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# 'Emily Dickinson's Gardening Life' Review: One Poet's Flower Album

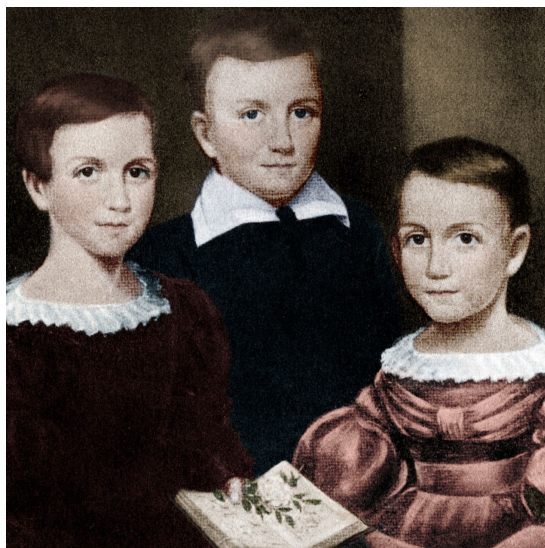
For Emily Dickinson, flowers and gardening were a constant personal preoccupation.

By *Geoff Wisner*

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For Emily Dickinson, flowers and gardening were a constant and personal preoccupation. When classmates called her sister, Lavinia, “the Pond Lily,” Dickinson responded, “Then I am the Cow Lily.”

Also known as the bullhead lily, that brightly colored but spherically inward blossom was an appropriate symbol for the willful red-haired young woman who could be seen roaming the woodland paths of Amherst, Mass.—alone except for Carlo, the enormous dog, “large as myself,” that her father bought for her protection. (Opinions differ as to whether Carlo was a Newfoundland or a St. Bernard.)



Emily, Austin and Lavinia Dickinson ca. 1840.

PHOTO: CULTURE CLUB/GETTY IMAGES

This stubbornly original, erotic and death-haunted poet remained bullheaded in her reclusive later years. She was bold enough to send her poems to the well-known writer Thomas Wentworth Higginson, asking, “Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?” He invited her to an event in Boston, but she declined with a phrase that (like many sentences in her letters) falls into the rhythm of her poetry: “I do not cross my Father’s ground for any House or town.” When Higginson came to see her in Amherst, she greeted him with a gift of two flaming day lilies—a

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EMILY DICKINSON'S GARDENING LIFE

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By Marta McDowell  
Timber Press, 267 pages, \$24.95

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daring gesture in a day when the language of flowers was taken seriously, and day lilies signified beauty and flirtation.

“Emily Dickinson’s Gardening Life” is a revised and expanded version of “Emily Dickinson’s Gardens,” which was published in 2005. The new book benefits from the author’s recent experience as gardener in residence at the Emily Dickinson Museum. Ms. McDowell writes with authority about the conservatory (later demolished and then rebuilt) where Dickinson grew buttercups out of season and watered cape jasmine and heliotrope with the “long, slender spout” of a “tiny watering-pot.”

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PREVIEW

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A visual treat as well as a literary one, this book is illustrated with 19th-century maps, engravings, herbarium pages, seed catalogs, color photos of Amherst, full-page sidebars on tinted paper, and dozens of Dickinson’s poems printed in dark green ink. It is enriched by the work of three New England botanical artists whose lives overlapped Dickinson’s: Orra White Hitchcock, a friend of the Dickinson family, Clarissa Munger Badger, whose lithographs were

reproduced in a book the poet owned, and Helen Sharp, who left portions of her paintings outlined but uncolored, giving them a startlingly modern look.

“Emily Dickinson’s Gardening Life” will be deeply satisfying for gardeners and garden lovers, connoisseurs of botanical illustration, and those who seek a deeper understanding of the life and work of Emily Dickinson.

—Mr. Wisner is the editor of “Thoreau’s Wildflowers” and “Thoreau’s Animals.”

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