

# *Historical Notices of Landscape Gardening in America*

*By Andrew Jackson Downing\**

“L’un à nos yeux présente  
D’un dessein régulier l’ordonnance imposante,  
Prête aux champs des beautés qu’ils ne connaissaient pas,  
D’une pompe étrangère embellit leur appas,  
Donne aux arbres des lois, aux ondes des entraves,  
Et, despote orgueilleux, brille entouré d’esclaves;  
Son air est moins riant et plus majestueux  
*L’autre*, de la nature amant respectueux,  
L’orne sans la farder, traite avec indulgence  
Ses caprices charmants, sa noble négligence,  
Sa marche irrégulière, et fait naître avec art,  
Des beautés du désordre, et même du hasard.”

DELILLE.



“UR first, most endearing, and most sacred associations,” says the amiable Mrs. Hofland, “are connected with gardens; our most simple and most refined perceptions of beauty are combined with them.” And we may add to this, that Landscape Gardening, which is an artistical combination of the beautiful in nature and art—an union of natural expression and harmonious cultivation—is capable of affording us the highest and most intellectual enjoy-

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ment to be found in any cares and pleasures belonging to the soil.

The development of the Beautiful is the end and aim of all Landscape Gardening, as it is of all other fine arts. The ancients sought to attain this by a studied and elegant regularity of design in their gardens; the moderns, by the creation or improvement of grounds which, though of limited extent, exhibit a highly graceful or picturesque epitome of natural beauty. Landscape Gardening differs from gardening in its common sense, in embracing the whole scene immediately about a country house, which it softens and refines, or renders more spirited and striking by the aid of art. In it we seek to embody our *ideal* of a rural home; not through plots of fruit trees, and beds of choice flowers, though these have their place, but by collecting and combining beautiful forms in trees, surfaces of ground, buildings, and walks, in the landscape surrounding us. It is, in short, the Beautiful, embodied in a home scene. And we attain it by the removal or concealment of everything uncouth and discordant, and by the introduction and preservation of forms pleasing in their expression, their outlines, and their fitness for the abode of man. In the orchard, we hope to gratify the palate; in the flower garden, the eye and the smell; but in the landscape garden we appeal to the sense of the Beautiful and the Perfect, which is one of the highest attributes of our nature.

This embellishment of nature, which we call Landscape Gardening, springs naturally from a love of country life, an attachment to a certain spot, and a desire to render that place attractive—a feeling which seems more or less strongly fixed in the minds of all men. But we should convey a false impression, were we to state that it may be applied with equal success to residences of every class and size, in the country. Lawn and trees, being its two essential elements, some of the beauties of Landscape Gardening may, indeed, be shown wherever a rood of grass surface, and half a dozen trees are within our reach; we may, even with such scanty space, have tasteful grouping, varied surface, and agreeably curved walks; but our



art, to appear to advantage, requires some extent of surface—its lines should lose themselves indefinitely, and unite agreeably and gradually with those of the surrounding country.

In the case of large landed estates, its capabilities may be displayed to their full extent, as from fifty to five hundred acres may be devoted to a park or pleasure grounds. Most of its beauty, and all its charms, may, however, be enjoyed in ten or twenty acres, fortunately situated, and well treated; and Landscape Gardening, in America, combined and working in harmony as it is with our fine scenery, is already beginning to give us results scarcely less beautiful than those produced by its finest efforts abroad. The lovely villa residences of our noble river and lake margins, when well treated—even in a few acres of tasteful foreground—seem so entirely to appropriate the whole adjacent landscape, and to mingle so sweetly in their outlines with the woods, the valleys, and shores around them, that the effects are often truly enchanting,

But if Landscape Gardening, in its proper sense, cannot be applied to the embellishment of the smallest cottage residences in the country, its principles may be studied with advantage, even by him who has only three trees to plant for ornament; and we hope no one will think his grounds too small, to feel willing to add something to the general amount of beauty in the country. If the possessor of the cottage acre would embellish in accordance with propriety, he must not, as we have sometimes seen, render the whole ridiculous by aiming at ambitious and costly embellishments; but he will rather seek to delight us by the good taste evinced in the *tasteful simplicity* of the whole arrangement. And if the proprietors of our country villas, in their improvements, are more likely to run into any one error than another, we fear it will be that of too great a desire for display—too many vases, temples, and seats,—and too little purity and simplicity of general effect.

