

Sowing the Seeds of History *by Robert Oakes*

Nestled in a copse of pine and maple trees just behind The Bidwell House Museum is a fertile patch of tilled soil bursting with edible life of various shapes, sizes and flavors. Most visitors to the Museum can't help but notice this gorgeous green jewel, but they might not ever meet its caretaker, Ann Hanchett, who comes and goes as quiet as the seeds she sows.

I met up with Ann just after she finished planting this year's garden. With the unusually cold and wet spring that we experienced this year, this task was completed later than normal, but Ann seemed unfazed. She explained that Rev. Bidwell and other early New England farmers would had to have dealt with such vagaries of weather, too. Ann took a moment to sit down with me to discuss the garden's history, as well as the history of gardening, especially as it was done in Rev. Adonijah Bidwell's day. She described some of what she's been up to so far this year and talked about some of her plans for the future.

This year, Ann decided not to subdivide the garden into four quadrants representing gardens of various eras, as had been done in the past. She has chosen, instead, to focus on the sort of garden that Rev. Bidwell himself would have had.

"I was experimenting," she said, "because there were so many things that I wanted to show people that they were growing in the mid-1700s, things that are even common now but of different types."

Among this year's crop are Calico corn, several types of beans (some growing alongside the corn in order to use the stalks as bean trellises), cash tobacco (a logical thing for Bidwell to have had because he came from Connecticut River Valley where there were large tobacco plantations), beets, parsnips, collards, three different kinds

of cabbages, cucumber, four types of squash, parsley, leeks, potatoes and five kinds of tomatoes.

The tomato, she said, is the one item she is now growing that would not have been found in Rev. Bidwell's garden.

"The English didn't eat tomatoes at that time," she explained. "They were indigenous to this country, but they thought they were poisonous, because they are in the nightshade family. So, they wouldn't have had these until the early 1800s."

A large part of Ann's job so far this year, as well as last year, when she first became head gardener, has been to reclaim the garden from the somewhat unkempt state it had fallen into. After its creator, Tom Weldon, left in the mid-1990s, the garden was taken over by a group that was using it to raise seeds but not preserving it as a showpiece.

"So, because of that, a lot of it went to weeds. It had a bunch of grass and all sorts of other stuff coming up in the spring," she said.

But thanks to Ann's work, as well as two grants that were given this year to the Museum by the

Berkshire Garden Club and the Lenox Garden Club, the historic vegetable garden is growing strong again.

Now that full summer has arrived, Ann's job has shifted from planting to weeding while waiting to reap the fruits of her labor come late August. Also, she intends now to work on the far corner of the garden, which she'll have to dig up because of the large amount of grass growing back there. She'll fill that area with perennials

and bi-annuals, as well as herbs that the Bidwells would have used either for culinary or medicinal uses.

Another project in the works involves creating signs that Ann will place beside each bed naming the type or plant or vegetable growing there along with some information drawn from writings left by early gardeners.

"I'd like to write up some of their recipes or at least their comments on

different plants and how they used them," she explained.

Ann said she'd like to have more educational events for both adults and children and to have some more instructional materials available up by the garden to explain to visitors more about what they see there. To that end, an informational garden brochure is now in the planning stages.

Clearly, Ann has plenty to do in the garden, and although she seems to have things well in hand, she can always use the help of volunteers. Anyone who is interested should contact the Museum or call Ann directly at 528-0374 and arrange a time to meet with her to discuss what needs to be done. In exchange for their labor, volunteers can expect to catch plenty of Ann's enthusiasm for working with the land and enjoy some satisfying time in the garden getting back to nature while going back in time.

This year's Bidwell House Museum Historic Vegetable Garden is supported by the following grants:

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Thank you for your generosity!*

