. To one friend, Dickinson wrote, "That a pansy is transitive, is its only pang." It will grow in cold weather, languish in hot. She gathered them into spring bouquets and wrote this accompanying poem.

The pansy, or heart's ease.

I'm the little "Heart's Ease"!
I dont care for pouting skies!
If the Butterfly delay
Can I, therefore, stay away?

If the Coward Bumble Bee
In his chimney corner stay,
I, must resoluter be!
Who'll apologize for me?

Dear - Old fashioned, little flower!
Eden is old fashioned, too!
Birds are antiquated fellows!
Heaven does not change her blue.
Nor will I, the little Heart's Ease -
Ever be induced to do!

167, 1860

The word "pansy" comes from the French word that means "to think." Thus a pansy is pensive, with its flowers that look like faces,

"I'm the little 'Heart's Ease'!"

faces that invite contemplation. Perhaps that is why another nickname for this flower is "heart's ease."

As spring moves forward, the earth warms and more perennials emerge, shouldering buds up through the soil. One of the plants in the garden is the peony, masses of peonies. Austin and Susan's daughter, Martha—called Mattie—later remembered "ribbons of peony hedges." A twelve-year-old Emily once compared them to the young rosy face of the stable hand's son. "Tell Vinnie I counted three peony noses, red as Sammie Matthews's, just out of the ground." (Peonies break the soil's surface with pointed burgundy buds that bear a striking resemblance to noses.) Even in adolescence, Emily Dickinson

Virginia bluebells, captured by Massachusetts botanical artist Helen Sharp.

could manage her metaphors. With the ground warming, the little bulbs spent, and the perennials coming into leaf, the stage is set for the peak spring display.

With friends, Emily shared some of her spring's abundance gathered from her garden or further afield. Once she sent pussy-willow with an enclosure that read, "Nature's buff message – left for you in Amherst. She had not time to call." Native to wet sunny places in New England, the Upper Midwest, and southern Canada, the pussy-willow, *Salix discolor*, is prized for its emerging, fuzzy catkins. It is an energetic small tree or large shrub, depending on one's point of view.

Emily also enclosed pressed flowers in her letters. In a brief note to a fellow poet, she once sent bluebells. "Bluebell" is a common name that graces several plants, including a bulb, English bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*), and a spring ephemeral, Virginia bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*). Because the letter is dated early April, it is likely the latter, since English bluebells bloom in Amherst later in spring. Virginia bluebells would have appealed to Dickinson, unfurling fluorescent blue-green leaves in March, nodding with blue clusters of blooms in April, sowing their seed and then disappearing by June. Like her poems, bluebells are startling and succinct.

One of Dickinson's friends opened a letter to find this arrangement of pressed pansies. She called them "Satin Cash" in an enclosed poem, a horde of petals paid, as if on account, for many paragraphs.

As the days lengthened, Emily Dickinson took up her trowel, rising earlier, staying out later. She also took up her pen to celebrate the changing cadence.

A Light exists in Spring
Not present on the Year
At any other period -
When March is scarcely here
A Color stands abroad
On Solitary Fields
That Science cannot overtake
But Human Nature feels.

It waits opon the Lawn,
It shows the furthest Tree
Opon the furthest Slope you know
It almost speaks to you.

Then as Horizons step
Or Noons report away
Without the Formula of sound
It passes and we stay -

A quality of loss
Affecting our Content
As Trade had suddenly encroached
Opon a Sacrament -

962, 1865

Early spring is a season of watching.

Late Spring

THE EDUCATION OF A GARDENER

ONE MORNING, Emily's mother received a note from Deborah Fiske, a neighbor across town. Mrs. Fiske wrote, "Professor Fiske will lead Helen over to play with Emily beneath the syringas, this afternoon. In case it prove not convenient to send her home, he will call for her in the chaise before nightfall, before the dew falls." The two girls played under the mock orange, called syringa at the time. There is more significance to this connection between two small girls—both five years old at the time—than a childhood playdate. Helen Fiske would grow up to become Helen Hunt Jackson, an author of note and one of the few people to recognize the genius of the adult Dickinson's poetry. But that would come later.

Did Helen and Emily play in the mud that day in 1836? Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was not a perfect child, receiving the occasional parental scolding. Deportment aside, she had a child's reaction to the natural world—awe and joy—a quality that many lose but she retained. As a little girl, she wandered and came home happy, but bedraggled. Well into adulthood, Dickinson wrote, "I was always attached to Mud."

Young Emily Dickinson in profile, 1845.

She remembered, "two things I have lost with Childhood, the rapture of losing my shoe in the mud and going Home barefoot, wading for Cardinal flowers and the mother's reproof which was more for my sake than her weary own for she frowned with a smile." There was a stream that ran through the Dickinson meadow and others nearby, ready for wading. Deep red cardinal flowers bloomed in moist soils.

After an afternoon of muddy wandering, young Emily might have settled in with the latest issue of *Parley's*, a children's quarterly. Her father bought them for his three offspring. *Parley's* often featured gardening poems, stories, and embellishments—what we call illustrations. "My Dear little Children," Edward wrote, "I send you some of Parley's Magazine—They have some interesting stories for you to read. I want to have you remember some of them to tell me when I get home." An 1839 issue includes a poem called "The Harebell, or Campanula Rotundifolia," by Miss Mary Howitt. Harebells are blue flowers common to Amherst and would be the subject of future Dickinson poems.

For her first nine years, Emily and her family lived in half of the Homestead, sharing the house first with her grandparents, then—after her grandfather's bankruptcy—as tenants with new owners, the Macks. By 1840 with an established law practice, Edward Dickinson could finally afford a home of his own. They moved to a house on North Pleasant Street, a few blocks from where Emily was born. They lived there until 1855.

Everything on the property was demolished decades ago. It was next to the West Cemetery, which is still there. The only surviving photograph shows a comfortable house with a large porch and fruit trees in the front. In May 1842, Emily wrote to Austin, reporting that although the garden hadn't gone in yet—that is, the annual flowers and vegetables hadn't been planted—both grape arbor and lattice work had been painted, and "our trees are all very full of blossoms now and – they look Very handsome."

Their fruit trees were evidently good performers, and there must have been a grape trellis as well. One September, the local paper reported, "Edward Dickinson Esq. of Amherst, sent over a basket

ABOVE The North Pleasant Street house where the Dickinson family lived and gardened for fourteen years.

LEFT Amherst Academy, where Emily first studied botany.

containing a rich variety of fine pears and other fruit . . . Two varieties [of grapes] came in the basket of Edward Dickinson Esq."

Growing up, Emily was a natural storyteller, clever and arch. In a letter to her cousins she described her Aunt Libbie, using the garden as a springboard for family comedy. "The trees stand right up straight when they hear her boots, and will bear crockery wares instead of fruit, I fear." Elizabeth Dickinson Currier must have been a stickler, because her niece concluded, "She hasn't starched the geraniums yet, but will have ample time."

Austin took after his father in his interest in improving the new property. One spring he planted a new sapling near the house. He was concerned with its well-being. "I take good care of the tree," his sister reported in his absence, "give it a pail of water every day, and certainly it looks stouter, and we all think it will live."