The inquiring reader will perhaps be glad to have a glance at the history and progress of the art of tasteful gardening; a recurrence to which, as well as to the history of the fine arts, will afford abundant proof that, in the first stage or infancy of



all these arts, while the perception of their ultimate capabilities is yet crude and imperfect, mankind has, in every instance, been completely satisfied with the mere exhibition of *design* or *art*. Thus in Sculpture the first statues were only attempts to imitate rudely the *form* of a human figure, or in painting, to represent that of a tree: the skill of the artist, in effecting an imitation successfully, being sufficient to excite the astonishment and admiration of those who had not yet made such advances as to enable them to appreciate the superior beauty of *expression*.

Landscape Gardening is, indeed, only a modern word first coined, we believe, by Shenstone.

The most distinguished English Landscape Gardeners of recent date, are the late Humphrey Repton, who died in 1818; and since him John Claudius Loudon, better known in this country as the celebrated gardening author. Repton's taste in Landscape Gardening was cultivated and elegant, and many of the finest parks and pleasure grounds of England at the present day, bear witness to the skill and harmony of his designs. His published works are full of instructive hints, and at Cobham Hall, one of the finest seats in Britain, is an inscription to his memory, by Lord Darnley.

Mr. Loudon's writings and labors in tasteful gardening are too well known to render it necessary that we should do more than allude to them here. Much of what is known of the art in this country undoubtedly is, more or less directly, to be referred to the influence of his published works. Although he is, as it seems to us, somewhat deficient as an artist in imagination, no previous author ever deduced so clearly sound artistical principles in Landscape Gardening and Rural Architecture; and fitness, good sense, and beauty are combined with much unity of feeling in all his works.

As the modern style owes its origin mainly to the English, so it has also been developed and carried to its greatest perfection in the British Isles. The law of primogeniture, which has there so long existed, in itself contributes to the continual improvement and embellishment of those vast



landed estates, that remain perpetually in the hands of the same family. Magnificent buildings, added to by each succeeding generation, who often preserve also the older portions with the most scrupulous care; wide spread parks, clothed with a thick velvet turf which, amid their moist atmosphere, preserves during a great part of the year an emerald greenness—studded with noble oaks and other forest trees which number centuries of growth and maturity; these advantages, in the hands of the most intelligent and the wealthiest aristocracy in the world, have indeed made almost an entire landscape garden of “merry England.” Among a multitude of splendid examples of these noble residences, we will only refer the reader to the celebrated Blenheim, the seat of the Duke of Marlborough, where the lake alone (probably the largest piece of artificial water in the world) covers a surface of two hundred acres: Chatsworth, the varied and magnificent seat of the Duke of Devonshire, where there are scenes illustrative of almost every style of the art: and Woburn Abbey, the grounds of which are full of the choicest specimens of trees and plants, and where the park, like that of Ashbridge, Arundel Castle, and several other private residences in England, is only embraced within a circumference of from ten to twenty miles.

On the continent of Europe, though there are a multitude of examples of the modern style of landscape gardening, which is there called the *English* or *natural* style, yet in the neighborhood of many of the capitals, especially those of the south of Europe, the taste for the geometric or ancient style of gardening still prevails to a considerable extent; partially, no doubt, because that style admits, with more facility, of those classical and architectural accompaniments of vases, statues, busts, etc., the passion for which pervades a people rich in ancient and modern sculptural works of art. Indeed many of the gardens on the continent are more striking from their numerous sculpturesque ornaments, interspersed with fountains and jets-d’eau, than from the beauty or rarity of their vegetation, or from their arrangement.



