Gardening with the Dead: A Medieval Monastic Gardening Practicum

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Spring 2019

Scene from “The Chronicle of the Months” (Oesterreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Codex 387 90v)
An Early Medieval Monastic Gardening Practicum

Walafrid Strabo
*Liber de cultura hortorum*

or *Hortulus* (“Little Garden”) c. 840s

1. Connect with a pre-modern world
2. Contribute to community
3. Understand the differences and similarities between pre-modern methods and modern ones

Photo credit: Jennifer Liu
[Eugendus] was resting under his usual tree, when suddenly three men arrived in his sleep, and presented themselves to him . . . Then one said, “I am Peter, and this is my brother Andrew, and that is our brother Paul.” And [Eugendus], at once prostrating himself in spirit at their feet, said, “How is it, my lords, that you have come to dwell in these rural forests, you whose bodies, we read, are buried in those great cities of Rome and Patras after your holy martyrdoms?” They replied, “It is true, as you say, we are indeed in those places, but now we have come to dwell here as well.

_Vita patrum iurensium_, 153–154
There is, as a vision in my heart can reveal, a hill not large [and] with a sloping, winding path, where the rising sun flies across the face of Libra, the weigher; here thickets of thorns crown [the hill] with leaves. Cut these away with scythes, brother, and take them away with their seed from the top and sides just mentioned, and then establish in that place a beautiful church for the Lord.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>De abbatibus 135</th>
<th>Matt. 27.29</th>
<th>Mark 15.17</th>
<th>John 19.2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hunc spinae spissa cum fronde coronant.</td>
<td>et plecentes coronam de spinis posuerunt super caput eius.</td>
<td>et inponunt ei plecentes spineam coronam.</td>
<td>Et milites plecentes coronam de spinis inposuerunt capiti eius.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thickets of thorns crown this place with leaves.</td>
<td>And platting a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head.</td>
<td>And platting a crown of thorns, the put it upon him.</td>
<td>And the soldiers, platting a crown of thorns, put it upon his head.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Monastic Models 3: Plan of Saint Gall c. 820–30

Overlaps: St. Gall Plan + Walafrid’s Hortulus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Herbs</th>
<th>Vegetables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>parsley*</td>
<td>celery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chervil</td>
<td>chervil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fennel</td>
<td>fennel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iris</td>
<td>iris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lily</td>
<td>lily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lovage</td>
<td>lovage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mint</td>
<td>Mint</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*mentioned in Walafrid’s poem on gourds

stgallplan.org
“This I have learned not only from common opinion and searching about in old books, but from experience of hard work and sacrifice of many days when I might have rested, but chose instead to labor” (15-19).

Student Reflection:

“I understand now that monasticism is no joke. It is very tough work, not just sitting around and praying.”
Gardening Practicum: Plants & Tools

Sage
Rue
Gourd
Melon
Fennel
Mint
Pennyroyal
Radish

Photos by author
Winter, image of old age, who like a great belly
Eats up the whole year’s substance and heartlessly
Swallows the fruits of our unstinted labor,
Had gone into hiding deep below the earth.
For Spring had arrived and driven him under.

But this little patch which lies facing east
In the small open courtyard before my door
Was full of nettles! All over
My small piece of land they grew...

So I put it off no longer. I set to with my mattock
And dug up the sluggish ground.

Walafrid Strabo, *Hortulus *
lines 19–25, 36–40, 46–47
Gardening Practicum: Labor

I destroyed the tunnels of the moles that haunt dark places,
And back to the realms of light I summoned the worms . . .
With a rake
I broke the soil up bit by bit, and then
Worked in from on top the leaven of rich manure.
Some plants we grow from seed, some from old stocks
We try to bring back to the youth they knew before.
Student Response:

“This garden experience has helped me understand the text better because I was able to connect with Walafrid and understand the strenuous work this type of gardening requires. This also helps us see how . . . monastic gardening is not much different from our type of gardening. We were also able to understand how accomplished they felt by doing this work and feeling the same type of emotions they felt.”
Sage

It deserves to grow green forever, enjoying perpetual youth;
For it is rich in virtue and good to mix in a potion,
Of proven use for many a human ailment.
Pennyroyal

Believe me, my friend, if you cook some pennyroyal
And use it as a potion or a poultice, it will cure
A heavy stomach . . .

When the sun is blazing down on you in the open,
To prevent the heat from harming your head, put a sprig
Of pennyroyal behind your ear . . .

(317–323)
Let us not forget to honor fennel . . .

Its seed, taken with milk from a pregnant goat,
Eases a swollen stomach and quickly loosens
Sluggish bowels. What is more, your rasping cough
Will go if you take fennel-root mixed with wine.

(208–216)
Looking Ahead

Connect with local monasteries

Make medieval tools

Photography integration

Monastery design

Integrate with a manuscript making project...
Some Conclusions

“Experiential Learning,” but the type that would make sense to Medieval practitioners:

“There’s only so much you can learn inside the classroom; before this project, I knew what plants Walafrid planted and their general uses, but I had no idea how much intention and effort was required to plant them.”

The Joy of History:

“It’s incredible the effect that the season can have not only on the plants, but on us. Enjoying the spring and all the open air garden had to offer was cleansing me of any sadness and stress from the coldest time of year. While I was digging up the weeds and tending to the garden, I was digging up the weeds from my brain, clearing the garden of my soul and heart, making room for new spring creativity and excitement.”

Photo credit: Jennifer Liu