

# A garden good for what ailed our ancestors

## More than 100 medicinal plants are tended at Pennsylvania Hospital.

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RON TARVER / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Arleen Weinstein (left) and Betty Toland, weeding and mulching, are among 50 volunteers who maintain the Physic Garden. The walled retreat, at its best now, is in the 800 block of Pine Street, in front of Pennsylvania Hospital's original building.

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Imagine you have a fever that won't go away. You call your doctor, who says, "Take some bloodroot and call me in the morning."

Could have happened in the 18th century, except there were no telephones and few trained doctors. But there was bloodroot, which people took for fever and rheumatism, as well as hundreds of other herbs to treat everything from toothaches and syphilis to head colds and snake bites.

That golden age of herbal medicine has been recreated in the charming Physic Garden at Pennsylvania Hospital, founded in 1751 as the nation's first hospital by Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Bond. *Physic* is

the old-fashioned term for medicine, which until the modern era was infinitely more art than science.

"These things actually go back to antiquity," says Lucia Shen of West Philadelphia, coordinator of about 50 volunteers who maintain the garden.

It's a walled retreat in the 800 block of Pine Street, in front of the Pine Building, which was the original hospital. More than 100 medicinal plants are laid out in classic style, with eight beds radiating out from a center circle, an L-shaped border of woodland plants, a walking path, and benches.

Although pleasant in May, now is the Physic Garden's best time, with blooms continuing through October. It's free, and open to the public.

Volunteers have planted, pruned, weeded and otherwise cared for the plants organically since 1976, when the Philadelphia committee of the Garden Club of America and the Friends of Pennsylvania Hospital pledged to recreate an 18th-century medicinal garden for the Bicentennial. (In 1774, just such a garden was authorized by the hospital, but it never came to be, probably for financial reasons.)

The Physic Garden was built on the site of an old clay tennis court once used - back when free time wasn't a fantasy - by the hospital's doctors and nurses.

Betty Toland of Media, a.k.a. "Betty the Lopper" for her pruning prowess, has been volunteering there for three decades. "I've been hiding under a bush," she jokes after putting in her hours one recent hot morning.

Ditto, it seems, for visitors. "It's been very much a secret garden. People don't know it's here," Shen says.

That began to change last year, when a \$50,000 grant from the Burpee Foundation funded a program called Learn to Grow. Since then, the grant has been renewed and more than 1,000 children have toured the garden with historic guide Essie Karp, who teaches them about plants and their place in the history of American medicine.

"They can look, sniff and pinch, but they're not allowed to eat anything," Karp says. "A lot of stuff is poisonous."

Which, naturally, fascinates everyone, and that's part of the package. Karp believes kids need to learn all about our herbal past.

They know that the early settlers came here for a better life. "But I tell them it wasn't that easy, and that one of the greatest hardships was staying healthy. There were no Rite Aids," Karp says.

Kids also know "the environment" is important, but that sounds vast and vague. Karp connects the herbal remedies of old with modern medicine, one of many ways human life and plants intersect.

"Forty percent of modern pharmaceuticals use plants for their medicines," she says, citing white willow tree bark, which brought forth aspirin, and foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*), which gave us the heart medication Digoxin.

Hints of nature's role in healing are everywhere as you walk through the garden. And some things are just plain obvious.

Woolly lamb's ears, for example, officially known as *Stachys byzantina* and sometimes called woundwort, are beloved by gardeners for their silver-green leaves and lavender flowers, fuzzy feel and water-conserving nature.

But, think about it: One is also just the right size and texture for a bandage. And when you rub it, healing oils are released.

"This is a 200-year-old Band-Aid," says Karp, who's been known to "bandage" her delighted charges.

The ancestors of most of the Physic Garden's plants came to this country with the early European settlers or were here when they arrived, their use conveyed to the newcomers by American Indians. Historically, the plants and herbs were taken raw or roasted, drunk as a "tea," or ground up and mixed with oils.

There's dogwood for malaria and monkshood for sciatica, wild indigo for ulcers and costmary for dysentery. Our forebears liked sneezeweed for colds and believed lemon balm calmed unruly children. (On the off chance that this is true, do we grind, roast, make tea, what?)

After such a menu of maladies, we've developed, as in days of olde, "mental debility" and "nervous complaints." Whatever shall we do?

As they say in 2007, no problem.

Have a seat in the Physic Garden. And check out the queen of the prairie (*Filipendula rubra*) over there. This two-toned, cloud-of-pink plant with the misty, cotton-candy look makes the heart merry.

So they say.

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## Tour the Garden

The Physic Garden, Eighth and Pine Streets, is open weekdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. For tour information, call 215-829-3370. To be a garden volunteer, call 215-222-5757.

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Take a video tour at  
<http://go.philly.com/thephysicgarden>.

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