In the United States, it is highly improbable that we shall ever witness such splendid examples of landscape gardens as those abroad, to which we have alluded. Here the rights of man are held to be equal; and if there are no enormous parks and no class of men whose wealth is hereditary, there is, at least, what is more gratifying to the feelings of the philanthropist, the almost entire absence of a very poor class in the country; while we have on the other hand, a large class of independent landholders, who are able to assemble around them, not only the useful and convenient, but the agreeable and beautiful, in country life.

The number of individuals among us who possess wealth and refinement sufficient to enable them to enjoy the pleasures of country life, and who desire in their private residences so much of the beauties of landscape gardening and rural embellishment as may be had without any enormous expenditure of means, is every day increasing. And although, until lately, a very meagre plan of laying out the grounds of a residence was all that we could lay claim to, yet the taste for elegant rural improvements is advancing now so rapidly, that we have no hesitation in predicting that in half a century more there will exist a greater number of beautiful villas and country seats of moderate extent, in the Atlantic States, than in any country in Europe, England alone excepted. With us, a feeling, a taste, or an improvement, is contagious; and once fairly appreciated and established in one portion of the country, it is disseminated with a celerity that is indeed wonderful, to every other portion. And though it is necessarily the case where amateurs of any art are more numerous than its professors, that there will be, in devising and carrying into execution, many specimens of bad taste, and perhaps a sufficient number of efforts to improve without any real taste whatever, still we are convinced the effect of our rural embellishments will in the end be highly agreeable, as a false taste is not likely to be a permanent one in a community where everything is so much the subject of criticism.



With regard to the literature and practice of Landscape Gardening as an art, in North America, almost everything is yet before us, comparatively little having yet been done. Almost all the improvements of the grounds of our finest country residences, have been carried on under the direction of the proprietors themselves, suggested by their own good taste, in many instances improved by the study of European authors, or by a personal inspection of the finest places abroad. The only American work previously published which treats of Landscape Gardening, is the *American Gardener's Calendar*, by Bernard McMahon of Philadelphia. The only practitioner of the art, of any note, was the late M. Parmentier of Brooklyn, Long Island.

M. Andre Parmentier was the brother of that celebrated horticulturist, the Chevalier Parmentier, Mayor of Enghien, Holland. He emigrated to this country about the year 1824, and in the Horticultural Nurseries which he established at Brooklyn, he gave a specimen of the natural style of laying out grounds, combined with a scientific arrangement of plants, which excited public curiosity, and contributed not a little to a taste for the natural mode of landscape gardening.

During M. Parmentier's residence on Long Island, he was almost constantly applied to for plans for laying out the grounds of country seats, by persons in various parts of the Union, as well as in the immediate proximity of New York. In many cases he not only surveyed the demesne to be improved, but furnished the plants and trees necessary to carry out his designs. Several plans were prepared by him for residences of note in the Southern States; and two or three places in Upper Canada, especially near Montreal, were, we believe, laid out by his own hands and stocked from his nursery grounds. In his periodical catalogue he arranged the hardy trees and shrubs that flourish in this latitude in classes, according to their height, etc., and published a short treatise on the superior claims of the natural over the formal or geometric style of laying out grounds. In short, we consider M. Parmentier's labors and examples as having effected, directly, far more for



landscape gardening in America, than those of any individual whatever.

The introduction of tasteful gardening in this country is, of course, of very recent date. But so long ago as from 25 to 50 years, there were several country residences highly remarkable for extent, elegance of arrangement, and the highest order and keeping. Among these we desire especially to record here the celebrated seats of Chancellor Livingston, Wm. Hamilton, Esq., Theodore Lyman, Esq., and Judge Peters.