While they lived on North Pleasant Street, Emily learned her letters and numbers in the local schoolhouse. She walked there with other children from her neighborhood, kicking through autumn leaves, chasing petals in the spring. On cold winter mornings, a hot potato in her pocket kept her fingers warm. Her parents and grandparents believed in advanced education for all children, boys and girls. Austin went away to boarding school at Williston Seminary in Northampton. When she finished primary school, Emily lived at home and attended Amherst Academy on Amity Street.

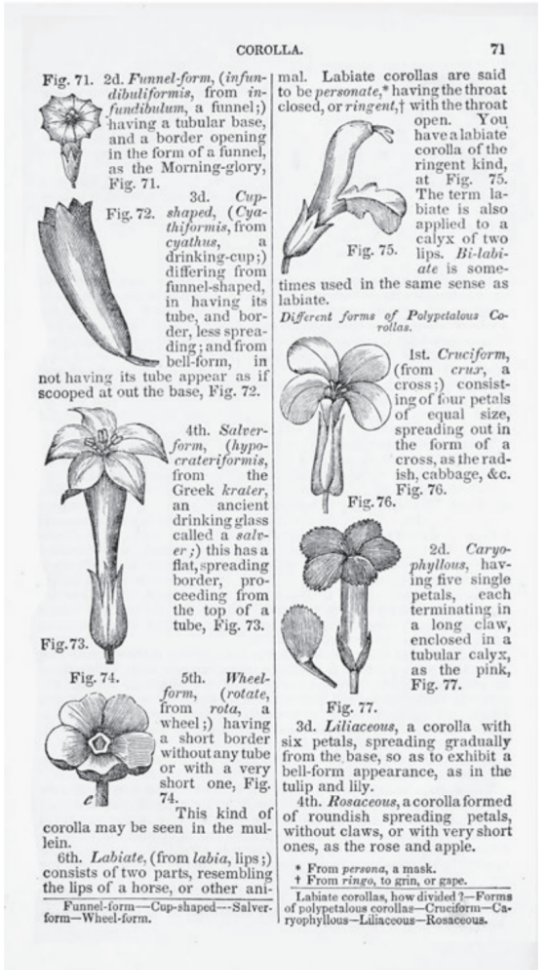
Amherst Academy gave Emily Dickinson her first formal lessons about plants. She described her studies enthusiastically to her friend Jane Humphrey. "Besides Latin I study History and Botany I like the school very much indeed." She added, "My Plants grow beautifully."

The school also helped its students to grow with diverse educational opportunities. They attended lectures at Amherst College. Edward Hitchcock, the president of the college, and his colleagues lectured on natural history topics including botany and geology. "We found that the admission of girls to such lectures as they could understand," one writer had documented in 1835, "was a practice of some year's standing, and . . . no evil had been found to result from it."

The Dickinsons and Hitchcocks were in the same social set. Vinnie's best friend was their youngest daughter, Jane. They were companions for walking and shopping, for the reading circle and for parties. Edward Jr. was a lifelong friend of Austin's. In addition to lectures, teaching, and college administration, Doctor Hitchcock preached at Sunday services and wrote books.

"When Flowers annually died, and I was a child," Dickinson recalled, "I used to read Dr Hitchcock's Book on the Flowers of North America. This comforted their Absence – assuring me they lived." An article she had read in the September 1861 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* entitled "My Out-Door Study" had triggered this childhood memory.

In the essay, the author, Thomas Wentworth Higginson (more about him later) contended that "even the driest and barest book of Natural History is good and nutritious, so far as it goes, if it represents genuine acquaintance; one can find summer in January by poring over the Latin catalogues of Massachusetts plants and animals in Hitchcock's Report." Dickinson reacted to this "summer in January" with her memory of Edward Hitchcock's book. The seasonal cycles of plants—their growth, death, and resurrection—became a frequent trope for Dickinson in her poetry.



COROLLA. 71

Fig. 71. 2d. *Funnel-form*, (*infundibuliformis*, from *infundibulum*, a funnel;) having a tubular base, and a border opening in the form of a funnel, as the Morning-glory, Fig. 71.

Fig. 72. 3d. *Cup-shaped*, (*Cyathiformis*, from *cyathus*, a drinking-cup;) differing from funnel-shaped, in having its tube, and border, less spreading; and from bell-form, in not having its tube appear as if scooped at out the base, Fig. 72.

Fig. 73. 4th. *Salver-form*, (*hypocrateriformis*, from the Greek *krater*, an ancient drinking glass called a *salver*;) this has a flat, spreading border, proceeding from the top of a tube, Fig. 73.

Fig. 74. 5th. *Wheel-form*, (*rotate*, from *rota*, a wheel;) having a short border without any tube or with a very short one, Fig. 74.

This kind of corolla may be seen in the mullein.

6th. *Labiate*, (from *labia*, lips;) consists of two parts, resembling the lips of a horse, or other animal. Labiate corollas are said to be *personate*,* having the throat closed, or *ringent*,† with the throat open. You have a labiate corolla of the ringent kind, at Fig. 75. The term labiate is also applied to a calyx of two lips. *Bi-labiate* is sometimes used in the same sense as labiate.

Fig. 75.

Different forms of Polypetalous Corollas.

Fig. 76. 1st. *Cruciform*, (from *crux*, a cross;) consisting of four petals of equal size, spreading out in the form of a cross, as the radish, cabbage, &c. Fig. 76.

Fig. 77. 2d. *Caryophyllous*, having five single petals, each terminating in a long claw, enclosed in a tubular calyx, as the pink, Fig. 77.

3d. *Liliaceous*, a corolla with six petals, spreading gradually from the base, so as to exhibit a bell-form appearance, as in the tulip and lily.

4th. *Rosaceous*, a corolla formed of roundish spreading petals, without claws, or with very short ones, as the rose and apple.

* From *persona*, a mask.
† From *ringo*, to grin, or gape.

Funnel-form—Cup-shaped—Salver-form—Wheel-form.

Labiate corollas, how divided?—Forms of polypetalous corollas—Cruciform—Caryophyllous—Liliaceous—Rosaceous.

In the edition of *Familiar Lectures on Botany* that Emily used, "corolla" is defined as "that part of the flower which is most remarkable for the liveliness of its colours, the delicacy of its substance, and the sweetness of its perfume."

Amherst Academy introduced Emily to another botanical book. Her science class used Almira Lincoln's textbook *Familiar Lectures on Botany*, a popular book that went through nine editions in ten years. The analysis of plants was considered a genteel occupation for women. If you open the little brown book that Emily opened, the introduction from Mrs. Lincoln reads, "The study of Botany seems peculiarly adapted to females; the objects of its investigation are beautiful and delicate; its pursuit leading to exercise in the open air is conducive to health and cheerfulness."

Emily Dickinson studied many beautiful and delicate flowers in the open air. She practiced her botany in person and in poetry. She described the scientific process:

I pull a flower from the woods -
A monster with a glass
Computes the stamens in a breath -
And has her in a "Class"!

From 117, 1859

Using a magnifying glass she counted the stamens, the pollen-bearing male parts of the flower that entice bird, bee, and botanist. Once counted, the flower could be brought to class, as in classroom, and placed in a class, as in the Linnaean classification system used at the time.

Beyond the taxonomy of plants, Dickinson mined botanical vocabulary. One of Mrs. Lincoln's lectures is entitled "Of the Calyx and Corolla." In Dickinson's poems, both words appear. Blooms open, releasing their scent.

