

A 17th CENTURY STILL ROOM



In 1935, the newly formed New England Unit of The Herb Society of America was asked by the Massachusetts Horticultural Society to participate in their Spring Flower Show. They took up the challenge and decided to re-create a 17th century English still room and garden. They subsequently won a Gold Medal for their efforts. This year (2010) being the 75th anniversary of the founding of The New England Unit, we decided to continue the tradition of herbal education that our founders began. We wanted to bring a rich history of herbs to today's viewers, and so planned an exhibit inspired by that in 1935, showing a still room and plants that would have been used in the 17th century.

A still room was a structure, or a room, dedicated to housing the workspace, implements and materials that were essential for the herbalist (mostly the woman of the household) to create the medicines, household products, cosmetics and a host of other preparations that she would need to handle the rigors and needs of everyday living. She often kept a still room book that contained receipts (or recipes) that each family carefully recorded, amended and then handed down to subsequent generations. As the women of the household would have been responsible for the health and well-being of family, servants, tenant farmers, and even animals, the still room was an extremely important component of the running of a household.

This Still Room is our interpretation of that first Still Room exhibit of 75 years ago, and depicts a workspace from earlier times. Several items were traditionally used to prepare plant material for proper processing. Some of the items you will see in our exhibit are:

- Mortar and Pestle - for grinding herbs
- Herb Crusher - for seeds & woody plants
- Still - for the distillation of flower & herb essences
- Sieve - for processing of powdered herbs

The floor is covered with dried plant material or strewing herbs, which served as vermin and insect repellents, and when trod upon also perfumed the air. Bunches of herbs are drying on the rafters. The processed herbs are stored in earthenware jars that were covered with linen and sealed with wax or lard. Many of the preparations were time consuming - a receipt for Lady Allen's Water included 33 herbs and spices, all picked at different times, steeped in wine and brandy, processed and then distilled.

In the garden, there are over 35 different varieties of herbs that were considered important for the health and well-being of a household - a small fraction of the "herbes" that they might have used. Many of the plants are common and known to us today, but their uses, particularly as medicinal plants, have not transcended to today. Flowers, in particular, were very popular as medicinals and restoratives and some herbs such as thyme and lavender have been found by scientific research to be effective as antifungal and antibacterial. Others have fallen out of use, and some can be considered dangerous. However, we can enjoy their fragrance and visual appeal, appreciating their history and importance to our forefathers.

For more information, please visit our website:

www.neuhsa.org

We have posted several articles on still rooms and also a listing of the plants we have included and their uses. A bibliography of resource material is recorded as well, for further reading.



The New England Unit of The Herb Society of America

The Herb Society of America, New England Unit, is a 501(c)(3) educational organization whose members are dedicated to promoting the knowledge, use and delight of herbs through educational programs, research, and sharing the experience of its members with the community.

For further information on the history and use of herbs, or a visit to the teaching garden created by the Herb Society at **Strawbery Banke Museum**, go to www.strawberybanke.org and navigate to the herb garden and "Heirloom Herbs and Their Use" via the "Explore" tab.

It is the policy of The Herb Society of America not to advise or recommend herbs for medicinal or health use. The information in this presentation is intended for educational purposes only and should not be considered as a recommendation or an endorsement of any particular medical or health treatment. Please consult a health care provider before pursuing any herbal treatments.