*Woodlands*, the seat of the Hamilton family, near Philadelphia, was, so long ago as 1805, highly celebrated for its gardening beauties. The refined taste and the wealth of its accomplished owner were freely lavished in its improvement and embellishment; and at a time when the introduction of rare exotics was attended with a vast deal of risk and trouble, the extensive green-houses and orangeries of this seat contained all the richest treasures of the exotic flora, and among other excellent gardeners employed was the distinguished botanist Pursh, whose enthusiastic taste in his favorite science was promoted and aided by Mr. Hamilton. The extensive pleasure grounds were judiciously planted, singly and in groups, with a great variety of the finest species of trees. The attention of the visitor to this place is now arrested by two very large specimens of that curious tree, the Japanese Ginko (*Salisburia*), 60 or 70 feet high, perhaps the finest in Europe or America, by the noble magnolias and the rich park-like appearance of some of the plantations of the finest native and foreign oaks. From the recent unhealthiness of this portion of the Schuylkill, *Woodlands* has fallen into decay, but there can be no question that it was, for a long time, the most tasteful and beautiful residence in America.

The seat of the late Judge Peters, about five miles from Philadelphia, was, 30 years ago, a noted specimen of the ancient school of landscape gardening. Its proprietor had a most extended reputation as a scientific agriculturist, and his place was also no less remarkable for the design and culture of its pleasure-grounds, than for the excellence of its farm.



Long and stately avenues, with vistas terminated by obelisks, a garden adorned with marble vases, busts and statues, and pleasure grounds filled with the rarest trees and shrubs, were conspicuous features here. Some of the latter are now so remarkable as to attract strongly the attention of the visitor. Among them is the chestnut planted by Washington, which produces the largest and finest fruit; very large hollies; and a curious old box-tree much higher than the mansion near which it stands. But the most striking feature now, is the still remaining grand old avenue of hemlocks (*Abies canadensis*). Many of these trees, which were planted 100 years ago, are now venerable specimens, ninety feet high, whose huge trunks and wide spread branches are in many cases densely wreathed and draped with masses of English Ivy, forming the most picturesque sylvan objects we ever beheld.

*Lemon Hill*, half a mile above the Fairmount waterworks of Philadelphia, was, 20 years ago, the most perfect specimen of the geometric mode in America, and since its destruction by the extension of the city, a few years since, there is nothing comparable with it, in that style, among us. All the symmetry, uniformity and high art of the old school, were displayed here in artificial plantations, formal gardens with trellises, grottoes, spring-houses, temples, statues, and vases, with numerous ponds of water, jets-d'eau, and other waterworks, parterres, and an extensive range of hothouses. The effect of this garden was brilliant and striking; its position, on the lovely banks of the Schuylkill, admirable; and its liberal proprietor, Mr. Pratt, by opening it freely to the public, greatly increased the popular taste in the neighborhood of that city.

On the Hudson, the show place of the last age was the still interesting *Clermont*, then the residence of Chancellor Livingston. Its level or gently undulating lawn, four or five miles in length, the rich native woods, and the long vistas of planted avenues, added to its fine water view, rendered this a noble place. The mansion, the green-houses, and the gardens, show something of the French taste in design, which Mr.



Livingston's residence abroad, at the time when that mode was popular, no doubt, led him to adopt. The finest yellow locusts in America are now standing in the pleasure-grounds here, and the gardens contain many specimens of fruit trees, the first of their sorts introduced into the Union.

*Waltham House*, about nine miles from Boston, was, 25 years ago, one of the oldest and finest places, as regards Landscape Gardening. Its owner, the late Hon. T. Lyman, was a highly-accomplished man, and the grounds of Waltham House bear witness to a refined and elegant taste in rural improvement. A fine level park, a mile in length, enriched with groups of English limes, elms and oaks, and rich masses of native wood, watered by a fine stream and stocked with deer, were the leading features of the place at that time; and this, and Woodlands, were the two best specimens of the modern style, as Judge Peters' seat, Lemon Hill, and Clermont, were of the ancient style, in the earliest period in the history of Landscape Gardening among us.