Bright Flowers slit a Calyx
And soared opon a stem
Like Hindered Flags - Sweet hoisted -
With Spices - in the Hem -

From 523, 1863

"Calyx" is the outer covering of the flower. It is made up of scales that protect a flower bud. Thus the calyx is slit when the bud unfurls and the flower is exposed. Of the petals or "corolla" of the fall-blooming fringed blue gentian, she later wrote:

The Gentian has a parched Corolla -
Like Azure dried
'Tis Nature's buoyant juices
Beatified -
Without a vaunt or sheen
As casual as Rain
And as benign -

When most is past - it comes -
Nor isolate it seems -
It's Bond it's Friend -
To fill it's Fringed career
And aid an aged Year
Abundant end -

1458, 1877

In addition to studying botany, Emily began collecting flowers and creating a herbarium, a collection of pressed, dried plants. It was a popular hobby, part of nineteenth-century eclecticism and a continuation of the appetite for science stimulated by the Enlightenment. A fourteen-year-old Emily wrote to her friend Abiah Root:

> *I have been to walk to-night and got some very choice wild flowers. I wish you had some of them. . . . I am going to send you a little geranium leaf in this letter, which you must press for me. Have you made an herbarium yet? I hope you will if you have not, it would be such a treasure to you; most all the girls are making one.*

OPPOSITE The "parched Corolla" of the fringed gentian, from Mrs. Badger's *Wildflowers Drawn and Colored from Nature*.

BELOW A geranium leaf and small cluster of flowers, painted by Orra White Hitchcock, Edward Hitchcock's spouse.

If you do, perhaps I can make some additions to it from flowers growing around here.

She learned about this method of preserving plants in her botany class. "An herbarium neatly arranged is beautiful," wrote Mrs. Lincoln in *Familiar Lectures*, "and may be rendered highly useful, by affording an opportunity to compare many species together, and it likewise serves to fix in the mind the characters of plants." The herbarium was both feminine art and scientific endeavor according to Mrs. Lincoln.

Dickinson's sixty-six-page herbarium is bound in leather with a green fabric cover embossed in a floral pattern. For it, she gathered a flower of more than four hundred plants, often with accompanying stem and leaf. Then she pressed and dried them between sheets of paper or in the pages of large books.

Drying flowers and capturing poems are things that must be done without delay, as Dickinson documented.

I held a Jewel in my fingers -
And went to sleep -
The day was warm, and winds were prosy -
I said "Twill keep" -

I woke - and chid my honest fingers,
The Gem was gone -
And now, an Amethyst remembrance
Is all I own -

261, 1861

Once her specimens were dried, she laid them out on the album's pages. Each specimen was carefully mounted with strips of gummed paper and neatly labeled in her best penmanship.

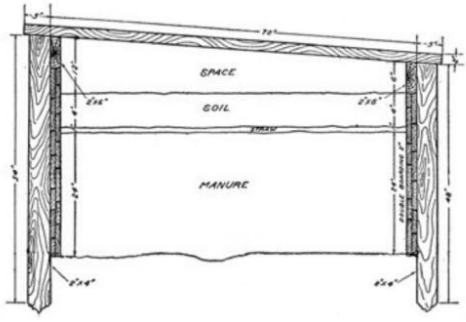
The layouts are lovely. On many pages Emily offset a single large specimen with several smaller ones. Sometimes the arrangements are whimsical, two daisies crisscrossed at the bottom of a page as if they support a coat of arms. Others are vigorous, three stems of aralia fanned out over a tripartite leaf of hepatica. Later in the album, she inserted more specimens per page, as if she worried about running

Late spring is a time to plant the more delicate summer-blooming bulbs like lilies. Dickinson once asked, "Is not an absent friend as mysterious as a bulb in the ground, and is not a bulb the most captivating floral form?" Bulbs and their tuberous kin are a fantastic menagerie. Lily bulbs look like artichokes, dahlias tubers look more like potatoes.

One May, when her friend Cornelia Sweetser sent some bulbs, she responded, "I have long been a Lunatic on Bulbs, though screened by my friends, as Lunacy on any theme is better undivulged." She reported that the bulbs arrived safely and, since planted, "rest in their subterranean Home."

While Dickinson the gardener sowed seeds and planted bulbs for summer flowers, the weeds sowed themselves. Who isn't beset by weeds? Then, as now, dandelions pop up all over lawn and garden. Their serrated leaves conferred the name "dandelion," reminding someone French of lion's teeth or *dent de lion*. The young leaves make a spicy salad or pot green—eating them seems a fitting punishment for the crime of deep taproots that they send into the garden.

Dickinson the writer took a different tack, capturing the dandelion for its images. In various poems, she called the seed heads "shields" and "millinery." In one letter, she pressed a dandelion and tied a



Hotbeds gave the Dickinson sisters a head start on summer.

A red blanket and antique wheelbarrow at the Emily Dickinson Museum along with an original terracotta pot recently discovered at The Evergreens.

Who wouldn't be a lunatic about a bulb like this lily?

ribbon around it, enclosing it with a poem. It is a poetic celebration, an ecstatic paean to spring.

The Dandelion's pallid Tube
Astonishes the Grass -
And Winter instantly becomes
An infinite Alas -
The Tube uplifts a signal Bud
And then a shouting Flower -
The proclamation of the Suns
That sepulture is o'er -

1565, 1882

The "pallid Tube" of the dandelion.

OPPOSITE One of the "'shares' in Primrose 'Banks," as painted by Orra White Hitchcock.

May Day is the first of May, a day when the Dickinson siblings gathered flowers from the garden to put in May baskets, small containers hung on doors from ribbon handles. Austin, while courting, was known to leave one for a sweetheart on occasion. Bleeding heart grows in their spring garden. Forget-me-nots also flower there. Dickinson once enclosed some of their petite blue and yellow blooms with this advice, "I send you a little Antidote to the love of others – Whenever you feel yourselves enticed, cling to it's Admonition."

At times Dickinson tallied her spring garden like some Dickensian miser, though as we have seen, she was generous in sharing its dividends.

Then I have "shares" in Primrose "Banks" -
Daffodil Dowries - spicy "stocks" -
Dominions - broad as Dew -
Bags of Doubloons - adventurous Bees
Brought me - from firmamental seas -
And Purple - from Peru -

From 266, 1861

With banks that multiplied each year, the garden's poetic sum was rich in floral prosperity.

The garden is lush with scent. Carpets of lily-of-the-valley, or "vale lily" as she called it, are redolent. The women of the family gathered it for the house and to adorn family graves. The lilacs in the garden are laden with panicles, heavy with perfume. Dickinson described them as delusive, reminding her "Of idleness and Spring." They are long-lived.

The Lilac is an ancient Shrub
But ancienter than that
The Firmamental Lilac
Opon the Hill tonight -
The Sun subsiding on his Course
Bequeaths this final plant
To Contemplation - not to Touch -
The Flower of Occident.

