

The Pioneer Vegetable Garden

As you leave the Boardwalk building and turn right (west) you will pass a small vegetable garden to the right (north) of the sidewalk. Each year this garden is planted with the help of two grade one classes from John Wilson School. The same two classes harvest it in the fall when they are in grade two. Our goal is to have the sort of vegetable garden you would have found in the Innisfail area 50 to 75 years ago. Where possible we try to grow the old cultivars that were grown in this area.

The vegetables planted in this garden include potatoes, carrots, peas, onions, spinach, lettuce, beans, beets, cucumbers, corn. These days people most often plant onion sets, small onions that were raised from seed the year before and are sold in garden stores in the spring. In earlier times the only onions that were grown were those started from seed. In addition there is rhubarb and seven types of herbs including: parsley, chives, sage, basil, oregano, dill, thyme, savory.

Examples of old cultivars and the dates they were developed are: Russet Burbank (netted gems) potatoes developed in the 1880s; Homestead also called Lincoln (1908), Little Marvel (pre 1900), or Tall Telephone (1881) peas; Detroit Dark Red (1892) beets; Chantenay (1820s), Danvers(1871), or Scarlet Nantes (1870) carrots; Early Yellow Globe (1850) onions; Chicago Pickling (1880) cucumbers; Scarlett Runner (pre 1750) beans. Other common plants that would have been found in gardens 50 to 75 years ago include: squash, radishes (China Rose, 1850; White Icicle, pre 1896), cabbage [Danish Ballhead (1887)], cauliflower [Early Snowball (1888)], turnips [Purple Top Milan, pre 1885], and parsnips [Hollow Crown (1850s)]. There are specific reasons why these are not included in this garden. Squash (summer, winter and pumpkin) is not planted because of the space it requires and radishes because their growth cycle is so short. Cabbage and cauliflower were grown by planting seed directly in the garden each spring. These days they are usually purchased as bedding plants. Cabbage and cauliflower require a lot of 'looking after' to prevent little white moths from laying their eggs on the leaves and having them hatch into green 'worms' that eat the plant.

People who grew up eating cabbage and cauliflower probably remember seeing the 'worms' and maybe even finding one in a piece of cauliflower on their plate. Turnips used to be easy to grow but now there are little 'worms' that burrow into the turnip so that they are unusable. Parsnips are not included in the garden because they are a late root crop and would not have grown to maturity when the rest of the garden is harvested in the fall by the students who planted it.

The common perennials in early vegetable gardens were rhubarb (for pies, jams, etc.), asparagus (the first spring vegetable), horse radish (ground root as a accompaniment with roast beef), currants, gooseberries, straw berries, and raspberries (to make jams and jellies). Most families also had crab apple or apple trees in their yard. There are raspberries planted near the entrance to the Parker Cabin. Asparagus is planted in the Heritage Garden. Currants and gooseberries require a lot of care if they are to be kept bug free and productive. Horse radish is very invasive. Straw berries require much weeding and care as well.

One of the tasks of late winter/early spring of early families was ordering seeds for their garden. Until the 1930s people in this area obtained seeds from some distant source, often in Manitoba. However in 1922 the Berggren family started Alberta Nurseries in Bowden. In 1933 they started selling seeds. The featured item in their first seed list was seeds for new ruby rhubarb (15¢/pkt). The 1933 seed list also included: Detroit Dark Red beets (3¢/pkt), Stringless Green Pod beans (4¢/pkt), Improved Danvers carrots (4¢/pkt), Early Chantenay Half Long carrots (4¢/pkt), Danish Ballhead cabbage (5¢/pkt), Grand Rapids lettuce (3¢/pkt), Hollow Crown parsnips (3¢/pkt) and King of Denmark spinach (4¢/pkt) as well as many other vegetable and flower seeds. Today Alberta Nurseries and Seeds is still a family owned and operated business in Bowden. Their current catalogue lists many of the cultivars named above (at slightly higher prices).

All the early settlers had vegetable gardens to feed them selves and their families. If you were to visit early homesteads in this area the vegetable garden would be very large and well tended because it provided a large amount of the food consumed by the early settlers. Flower gardens were

very small. The focus of early vegetable gardens in this area was on vegetables that could be stored or preserved to provide food through the fall and winter. There would be lots of potatoes, carrots, turnips, cabbage, beets, and parsnips that could be stored in root cellars dug into the ground. The root cellars were cool, damp places where potatoes, carrots and some other vegetables could be stored until the following summer when fresh vegetables were again available from the garden. Some parsnips were left in the ground in the fall because they could withstand the frost and would be sweet and fresh the following spring.

Freezers were not widely available in the Innisfail area until after World War II. Prior to that time those vegetables that wouldn't withstand storage had to be canned. This process involved placing the vegetables in scalding hot water, a process called blanching, then the blanched vegetables were placed in glass jars that had been sterilized in boiling water on the stove. The large pot was called a canner. They were usually enameled pots that were round and deep enough to hold quart jars with room to spare. The jars of vegetables were put back in the boiling water in the pot of boiling water on the stove and kept hot for various periods of time, up to several hours. Then the lids were tightened on the jars while the contents were still very hot. The jars of vegetables were stored in a cool dark place, usually the basement or cellar, until they were used. The vegetables that were commonly canned included: peas, beans, beets, corn. Tomatoes and cucumbers were canned as pickles.

Cabbage was made into sauerkraut by shredding the shredded leaves in a large crock with water and a little salt and allowing them to ferment. The shredded leaves were weighed down with a large rock to keep them compacted and force water out. This process allowed the fermented cabbage to be stored for long periods of time.

Pioneer women also made pickles, relishes and chutneys from the produce of their vegetable gardens. The primary constituents of these condiments were vinegar, sugar, dill, cucumbers, onions, cauliflower and tomatoes that they grew in their gardens. Sometimes other herbs or

spices were used as well as raisins which were common in the pantries of early kitchens.