In Search of Emily Dickinson’s Gardens

BY CHANTEL E. WHITE

A prolific poet during the mid- to late 19th century, Emily Dickinson is today revered for her works including “Success is counted sweetest” and “I’m nobody! Who are you?” From a young age, she developed a close and enduring relationship with nature, often sending flower specimens collected near her residence in Amherst, Massachusetts, in letters to friends and family. Dickinson’s affection for plants is also evident in her verse, both through the symbolic importance she gave to particular flowers and her frequent references to species growing in her own gardens and conservatory. During her lifetime, Dickinson was far more well-known as an expert gardener than as a poet. A close family friend once remarked that “Emily had an uncanny knack of making even the frailest growing things flourish.”

Although no photograph or detailed plan exists from the 1860s, Emily’s gardens were described by family members as extensive flower beds containing arbors and a summer house covered in roses. Today, the property is preserved as the Emily Dickinson Museum and is the site of ongoing archaeological excavations by the University of Massachusetts Amherst. In 2015, excavations revealed the footprint of her conservatory, which has now been rebuilt and repopulated with many plant species known to have been cultivated by Dickinson. Excavations across the property also helped delineate the barn yard, property hedge row, and potential garden bed locations. During excavation efforts last summer, Center for the Analysis of Archaeological Materials (CAAM) student Alexandria Mitchem processed archaeological soils from each of these locations to recover seeds and other types of plant material.

Students in CAAM recently had the opportunity to examine a number of samples from Emily Dickinson’s property as part of the ANTH 533 Archaeobotany Seminar in Fall 2017. Penn Museum Fellow Maddie Fried (C18)
continued this work into the spring semester. The students examined samples using low-power microscopy to identify botanical species (typically seeds, berries, and wood). Our research questions centered on reconstructing the cultivated and natural landscapes that Dickinson once inhabited, with a detailed eye for identifying evidence of potential garden plants. Within the samples, many thousands of seeds were recovered, including oxalis and morning glory, two plants that Dickinson certainly cultivated, as well as common garden weeds such as carpetweed and purslane. Evidence for the hedgerow that once separated the garden lawn from the street was identified through the presence of hemlock cones and bayberry fruits. Using high-power microscopy, wood fragments which may have been part of the demolished barn were revealed to be American chestnut, a once ubiquitous species that is all but extinct today.

One particularly unique element of this investigation has been access to the family’s historical documents and Dickinson’s own literary record as a means of supplementing our archaeobotanical interpretations. For example, the discovery of two varieties of grape seeds—one an Old World variety (Vitis vinifera) and one a New World variety (Vitis cf. labrusca)—is confirmed by the writings of Emily’s late niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi. She recalled that Emily’s mother maintained a trellis of grapevines that held at least three different varieties, including blue, purple, and white grapes. The family made homemade wine, notably a sweet Malmsey white wine, as well as wine jelly. Emily even described her own appearance in wine terms, likening the color of her eyes to “sherry in the glass.”

The archaeobotanical analysis of samples from the Dickinson property will continue in CAAM with the hope of uncovering more about Emily’s gardens and the related spaces of orchards, grape and fig trellises, and vegetable gardens. Emily spent most of her adult life within these few acres, and it was a landscape she knew well and cherished throughout her life. *

Archaeobotany students Maddie Fried, Markos Kapes, Bevan Pearson, Arielle Pierson, and Juliet Stein were instrumental in this research and their work is greatly appreciated. Fieldwork by Alexandria Mitchem and lab work by CAAM volunteer Kevin McKain were also key to this project. We are indebted to the UMass Amherst archaeology team for providing access to these samples and wish to thank Julie Woods, Kerry Lynch, and Eric Johnson for this opportunity, as well as the Emily Dickinson Museum.

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