Of one Corolla is the West -
The Calyx is the Earth -
The Capsules burnished Seeds the Stars -
The Scientist of Faith
His research has but just begun -
Above his Synthesis
The Flora unimpeachable
To Time's Analysis -
"Eye hath not seen" may possibly
Be current with the Blind
But let not Revelation
By Theses be detained -

1261, 1872

Lilacs attract never-idle bees. In one letter, Dickinson wrote, "I must just show you a Bee, that is eating a Lilac at the Window. There – there – he is gone! How glad his family will be to see him!" The worker bee (a "she" rather than "he," as all worker bees are female) is

Lilacs ready to bloom on ancient shrubs behind the Homestead.

gathering nectar and pollen for the hive—nectar for honey, pollen for the apian equivalent of bread, stored to feed bee brood.

I wonder if Emily Dickinson knew that bees make bread, as she was the family's baker. She was fond of bees as an ever-ready source of inspiration and onomatopoeia, her "Buccaneers of Buzz." They pirate from her spring garden, building their stores for summer. And while they travel, they never forget home.

Early Summer

A GARDENER'S TRAVELS

AS MUCH AS A GARDENER LOVES A PATCH OF GROUND—her own circumference—travel is tempting. Other landscapes, other gardens, offer comparison and stimulation. Travel can be a gardener's muse, as well as a poet's.

In her teens and early twenties, Emily Dickinson traveled often. She visited relatives around Massachusetts, and Boston was a special draw. In 1846, she spent a month there, staying with her Aunt Lavinia and Uncle Loring Norcross. She played the tourist. "I have been to Mount Auburn, to the Chinese Museum, to Bunker Hill," she recounted to Abiah Root. "I have attended 2 concerts & 1 Horticultural exhibition. I have been upon the top of the State house & almost everywhere that you can imagine."

The horticultural exhibition! Aunt Lavinia took Emily to the Saturday display of fruits, flowers, and vegetables at the rooms of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society. The society, that venerable institution, was relatively new at the time, founded in 1829. It ran one of the first flower shows in America, and it continues to run competitions, public programs, and a research and lending library dedicated to the plant world. On September 16, 1846, the society commenced its "Eighteenth Annual Exhibition of Fruits, Flowers, Floral Decorations and Vegetables," with opening hours on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. It was this event that Emily Dickinson attended.

The cut-flower entries Dickinson saw at the September show featured late-season blooms: asters and fall-blooming roses, annuals

Horticultural Hall at 40 School Street in Boston where Emily Dickinson attended the 1846 exhibition.

like amaranth, cockscomb, abutilon, and dahlias. Over the years, Dickinson added some of these plants to her own garden—she mentioned asters and amaranth in later letters.

The spectacular show gardens at the exhibition displayed Victorian eclecticism at its best. Dickinson and her relations were treated to full-scale versions of a Grecian floral temple, a Swiss cottage decorated with moss and flowers, and a pagoda complete with a Chinese tea merchant and finished with fuchsias. There was a salute to the English picturesque in the form of a fourteen-foot Gothic-revival folly framed with evergreens. This round-the-world promenade demonstrated the skill of the designers as well as their wide-ranging taste. It gives a glimpse of what the American garden cognoscenti were up to at the time.

There were huge arrangements in vases and urns, wreaths and garlands hung from walls and ceilings, and flat designs. One that Dickinson would have seen was "a beautiful flat fancy design of large dimensions, presenting a surface wrought with asters, amaranths, and other flowers, with the words 'Horticultural Exhibition, 1846,' inscribed in a border around it, wrought with immortal flowers: on the top of the design was an eagle composed of flowers." Flat designs were the cut-floral equivalent of pattern bedding, that nineteenth-century propensity to make designs in flowers beds. They sound like the floats in a twenty-first-century Tournament of Roses Parade.

There was healthy rivalry in the Exhibition's fruit classes. Growers entered their apples, peaches, plums, figs, and grapes, but most of all they brought their pears. One horticulturist displayed 176 varieties. Their descriptive names—Belle et Bonne, Green Sugar,

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INDEX

A

Acer, 211
Acer spicatum, 211
Achillea millefolium, 228
acorns, 141, 211
Actaea rubra, 220
adder's tongue, 40, 41, 216
Adlumia fungosa, 216
Aesculus, 210
African lily, 216
Agapanthus africanus, 216
Agrimonia gryposepala, 216
agrimony, 216
Albizia julibrissin, 223
Alcea rosea, 205
Aletris farinosa, 218
Alisma subcordatum, 228
Allegheny hawkweed, 216
Allegheny vine, 216
Allium, 221
Aloysia triphylla, 210
alternate leaf dogwood, 208
amaranth, 59
Amazon waterlily, 132
Amberboa moschata, 90, 207
Amelanchier arborea, 226
American elm, 167, 194–195
American liverleaf, 42
American mountain ash, 216
Amherst, MA
  beautification efforts, 128–129
  as a farming town, 19
  growth, 127
  libraries, 196, 197
  Main Street, 15, 166
  maps, 76
  as in mid-1800s, 17–18
  photographs, 17, 127
  surrounding communities, 197
  trains, 127
  Urban Forest Restoration project, 195
Amherst Academy, 32, 33, 196
Amherst area plants, 148–149
Amherst College, 19, 33, 127–128, 191, 196–197
Amherst Historical Society Museum, 197
Amherst Ornamental Tree Association, 128, 194
Ammobium alatum, 228
Anemone americana, 42, 222
Anemone cylindrica, 218
Anemone quinquefolia, 228
Anemone virginiana, 227
annuals, 88–90. *See also* plant list, 203-208
Anredera cordifolia, 223
Antennaria plantaginifolia, 224
Anthemis cotula, 223
Antirrhinum majus, 89, 207
Apium graveolens, 214
Apocynum androsaemifolium, 220
apple
  Baldwin, 145, 213
  Bell Flower, 213
  Dickinson Sweeting, 194
  Early Harvest, 213
  in ED's writings, 19, 44, 126, 170, 174, 213
  Golden Sweet, 145, 213
  as herbarium specimen, 39, 213
  in landscapes, 109, 111, 187, 193–194
  orchard, 16, 49, 146
  Russet, 145, 213
  Seek-No-Further, 213
  Tolman Sweet, 194
apple cider, 146
Aquilegia canadensis, 203

Aralia nudicaulis, 42
Aralia racemosa, 226
arbutus, 41, 44
arrowhead, 43, 216
Artemisia, 203
Asarum canadense, 228
Asclepias tuberosa, 217
Asclepias verticillata, 228
asparagus, 112, 139, 213
Asparagus officinalis, 213
aster, 58, 59, 79, 117, 137, 148, 185, 216
The Atlantic Monthly, 34, 77
Aureolaria virginica, 220
autumn leaves, 134–136, 151
azalea, 129
azalea rhodora, 43

