Digging up the past: using articles in early 20th-century magazines archived in the Rosarium Project to uncover daily life through the lens of growing roses

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"The rose is the queen of garden flowers. Some of us admire the dahlia; others prefer the chrysanthemum, but everybody seems to love the rose.” So begins an article on roses from the September 1914 issue of *House Beautiful* (Riley 1914, 101).

Roses have long been part of the fabric of human culture. Indeed, mankind has loved roses and rose scented and flavored things for thousands of years. Roses have long been considered the queen of the garden and thus enjoyed in numerous ways.

In the ancient world roses were associated with death and rebirth.

This was evidenced by the vials of rose water which were entombed with other things necessary for the afterlife in the Sumerian royal tombs discovered at Ur (Harkness 2005, 118), which date back as far as 3500 BC (Gadd 1929, 40).

The Romans also used roses to honor the dead as is shown by this pillar of roses that decorates the tomb of the Haterii, a family of building contractors who lived in Rome during the first century AD.

The ancients venerate the gods with roses. They were connected with Venus and Aphrodite, Adonis and Dionysus (Jashemski 1987, 75; Talgam 2004, 225-224; West 2013, 388-389; Du Quesnay 2012, 165). “The oldest known rose fragments, apart from fossils, are [thorns] preserved in the flooded levels of Hera's Temple on the island of Samos in Greece” (Harkness 2005, 117-118).

Mankind has an enduring relationship with the rose. It has been cultivated in gardens for thousands of years. The world’s poetry, prose, myths, and legends are replete with roses. Art in all its forms is festooned with roses.

They are depicted in the “blue bird” fresco of the Minoan palace at Knossos on the island of Crete which dates back to 1600 BC (Harkness 2005, 11).

Roses also appeared in the frescoes of the House of the Gold Bracelet in Pompeii (Jashemski and Meyer 2002).

Following the Christianization of Rome, the rose became a symbol of purity and was closely associated with the Virgin Mary (Cucciniello 2008). Numerous paintings and illuminated manuscripts show her in a rose garden or holding a rose.

In the Middle Ages roses also came to symbolize courtly love. This is best illustrated by the famous French thirteenth-century allegorical love poem called the *Roman de la Rose* (Walters 2016).

With these artifacts we can see how well loved roses were but most of what we know about roses and their role in society comes from what has been written about them.
The Akkadian word for roses is inscribed on the 4,000 year old tablets found within the tombs at Ur (Harkness 2005, 118). Herodotus in his *History* wrote of roses and their culture in Greece during the fifth century BC.

Roman authors described how roses were used to honor the dead, revere the gods and to celebrate victories. The lavish rose-strewn dinners of emperors Nero and Heliogabulus were well documented.

Pliny in the first century AD described the roses of Rome and how best to grow and use them.

In the Medieval period, medical treatises were translated from Arabic and Greek into Latin making them more accessible to practitioners in Europe. Works by Galen and Constantinus Africanus figured largely. Four species of roses were known at that time and *R. gallica* and *R. canina* were heavily used in treatments of a wide range of illnesses (Touw 1982, 79-80).

Botanical books from the Renaissance period reflect the burgeoning interest in the sciences and the natural world. John Gerard, the famous English herbalist published in 1597 his history of plants, in which he describes the dozen varieties of roses then known in Europe. Explorations in the Middle and Far East brought back more and more types of roses. John Parkinson another famous English herbalist was able to name the two dozen varieties of roses to be had in England a mere thirty years later.

By the Victorian era, the sheer number of varieties of roses available at nurseries and the numbers of plants sold to an eager public attest to their increasing popularity.

As an example take the rose ‘Géant des Batailles.’ In 1849, one nursery, the Thomas Rivers Nursery of Sawbridgeworth England, alone sold 8,000 bushes of this one variety (Rivers 1877, 105).

Catalogues from prominent plant nurseries of the period listed thousands of different roses for sale.

By the second decade of the twentieth century hundreds upon hundreds of books and articles had been published in English alone. Consider the gardening classic by the Reverend Samuel Reynolds Hole entitled *A book about roses: how to grow and show them*; it was published in both New York and London and went through twenty seven editions between 1869 and 1918.

In an effort to capture the place roses and growing them had in society, the Rosarium Project was begun at Providence College in the spring of 2015. The Rosarium Project is an online repository of materials written in English about roses, rose enthusiasts and rose gardens. The first curated pieces were articles from popular magazines, widely circulated and routinely held by libraries published between 1894 and 1922. These articles were identified using the well-respected periodical index known as the *Readers Guide Retrospective*. 
163 articles from thirty-four different, primarily American, magazines and journals currently make up the collection. The subject matter of these articles includes gardening tips, notices of new varieties, travelogues, suggestions for garden design and recipes.