There is no part of the Union where the taste in Landscape Gardening is so far advanced, as on the middle portion of the Hudson. The natural scenery is of the finest character, and places but a mile or two apart, often possess, from the constantly varying forms of the water, shores, and distant hills, widely different kinds of home landscape and distant view. Standing in the grounds of some of the finest of these seats the eye beholds only the soft foreground of smooth lawn, the rich groups of trees shutting out all neighboring tracts, the lake-like expanse of water, and closing the distance, a fine range of wooded mountain. A residence here of but a hundred acres so fortunately are these disposed by nature, seems to appropriate the whole scenery round, and to be a thousand in extent.

At the present time, our handsome villa residences are becoming every day more numerous, and it would require much more space than our present limits, to enumerate all the tasteful rural country places within our knowledge, many of which have been newly laid out, or greatly improved within a few



years. But we consider it so important and instructive to the novice in the art of Landscape Gardening to examine, personally, country seats of a highly tasteful character, that we shall venture so refer the reader to a few of those which have now a reputation among us as elegant country residences.

*Hyde Park*, on the Hudson, formerly the seat of the late Dr. Hosack, now of W. Langdon, Esq., has been justly celebrated as one of the finest specimens of the modern style of Landscape Gardening in America. Nature has, indeed, done much for this place, as the grounds are finely varied, beautifully watered by a lively stream, and the views are inexpressibly striking from the neighborhood of the house itself, including, as they do, the noble Hudson for sixty miles in its course, through rich valleys and bold mountains. But the efforts of art are not unworthy so rare a locality; and while the native woods, and beautifully undulating surface are preserved in their original state, the pleasure-grounds, roads, walks, drives and new plantations, have been laid out in such a judicious manner as to heighten the charms of nature. Large and costly hot-houses were erected by Dr. Hosack, with also entrance lodges at two points on the estate, a fine bridge over the stream, and numerous pavilions and seats commanding extensive prospects; in short, nothing was spared to render this a complete residence. The park, which at one time contained some fine deer, afforded a delightful drive within itself, as the whole estate numbered about seven hundred acres. The plans for laying out the grounds were furnished by Parmentier, and architects from New York were employed in designing and erecting the buildings. For a long time this was the finest seat in America, but there are now many rivals to this claim.

*The Manor of Livingston*, lately the seat of Mrs. Mary Livingston (but now of Jacob Le Roy, Esq.), is seven miles east of the city of Hudson. The mansion stands in the midst of a fine park, rising gradually from the level of a rich inland country, and commanding prospects for sixty miles around. The park is, perhaps, the most remarkable in America, for the



noble simplicity of its character, and the perfect order in which it is kept. The turf is, everywhere, short and velvet-like, the gravel roads scrupulously smooth and firm, and near the house are the largest and most superb evergreens. The mansion is one of the chastest specimens of the Grecian style, and there is an air of great dignity about the whole demesne.

*Blithewood*, formerly the seat of R. Donaldson, Esq. (now John Bard, Esq.), near Barrytown, on the Hudson, is one of the most charming villa residences in the Union. The natural scenery here is nowhere surpassed in its enchanting union of softness and dignity—the river being four miles wide, its placid bosom broken only by islands and gleaming sails, and the horizon grandly closing in with the tall blue summits of the distant Kaatskills. The smiling, gently varied lawn is studded with groups and masses of fine forest and ornamental trees, beneath which are walks leading in easy curves to rustic seats, and summer houses placed in secluded spots, or to openings affording most lovely prospects. In various situations near the house and upon the lawn, sculptured vases of Maltese stone are also disposed in such a manner as to give a refined and classic air to the grounds.

As a *pendant* to this graceful landscape, there is within the grounds scenery of an opposite character, equally wild and picturesque—a fine, bold stream, fringed with woody banks, and dashing over several rocky cascades, thirty or forty feet in height, and falling altogether a hundred feet in a distance of half a mile. There are also, within the grounds, a pretty gardener's lodge by the gate, in the bracketed mode; in short, we can recall no place of moderate extent, where nature and tasteful art are so harmoniously combined to express grace and elegance.