B

baby's breath, 122, 203
Badger, Clarissa Munger, 15, 37, 41, 45, 48, 70, 77, 78, 93, 119
balsam apple, 216
Baptisia tinctoria, 228
barberry, 216
Barry, Patrick, 146
basil, 216
basswood, 216
bean, 123, 138, 139, 213
bean family, 91
bedstraw, 216
bees, 56–57
beets, 138, 141, 214
begonia / *Begonia*, 216
bellwort, 216
Bengal trumpet, 216
Berberis vulgaris, 216
berries, 82, 123–124
"Beryl Egg", 169
Beta vulgaris, 214
Betula papyrifera, 213
Bianchi, Martha Dickinson. *See* Dickinson, Martha
big-leaf hydrangea, 216
birds, 50, 159
blackberry, 124, 217
black walnut, 142
bladderwort, 217
bleeding heart, 54, 203
Bliss catalog, 170, 171, 181
bloodroot, 42, 217
bluebell, 27, 28
blue-eyed grass, 217
blue flag iris, 217
blue gilia, 217
blue spruce, 111, 162, 208
bluet, 217
borage, 217
Borago officinalis, 217
Boston, MA, 58
botanical names, 64
bottle gentian, 217
bouquets / nosegays, 75
boutonnieres, 112
Bowles, Mary, 122, 142
Bowles, Samuel, 142, 169
boy's love, 203
bracken fern, 112
Brassica, 214
Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, portrait of, 232
bulbs, 23–24, 53, 172–173
Bullard, Otis T., 20
bunchberry, 217
bur cucumber, 217
Burnett, Frances Hodgson, 111
bush honeysuckle, 217
buttercup
  in ED's writings, 103, 109, 114, 157, 184
  as herbarium specimen, 217
  illustrations, 93, 176
  as a wildflower, 49, 118, 157, 175
butterflies, 184–185
butterfly weed, 43, 185, 217

C

cabbage, 140, 214
Cactaceae, 203
cactus, 103, 203
calendula, 217
Calendula officinalis, 217
California poppy, 39, 203
calla lily, 101, 203
Calla palustris, 228
Calopogon tuberosus, 221
Caltha palustris, 223
Calycanthus floridus, 218
calyx, 35, 37
camas, 217
Camassia scilloides, 217
campanula, 181
Campanula aparinoides, 39, 223
Campanula medium, 218
Campanula rotundifolia, 221
Campanula trachelium, 227
Campsis radicans, 227
Canada mayflower, 217
cancer root, 217
candle anemone, 218
candytuft, 218
Cannabis sativa, 223
canterbury bells, 218
cape jasmine, 103, 105, 113, 208
caraway, 218
Cardamine diphylla, 227
cardinal flower, 31, 117, 119, 218
Carlo (dog), 45–47, 100
carnation, 83, 102, 103, 104, 152, 173, 203
Carolina allspice, 218
Carum carvi, 218

Carya, 209
Castanea dentata, 208
Castilleja coccinea, 223
catalpa, 218
Catalpa bignonioides, 218
Cattle Show, 130–131
celandine, 218
celery, 140–141, 214
cemetery landscapes, 60–62
Centaurea cyanus, 219
Ceratocystis fungus, 195
Chaenomeles japonica, 210
Chamaedaphne calyculata, 222
checkerberry, 218
Chelidonium majus, 218
Chelone glabra, 228
Chenopodium botrys, 222
cherry, 16, 47, 49, 82, 122, 214
chestnut, 100, 142, 162, 208
chestnut blight, 195
children at play, 112–114, 121
Chimaphila maculata, 226
Chimaphila umbellata, 224
China tree, 218
Chondrus crispus, 222
chrysanthemum, 137, 188, 203
Chrysanthemum leucanthemum, 39, 40
Chrysosplenium americanum, 221
Church, Horace, 139, 141
cinnamon fern, 203
Circaea lutetiana var. *canadensis*, 220
Cistus canadensis, 39
Cladophora, 221
clammy locust, 218
Clark, William S., 131
clarkia, 218
Clarkia unguiculata, 218
Claytonia caroliniana, 226
clematis / *Clematis*, 137–138
Clematis occidentalis, 209
climate change and diversity, 186
climbing bittersweet, 224
clintonia, 218
Clintonia borealis, 218
clover, 91, 93, 118, 154, 185, 186, 218
Coeloglossum viride, 221
colic root, 218
Collinsonia canadensis, 222
coltsfoot, 218
columbine, 51, 52, 203
comfrey, 218
common lilac, 39, 209
Congregational church, 50, 75, 129, 166, 196, 232
Convallaria majalis, 206
Convolvulus sepium, 217
Coptis trifolia, 221
Corallorhiza maculata, 218
coralroot, 218
coreopsis, 219
Coreopsis tinctoria, 219
corn, 81, 115, 139, 214
cornflower, 219
corn poppy, 39, 203
corn spurry, 219
Cornus alternifolia, 208
Cornus canadensis, 217
Cornus florida, 209
corolla, 34, 35, 37
Coronilla varia, 219
corydalis, 219
Corydalis sempervirens, 219
cottongrass, 219
cow lily, 96, 126, 219
cow parsnip, 219
cowslip, 67, 207
cowwheat, 219
cranberry, 219
Crassula coccinea, 225
Crataegus dodgei, 209
creeping saxifrage, 219
crocus / *Crocus*, 23, 43, 102, 157, 187, 204
'Cloth of Gold', 23
Crocus tommasinianus, 23
crown imperial, 106, 204
crown vetch, 219
cucumber, 39, 219
cucumber root, 219
Cucumis sativus, 219
Cucurbita maxima, 215
Culver's root, 219
currant, 124, 214, 215, 228
Currier, Elizabeth Dickinson (aunt), 33
Currier and Ives print, 233
Cuscuta gronovii, 220
cypress spurge, 219
cypress vine, 219
Cypripedium acaule, 222
Cypripedium parviflorum var. *makasin*, 222

D

daffodil, 17, 54, 90, 187, 204
dahlia, 53, 131
daisy, 13, 22, 51, 85, 114, 164, 204
"Daisy" as nom de plume, 84, 204
dandelion, 53–54, 100, 149, 152, 219
daphne, 80, 105, 172, 209
Daphne odora, 209
Daucus carota, 225
daylily, 99–100, 204
deerberry, 219
The Dell, 162–163, 195–196
Delphinium elatum, 222
Dendranthema, 203
Desmodium canadense, 227
Dianthus, 203