[SLIDE] So why curate magazine articles from the turn of the twentieth century? During this period magazines reached an unprecedented audience. Cheap paper and the reduced costs of postage meant that magazines could expand their readership across America. Editors could address, and advertisers could reach, a large homogeneous group of subscribers.

“Popular magazines were important because they were, for a period, the only cultural form that seemed to represent the entire nation, thus conferring a kind of legitimacy on certain ideas and images by bringing them before a national audience” (Schneirov 1994, 4).

[SLIDE] Popular magazines were the only form of mass media of the time. Newspapers were primarily regional in scope. Films were only available in the big cities and towns. Magazines by way of the post were able to reach readers in tiny rural villages as well as those in the big cities. And the readership for these journals was massive. The Ladies’ Home Journal had 1.6 million paid subscribers by 1915 and reached even more readers than that.

[SLIDE] Editors of popular magazines provided content that they felt would interest and inspire their readers.


the magazines were a product, their survival depended on their ability to conform to the needs of two sets of customers: readers and advertisers. Advertisers demanded large circulation figures and respectable editorial content that would provide “good company” for their advertisements. The readers, who were generally middle class, wanted to be entertained, kept abreast of contemporary issues, and given information they could put to practical use (xii).

[SLIDE] Thus popular magazines, their articles and their advertisements were a true reflection of the society of their readership for the time in which they were written. So if one were to scrutinize the sixteen articles on roses that appeared in the four woman’s magazines indexed by the Readers Guide Retrospective, one could pick up a sense of the life of the middle class women who read them.

[SLIDE] The four magazines in question are the aforementioned Ladies’ Home Journal, the Woman’s Home Companion, the Delineator and Harper’s Bazar. Each one had a large subscription base. The number of subscribers to the Delineator reached one million by 1912; Woman’s Home Companion reached that mark by 1916.

[SLIDE] The Delineator, the oldest of the four, was primarily a fashion magazine from the Butterick Publishing Company, the producer of paper patterns for clothing. But it “defined fashion” in a broad sense. “Fashion,” within its framework, was not only clothing but home decorating and housekeeping, women’s issues, health and the arts as well (Endres and Lueck
The magazine was progressive and provided “coverage of the New Woman and broader social, political and economic questions,” though there was “perennial focus on kitchen and garden” (Bland 2009, 175).

The Ladies’ Home Journal was “a conservative spokesman for the role of women in society” (Endres and Luck 1995, 172). Jennifer Scanlon (1995) explains, in her book about the magazine entitled Inarticulate Longings, that the “Ladies’ Home Journal, both a medium of popular culture and a business enterprise, promoted for its women readers traditional “woman’s values” and full participation in the consumer society” (4). Endres & Lueck (1995), in their book Women’s Periodicals in the United States: Consumer Magazines, describe it as a “woman’s survival manual with departments that offered practical advice on child rearing, useful household hints, instructions for various crafts, and inspirational essays on a variety of topics” (173).

While the Woman’s Home Companion “offered a similar fare of editorial content” (Endres and Lueck 1995, 445), it was more progressive and printed features that resonated with the promise of the New Woman. These included “profiles of strong women who made a difference, practical advice in business or going to college, and unusual adventures or travels by women” (Endres and Lueck 1995, 446).

Harper’s Bazar “was a distinctly different periodical. Untypically, it avoided reports of treaties and plagues and such ‘hard news’ ” (Endres and Lueck 1995, 137). In its first issue the editor explained that women were the primary readership and that it would “devote considerable space to the matters which fall particularly under their jurisdiction, such as dress and household affairs” (Harper’s Bazar 1867).

While the magazines were split in their outlook on women, some traditional and some progressive, and while some were fashion magazines and some were more broadly topical, all of them understood that women cared about roses. Each magazine printed multiple articles on roses illustrating the editors’ beliefs that roses were a perennial favorite. As Chesla Sherlock (1920) explains in the opening of her article “ A Rose Garden of Your Own” which appeared in the March 1920 issue of the Ladies’ Home Journal, “there is nothing so expressive of home, of permanency, as a garden of roses” (97).

The sixteen articles from these magazines show that the middle class women reading them were gardeners. Despite the fact that the articles are divided into two broad categories, gardening and housekeeping, they all assume that the reader is or will be a rose gardener. The gardening articles either provide instructions or recommend rose varieties that will ensure success in growing roses. The housekeeping articles that outline recipes or crafts that made use of roses assume the readers have their own numerous rosebushes that can amply supply them with the raw materials of rosebuds and rose petals for the projects they espoused.