*Montgomery Place*, the residence of Mrs. Edward Livingston, which is also situated on the Hudson, near Barrytown, deserves a more extended notice than our present limits allow, for it is, as a whole, nowhere surpassed in America, in point of location, natural beauty, or the landscape gardening charms which it exhibits.



It is one of our oldest improved country seats, having been originally the residence of General Montgomery, the hero of Quebec. On the death of his widow it passed into the hands of her brother, Edward Livingston, Esq., the late minister to France, and up to the present moment has always received the most tasteful and judicious treatment.

The lover of the expressive in nature, or the beautiful in art, will find here innumerable subjects for his study. The natural scenery in many portions approaches the character of grandeur, and the foreground of rich woods and lawns, stretching out on all sides of the mountain, completes a home landscape of dignified and elegant seclusion, rarely surpassed in any country.

Among the fine features of this estate are the *wilderness*, a richly wooded and highly picturesque valley, filled with the richest growth of trees, and threaded with dark, intricate and mazy walks along which are placed a variety of rustic seats. This valley is musical with the sound of waterfalls, of which there are several fine ones in the bold impetuous stream which finds its course through the lower part of the wilderness. Near the further end of the valley is a beautiful lake, half of which lies cool and dark under the shadow of tall trees, while the other half gleams in the open sunlight.

In a part of the lawn, near the house, yet so surrounded by a dark setting of trees and shrubs as to form a rich picture by itself, is one of the most perfect flower-gardens in the country, laid out in the arabesque manner, and glowing with masses of the gayest colors—each bed being composed wholly of a single hue. A large conservatory, an exotic garden, an arboretum, etc., are among the features of interest in this admirable residence. Including a *drive* through a fine bit of natural wood, south of the mansion, there are five miles of highly varied and picturesque private roads and walks, through the pleasure grounds of Montgomery Place.

*Ellerslie* is the seat of William Kelly, Esq. It is three miles below Rhinebeck. It comprises over six hundred acres, and is one of our finest examples of high keeping and good management, both in an ornamental and agricultural point of view.



The house is conspicuously placed on a commanding natural terrace, with a fair foreground of park surface below it, studded with beautiful groups of elms and oaks, and a very fine reach of river and distant hills. This is one of the most celebrated places on the Hudson, and there are few that so well pay the lover of improved landscape for a visit.

Just below Ellerslie are the fine mansion and pleasing grounds of Wm. Emmet, Esq.,—the former a stone edifice, in the castellated style, and the latter forming a most agreeable point on the margin of the river.

The seat of Mrs. Gardiner Howland, near New Hamburg, is not only beautiful in situation, but is laid out with great care, and is equally remarkable for the many rare trees and shrubs collected in its grounds.

*Wodenethe*, near Fishkill landing, is the seat of H. W. Sargent, Esq., and is a bijou full of interest for the lover of rural beauty; abounding in rare trees, shrubs and plants, as well as vases, and objects of rural embellishment of all kinds.

*Kenwood*, formerly the residence of J. Rathbone, Esq., is one mile south of Albany. Ten years ago this spot was a wild and densely wooded hill, almost inaccessible. With great taste and industry Mr. Rathbone has converted it into a country residence of much picturesque beauty, erected in the Tudor style, one of the best villas in the country, with a gate-lodge in the same mode, and laid out the grounds with remarkable skill and good taste. There are about 1200 acres in this estate, and pleasure grounds, forcing houses and gardens are now flourishing where all was so lately in the rudest state of nature; while, by the judicious preservation of natural wood, the effect of a long cultivated demesne has been given to the whole.

The Manor House of the "*Patroon*" (as the eldest son of the Van Rensselaer family is called) is in the northern suburbs of the city of Albany. The mansion, greatly enlarged and improved a few years since, from the designs of Upjohn, is one of the largest and most admirable in all respects, to be found in the country, and the pleasure grounds in the rear of the house are tasteful and beautiful.





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