Dianthus barbatus, 83, 208
Dianthus caryophyllus, 83, 205, 207
Dicentra cucullaria, 220
Dickinson, Edward (father), 19–20, 47, 65–67, 73, 127, 153–154
Dickinson, Edward "Ned" (nephew), 113, 160
Dickinson, Emily Elizabeth
  books and reading, 15, 34–35, 76–77
  botanical study, 33–35, 37–40
  characteristics, 12, 33, 75, 80, 109, 114
  childhood, 30–31
  death and burial, 174–175, 177, 198
  deaths of family members, 153–157
  education, 33, 35, 62–65
  eyesight, 126
  myths concerning, 12
  physical description, 99
  portraits, 21, 30, 175
  relationship with Otis Lord, 164
  religious practice, 50
  social interraction, 75, 98–99, 160
  travel, 58, 65–67, 71–72
  withdrawal, 97–100, 154
Dickinson, Emily Norcross (mother), 16, 19–20, 142–143, 154–155, 214
Dickinson, Gilbert "Gib" (nephew), 113, 156–157, 160
Dickinson, Lavinia "Vinnie" (sister)
  cats of, 81–82
  disposition of ED's papers and poems, 21, 175, 177
  as ED's public face, 21, 104, 161
  as a gardener, 21, 104, 171, 187
  portrait, 21, 62
Dickinson, Martha "Mattie" (niece)
  childhood, 113–114
  heirs, 196
  marriage to Alexander Bianchi, 188
  Martha Dickinson Bianchi Trust, 191
  portrait, 160
Dickinson, Samuel Fowler (grandfather), 19
Dickinson, Susan (sister-in-law), 16, 106, 112, 131, 160, 177, 198
Dickinson, William Austin (brother)
  affair with Mabel Todd, 162, 164
  burial place, 198
  domestic life and entertaining, 106–107, 113, 160, 232
  ED's letters to, 20–21, 31, 47, 63, 138–139, 142
  "go west" fever, 106–107
  landscaping, 111, 162–163, 196, 198
  portrait, 21, 106
  tree planting, 20, 33, 112, 128–129, 163, 166, 171–172, 189–190, 209, 210, 211
  See also The Evergreens
Dickinson family plot, 198
Dickinson family silhouette, 67
Dickinson home (North Pleasant Street), 31–32, 33
Dickinson Homestead
  barn, 16, 122
  cellar, 170
  changes after 1916, 188
  conceptual map, 18
  conservatory, 100–105, 148, 172, 188, 192
  description by Higginson, 99
  ED's bedroom, 231–233
  ED's preferred nook, 74–75
  family's renovation and relocation, 73–74
  library, 77, 146
  as in mid-1800s, 15–16, 18
  ownership, 19, 31, 73, 188, 191
  piazza, 17, 18, 80
  pictured, 16, 155, 165
  restoration for museum, 191–192
  study, 78
  See also Emily Dickinson Museum
Diervilla lonicera, 217
Digitalis, 87
Digitalis purpurea, 204
Dirca palustris, 39, 222
ditch stonecrop, 219
dodder, 220
dogbane, 220
dogwood, 39, 129, 151, 208, 209
doll's eyes, 220
Downing, Andrew Jackson, 111
downy rattlesnake plantain, 220
Durfee Plant House, 132–133, 197
Dutch elm disease, 195
Dutchman's breeches, 220
dwarf dandelion, 220
dwarf raspberry, 220

E

early saxifrage, 220
eastern wahoo, 220
East Hampshire Agricultural Society, 130
elderberry, 43, 220
Eliot, George, portrait of, 232
elm, 134, 167, 189, 194–195, 209
emerald ash borer, 195
Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 43, 232
Emilia fosbergii, 227
Emily Dickinson Museum
  archaeology projects, 191–192
  ED's bedroom, 231–233
  restoration of Homestead, 53, 191–193, 231–233
  restoration of landscape, 193–194, 199
  volunteer gardeners, 194
enchanter's nightshade, 220
English bluebells, 28
English hawthorn, 109
Epigaea, 43
Epigaea repens, 41, 227
Equisetum arvense, 222
Eriophorum angustifolium, 219
Erythranthe moschata, 223
Erythronium americanum, 41, 216
Eschscholzia californica, 39, 203
Euonymus atropurpureus, 220
Euphorbia cyparissias, 219
European brooklime, 220
evening primrose, 220
The Evergreens
  design and landscaping, 107, 109–111, 112, 162, 191, 233
  entertaining and visitors, 111–112, 232
  pictured, 17, 108, 166
exhibitions, 59–60, 130–131

F

fairs and exhibitions, 59–60, 131
false beechdrops, 220
false foxglove, 220
false Solomon's seal, 220
Familiar Lectures on Botany (Lincoln), 34–35, 38
ferns, 92, 94, 102–103, 111, 112, 203, 222, 225
feverfew, 89, 221
Ficus carica, 214
fig, 16, 59, 131, 143, 214
First Congregational Church, 166, 196, 232. *See also* Congregational church
"Fishing Party" (lithograph), 233
Fiske, Helen, 30. *See also* Jackson, Helen Hunt
flower arranging, 112, 131
flower beds, pattern bedding, 59
flowering dogwood, 209
flowering onion, 221
flower parts, 35, 37
flowers, edible, 25
flowers, enclosing in letters, 28, 37, 53–54, 71, 84, 94, 205, 207, 228
flowers, preserving, 38
flowers, pressed, 28
foamflower, 221
forbidden fruit, 60
forget-me-not, 54, 204
four o'clock, 39, 124, 204
Fowler, Emily, 68
foxglove, 85, 87, 88, 183, 184, 204
Fragaria ×ananassa, 215
Fragaria virginiana, 228
fringed gentian, 37, 221
fringed loosestrife, 221
fringed orchids, 44
Fritillaria imperialis, 204
frog orchid, 221
Frost Library, 196
fruit
  Dickinson family cultivation of, 16, 82, 123–124, 142–144, 146–147, 213–215
  orchards, 16, 49, 144, 146–147, 193–194
The Fruit Garden (Barry), 146
fuchsia, 59, 102, 105, 205
Fuchsia hybrida, 105, 205
Fuchsia magellanica, 205

G

Galanthus nivalis, 23, 207
Galearis spectabilis, 226
Galium tinctorium, 216
garden balsam, 205
garden crocus, 43
gardenia, 105, 208
Gardenia jasminoides 'Veitchii', 208
gardening attire, 117
garden tasks, 50
gates, 107, 192
Gaultheria procumbens, 218
gaywings, 221
Geneva Nurseries, 181
gentian, 148–149
Gentiana clausa, 217
Gentianopsis crinita, 221
geranium, 33, 37, 67, 103, 114, 116, 122, 205
Geranium maculatum, 228
Geranium robertianum, 222
Geum canadense, 228
Geum rivale, 224
Gilia capitata, 217
gilliflower, 83, 102, 205
gill-over-the-ground, 221
ginkgo, 162, 209

Ginkgo biloba, 209
ginseng, 197, 221
gladiolus / *Gladiolus*, 205
glasshouse, 132
Glechoma hederacea, 221
globe amaranth, 89, 221
gold currant, 214
golden ragwort, 221
goldenrod, 43
golden saxifrage, 221
goldthread, 221
Gomphrena globosa, 89, 221
Goodyera pubescens, 220
"go west" fever, 106–107
grape hyacinth, 205
grapes, 31, 33, 50, 59, 139–140, 142–143, 214
grass-of-parnassus, 221
grass pink, 221
green algae, 221
Gypsophila, 203

H

Hamamelis virginiana, 149, 228
The Hampshire Express, 182
harebell, 31
harebells, 31, 221
harvest, 141
hawthorn, 109, 157, 187, 209
heal-all, 221
heart's ease, 25, 26, 205
Helianthemum canadense, 225
heliotrope, 102, 103, 112, 113, 122, 161, 174, 205
Heliotropium arborescens, 205
Hemerocallis lilioasphodelus, 204
hemlock, 15, 162, 168, 191, 193, 209
hemlock hedge, 15, 107–108, 154–155, 188
hemlock wooly adelgid, 195
hepatica, 42, 158, 222
Hepatica triloba, 42
Heracleum maximum, 219
herbarium
  as method of preserving plants, 38–39
  organization and documentation, 39–40, 42
  page layouts, 38–40, 42, 88, 120, 136, 138, 200
  plants included, 39–44, 88, 89, 120, 136, 138, 161, 185, 197
  See also plant list, 203-229
herb robert, 222
hickory, 209
Hieracium paniculatum, 216
Higginson, Thomas Wentworth
  correspondence with ED, 98–99, 184, 185
  "My Out-Door Study" essay, 34
  role in publication of ED's poems, 34, 158, 177
Hippocrepis comosa, 222
Hitchcock, Edward, 33–34
Hitchcock, Orra White, 37, 43, 54, 69, 83, 86, 94, 95, 102, 112, 135, 136
Holland, Elizabeth, 104, 154
hollyhock, 16, 112–113, 188, 205
honeysuckle, 17, 81, 157, 210
horse balm, 222
horsechestnut, 39, 210
horseshoe vetch, 222
horsetail, 43, 222
hosta, 205
Hosta plantaginea, 205
hot beds, 52, 53
Houstonia caerulea, 217
hummingbirds, 45–46, 159
hurricane, 1938, 188
hyacinth, 17, 23, 103, 104, 161, 172–173, 187, 206
hyacinth bulbs, 12, 206
Hyacinthoides non-scripta, 28
Hyacinthus orientalis, 23, 206
Hydrangea macrophylla, 216
Hydrangea quercifolia, 223
Hypoxis hirsuta, 226