In addition the authors of the gardening articles assume the reader is not a novice gardener. They use specialized gardening terminology such as “trenching,” “dormant,” “slips”
and “suckers.” They expect the readers to know how to “take cuttings” and to have heard of “a Bordeaux mixture.”

[SLIDE] They also assume that these ladies live in the suburbs or in the country and have room in their yards to have a sizable rose garden. This too is evident in the authors’ assumption that the readers have access to sods from the fields and manure from the barnyard.

[SLIDE] Now this shouldn’t be a surprise. As Patricia Tice (1984) explains in her book *Gardening in America 1830-1910*,

As gardening became less expensive and the number of middle-class households increased, many women assumed increasing responsibility for the ornamental garden. Moreover, the societal roles for women became more clearly defined as those of nurturer, arbiter of taste, and guardian of morals. Few activities were deemed as tasteful, as refined, or as wholesome as the cultivation of flowers. In view of the contemporary image of the garden, it followed that if working the soil of the field or kitchen garden conferred independence and stoic virtue upon men, then working the flower garden bestowed parallel virtues upon women. The gentility and spiritual beauty of the rose transferred, in part, to the woman who tended it. She herself became like the rose, the emblem of gentility and an ornament of the home (p. 58).

[SLIDE] These sixteen articles also show that these middle class women were consumers. The gardening articles recommend rose varieties to be planted which are to be bought from nurserymen and catalogs. The culinary and housekeeping articles list a wide variety of ingredients some of which are specifically stated to be gotten from a druggist. When it comes to the home, both inside, and out in the garden, these middle class women had control of the purse strings. The articles assumed that they could afford purchasing a number roses or a quantity of expensive attar of roses and would actually spend the money on them. But the articles were quick to assure the reader of the value and reliability of the roses recommended and reminded them that the planting of roses was an investment in the future. They promised that the recipes would make delicious rose-infused treats worthy of honored guests at a formal tea.

[SLIDE] Another commonality among the articles is that it is assumed that the reader will do the work. These articles are not just general interest articles with vague directions. The directions are clear, precise and detailed. The authors give step by step instructions for the planting of roses, and the preparation of rose scented potpourri. The instructions for the crystallization of rose petals speak of making a heavy syrup by cooking sugar and water “until it spins a thread” (Telford 1913). Such detail would be unnecessary if the author thought her readers would be leaving the doing of it to a cook or a housekeeper.

[SLIDE] Further scrutiny of these articles allows one to see into the pattern of the lives of the middle class women readers. Sifting through directions for gardening and craft-making, one comes upon the daily and seasonal activities the readers engaged in.
[SLIDE] Rose gardening is a year-round hobby. In the fall, these women would be preparing new rose beds and mulching existing ones. Come the winter and early spring, they would find themselves reading books and catalogs to learn about new techniques and varieties. They would be ordering roses from catalogs and local nurseries. And they would be pruning. Come spring, these ladies would find themselves planting and feeding rose bushes.

[SLIDE] Summer was the busiest season of all. In summer, they would start their days with an early breakfast so that they could be out in the garden picking roses while the dew was still on them. They would then make arrangements of cut flowers to decorate their houses. They would daily deadhead spent blossoms and patrol the garden for bugs and diseases harmful to roses. In the evenings they would spray the bushes with insecticides and fungicides. Weekly they would find time to water and then cultivate around the base of the plants to keep them weed-free.

[SLIDE] If they were of a mind to make potpourri, they would be out early each morning picking buds. They would then take them indoors and spread the petals on newspaper so that they might dry for a day. Then each day they would work on their potpourri jars by layering dried petals with salt and spices. On the following days they would stir the previous day’s batch and then add more petals and spices. This would go on as long as they could pick fresh blooms. Many of the recipes called for a peck or more of dried petals which meant that these women needed a lot of rose bushes blooming over a long season.

[SLIDE] If they were of a mind to make rose flavored fancies, they would again be out early to pick flowers. Then the morning would be taken up with cooking up syrups, crystallizing rose petals, and making preserves while the petals were fresh.

[SLIDE] One can certainly see that these sixteen articles are brimful of the details of their readers’ lives. One can only imagine what else might be learned by studying the other 147 articles in the Rosarium Project as it now stands.

[SLIDE] As a librarian and the principal researcher on the Rosarium Project, I find the work of curating these articles on roses and making them available to scholars very satisfying. The reading, transcribing and encoding of these materials is interesting work. Certainly the articles have opened up for me a window onto a bygone age. It is my hope that other scholars in the fields of horticulture, gardening history and particularly popular culture will also find them as illuminating and valuable to their research as I have.

[SLIDE] Thank you.

References:


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