I

Iberis amara, 218
Impatiens balsamina, 205
Impatiens capensis, 227
Impatiens walleriana, 130, 207
Indian paintbrush, 223
Indian pipe, 149, 161, 222
Indian pipes (painting by Todd), 160–161, 177–178, 198
insects, 185–186, 195
interrupted fern, 222
Ipomea quamoclit, 219
Ipomoea coccinea, 206
Ipomoea purpurea, 206
iris, 67, 81, 157, 162, 217, 229
Irish moss, 222
Iris pseudacorus, 229
Iris versicolor, 217
Isotria verticillata, 224

J

Jackson, Helen Hunt (née Helen Fiske), 157–159
Japanese lily, 84
japonica, 210
Jasione montana, 226
jasmine, 210
Jasminum humile, 210
Jasminum officinale, 210
Jenkins, MacGregor, 114, 185
Jerusalem oak, 222
jessamine, 102, 210
jewelweed, 227
jockey club, 206

Johnny-jump-ups, 25
Jones Library, 197
Juglans nigra, 213

K

Kalmia angustifolia, 226
Kalmia latifolia, 223
kerria, 222
Kerria japonica var. *pleniflora*, 222
Krigia virginica, 220

L

Lactuca sativa, 215
ladies' delights, 158
ladies' tresses, 222
lady's slipper, 174, 222
Lamprocapnos spectabilis, 203
larkspur, 222
Lathyrus odoratus, 207
leatherleaf, 222
leatherwood, 39, 222
Legousia speculum-veneris, 227
lemon verbena, 188, 210
letters, enclosing flowers in, 28, 37, 53–54, 71, 84, 94, 205, 207, 228
The Letters of Emily Dickinson (Todd), 187
lettuce, 215
Leucanthemum vulgare, 39, 204
Ligustrum vulgare, 224
lilac, 39, 56–57, 79, 198, 209
Lilium, 206
lily
  in biblical allusion, 85
  bulbs, 53
  in ED's writings, 67, 85, 108
  in the garden, 84–86, 206
  scarlet (or red), 101, 113, 184
  yellow, 86, 184
lily-of-the-valley, 17, 56, 206
lima bean, 213
Lincoln, Almira, 35, 40
Lindernia dubia, 220
Linnaea borealis, 227
Linnaean classification system, 35, 40
Liriodendron tulipifera, 212
liverleaf, 40, 42, 222
lobelia, 39, 224
Lobelia cardinalis, 218
Lobelia spicata, 224
Lobularia maritima, 89, 207
locust trees, 167
Lonicera canadensis, 210
Lonicera dioica, 210
Lonicera japonica, 210
Lonicera periclymenum, 210
Lonicera tatarica, 210
Lord, Otis Phillips, 164
lupine, 222
Lupinus perennis, 222
Lupinus perennis forma leucanthus, 222
Lycium barbarum, 223
Lycoperdon perlatum, 224
Lysimachia ciliata, 221
Lysimachia terrestris, 226, 227
Lysimachia vulgaris, 229

M

mad dog skullcap, 222
Madeira vine, 223
Madonna lily, 84
magnolia, 162, 187, 202, 210
Magnolia ×soulangeana, 210
Magnolia tripetala, 213
Maher, Maggie, 138, 232
Maianthemum canadense, 217
Maianthemum racemosum, 220
Maianthemum trifolium, 227
Malva moschata, 223
maple, 39, 65, 134–135, 167, 188, 211
maple syrup, 22
marigold, 17, 43, 122, 188, 206
marijuana, 223
marsh bellflower, 223
marsh marigold, 43, 223
Martha Dickinson Bianchi Trust, 191
Massachusetts Agricultural College, 131–132
Massachusetts Horticultural Society exhibition, 58–60
matrimony vine, 223
Matthiola incana, 90, 207
May Day, 54
mayflower, 41
mayweed, 223
meadow, 15, 31, 91, 117, 118, 148, 163, 196
Medeola virginiana, 219
medicinal plants, 42
Melampyrum lineare var. *americanum*, 219
Melia azedarach, 218
Melilotus alba, 207
Mercy Philbrick's Choice (Jackson), 158
Mertensia virginica, 28
mignonette, 90, 102, 206
milkweed, 185, 198, 228
milkwort, 224, 225
Mimosa pudica, 226
Mimulus ringens, 223
Minuartia groenlandica, 223
Mirabilis jalapa, 204
Mirabilis longiflora, 206
Mitchella repens, 224
Mitella diphylla, 223
miterwort, 223

mock orange. *See* syringa
Momordica balsamina, 216
monkey flower, 223
Monotropa hypopitys, 220
Monotropa uniflora, 161, 222
morning glory, 122, 123, 206
moth mullein, 223
moths, 124, 186
mountain laurel, 43, 129, 223
mountain sandwort, 223
Mount Auburn Cemetery, 60–62, 198
Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, 62–65
Mount Vernon, 65–66
mullein, 42, 223
Muscari botryoides, 205
mushrooms, 95
muskflower, 223
musk mallow, 223
Myosotis laxa, 204
"My Out-Door Study" (Higginson), 34
myrtle, 206

N

Narcissus, 204
nasturtium, 17, 39, 122, 188, 206
nectar, 57, 67, 81, 120, 148, 184, 185, 198
Nerium oleander, 105, 211
Nicotiana tabacum, 227
night pollinators, 124
nocturnal noise, 125
nodding trillium, 223
Norcross, Emily (cousin), 63
Norcross, Lavinia (aunt), 58, 60
Norcross, Loring (uncle), 58
Norway spruce, 171–172, 211
Nuphar advena, 96, 219
nuts, 141–142
Nymphaea odorata, 228

O

oak, 60, 129, 161, 162, 167, 189–191, 198, 211. *See also* white oak
oak flowers, 81
oakleaf hydrangea, 223
Ocimum basilicum, 216
Oenothera laciniata, 220
oleander, 17, 80, 105, 211
Olmsted, Frederick Law, 111, 127–128, 196, 232
onion, 221
orchis, 44, 45, 92, 223
Ornithogalum umbellatum, 207
Orobanche uniflora, 217
Osmunda claytoniana, 222
Osmunda regalis, 111, 225
Osmundastrum cinnamomeum, 203
Oxalis montana, 208
oxalis / *Oxalis*, 101, 102, 208
Oxalis stricta, 208
Oxalis violacea, 208
oxeye daisy, 39, 40
Oxydendrum arboreum, 212

P

Packera aurea, 221
Paeonia lactiflora, 207
painted cup, 223
painted trillium, 224
pale-spike lobelia, 224
Panax trifolius, 221
pansies, 25–26, 28, 171, 207
Papaver rhoeas, 39, 203
Parkes (Homestead owners), 188
Parley's (children's quarterly), 31
Parnassia glauca, 221
partridgeberry, 224
Passiflora caerulea, 224
Passiflora incarnata, 229
passionflower, 224, 229
pasture rose, 224
paths, 162, 167
pea, 215
peach, 47, 59, 123, 146–147, 215
pear, 49, 59, 82, 146–147, 215
  Belle et Bonne, 59
  Green Sugar, 59
  Miel de Waterloo, 60
Pedicularis canadensis, 228
Pelargonium, 205
Pelargonium domesticum, 205
Pelargonium odoratissimum, 205
Pelargonium peltatum, 205
Pelargonium quercifolium, 205
Pelham Hill health resort, 129–130
Penthorum sedoides, 219
peonies, 17, 26, 67, 169, 198, 207
perennials, 17, 26, 84, 88, 177. *See also* plant list, 203-208
Persian lilac, 39, 224
petunia, 224
Petunia violacea, 224
Phaseolus, 213
Phaseolus coccineus, 213
Phaseolus lunatus, 213
Philadelphus coronarius, 212
Picea abies, 172, 211
Picea pungens, 208
Pilat, Ignatz, 111–112
pink, 83, 158, 207
Pinus strobus, 213
pinxterbloom, 224
pipsissewa, 224
Pisum sativum, 215
pitcher plant, 224
Plantago major, 224
plantain, 224

plant collecting, 37, 39, 43–44
planting a poet's garden
choosing plants, 181–182, 186
color palette, 184
propagation methods, 182–183
soil, 180
using pollinator-friendly plants, 184–186
working with self-sowers, 183–184
plant list
about, 200–202
annuals and perennials, 203–208
fruits and vegetables, 213–215
plants mentioned or collected by ED, 216–229
trees, shrubs and woody vines, 208–213
Platanthera grandiflora, 223
Platanthera hookeri, 223
Platanthera lacera, 223
plum, 49, 59, 82, 146–147, 215
poems, publication of
ambivalence of ED, 177–178
first published, 19
newspaper commentary, 50
response to Emerson essay, 87–88
role of Lavinia Dickinson, 21, 175, 177
role of Mabel Todd, 12, 177, 187
role of Thomas Higginson, 34, 158, 177
Poems, Second Series (Dickinson), 187
poems and excerpts by first line
An altered look about the hills -, 94
The Angle of a Landscape -, 174
Answer July, 13
Besides the autumn poets sing, 147
On the Bleakness of my Lot, 140
Bright Flowers slit a Calyx, 35
The Butterfly's Assumption Gown, 184
The Dandelion's pallid Tube, 54
Death is like the insect, 195
A feather from the Whippowil, 169
Further in Summer than the Birds -, 125
The Gentian has a parched Corolla -, 37
Glowing is her Bonnet, 22
The Grass so little has to do -, 121
Hush! Epigea wakens!, 43
As if some little Arctic flower, 172
If the foolish, call them "flowers" -, 63
I hav'nt told my garden yet -, 97
I held a Jewel in my fingers -, 38
I'm the little "Heart's Ease"!, 25
I pull a flower from the woods -, 35
I robbed the Woods -, 189
I taste a liquor never brewed -, 87–88
I tend my flowers for thee -, 103
I think the Hemlock likes to stand, 154
It is an honorable Thought, 145
It was a quiet seeming Day -, 84
It will be Summer - eventually, 79
A Lady red, amid the Hill, 108
The Leaves like Women, interchange, 118
A Light exists in Spring, 29
Like Brooms of Steel, 170
The Lilac is an ancient Shrub, 56
Longing is like the Seed, 182
To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee, 186
Morning - is the place for Dew -, 81
The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants -, 95
Within my Garden, rides a Bird, 46
My Garden - like the Beach -, 80
The name - of it - is "Autumn" -, 134
New feet within my garden go, 23
Over the fence -, 82
Pigmy seraphs - gone astray -, 71
Pink - small - and punctual -, 41
Poor little Heart!, 123
The Products of my Farm are these, 141
Put down the apple Adam, 19
Ribbons of the Year -, 230

poems and excerpts (*cont.*)
The Robin's my Criterion for Tune -, 144
A Route of Evanescence, 159
A Saucer holds a Cup, 140
She slept beneath a tree -, 24
The Show is not the Show, 131
Soil of Flint, if steady tilled, 181
Some Rainbow - coming from the Fair!, 44–45
Summer begins to have the look, 134
Summer has two Beginnings -, 137
Summer laid her simple Hat, 117
Their dappled importunity, 41
Then I have "shares" in Primrose "Banks" -, 54
There is a flower that Bees prefer -, 91
There's a certain Slant of light, 153
These are the days when Birds come back -, 148
They ask but our Delight -, 186
Those who read the "Revelations", 64
Thy flower - be gay -, 164
'Tis Customary as we part, 137
A Visitor in Marl -, 150
We should not mind so small a flower -, 150
What care the Dead, for Chanticleer -, 168
What mystery pervades a well!, 116
When Diamonds are a Legend, 82, 83
Which shall it be, Geraniums or Juleps?, 114
Will there really be a "morning"?, 96
The Wind begun to rock the Grass, 115
The Wind did'nt come from the Orchard - today -, 120
The Wind took up the Northern Things, 189
Winter is good - his Hoar Delights, 173
Would you like Summer? Taste of our's -, 124
You know who "June" is -, 67
poetry writing
biblical allusion, 60, 64, 85, 145
booklets (fascicles), 175, 177
drafts, 118
Eden, use of, 18, 25, 60, 172
financial metaphors, 44, 54–56
fragment poems, 196
productive period, 75
seasonal cycles, metaphorical use, 34
summer and winter references, 80
writing desks, 75
pogonia, 224
Pogonia ophioglossoides, 225
poison ivy, 224
pollinator-attracting plants, 184–186
Polygala paucifolia, 221
Polygala polygama, 225
Polygala sanguinea, 224
Polypodium virginianum, 94, 225
polypody fern, 225
pomegranate, 17, 211
pond lily, 96
poppy, 39, 84
potato, 33, 39, 50, 138, 215
potted plants, 17, 18, 80, 102–103
Prenanthes trifoliolata, 225
pressing plants, 37–38
primrose, 51, 54, 102, 207
Primula veris, 207
privet, 224
produce, 123
Prunella vulgaris, 221
Prunus, 213
Prunus avium, 214
Prunus domestica, 215
Prunus pensylvanica, 214
Prunus persica, 215
Prunus virginiana, 214
puffball, 224
Punica granatum, 211
purple avens, 224
purple milkwort, 224
purple passionflower, 224
purple shamrock, 105
pussytoes, 224
pussywillow, 28, 225
pyrola, 158, 225
Pyrola rotundifolia, 225
Pyrola secunda, 225
Pyrus, 215
'Flemish Beauty', 215
'Seckel', 215
'Sugar', 215
'Winter Nelis', 215
Pyrus malus, 213

Q

Queen Anne's lace, 118, 185, 225
Quercus, 189, 211
Quercus alba, 211
quince, 147