

SOUTH OF BOSTON

New book uncovers the seeds of today's flower gardens

By Robert Knox
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Quincy author Thomas Mickey's new book "All About Flowers" tells the story of how America's floral landscape developed into the familiar scenes we recognize each summer.

Households grow flowers in their yards and plant them in pots. Restaurants and shops put them in planters outside the door. And much of what we plant, Mickey tells us, is immediately recognizable.

"Most likely," the retired professor states, "we will follow the example of the Victorian gardener and plant familiar flowers like the petunia, geranium, impatiens, and marigolds."

How did this longlasting trend begin? One explanation for certain flowers taking root in the nation's gardening palette lies in the work of the influential seed company pioneer, promoter, and writer James Vick, who was born in England in 1818 and prospered in mid-century Rochester, N.Y.

Mickey's book, titled in full "All About Flowers: James Vick's Nineteenth-Century Seed Com-

pany" (published by Ohio University Press), tells the remarkable story of an underappreciated industry founder.

"Gardening at the home took off after 1850 when people had the leisure time," said Mickey, who taught communications at Bridgewater State University.

Before that period only the wealthy had sufficient property and means to think about landscaping. In the latter half of the 19th century as America's industrialization took off, a new economy created more middle-class jobs and incomes. People moved from farms to be closer to cities, and middle-class families could afford a house with both a vegetable garden and a flower garden.

Mickey, whose previous book "America's Romance with the English Garden" discussed the influence of the English garden on American landscaping styles, discovered James Vick in a library archive in Rochester, a wealthy and important city in the 19th century, where the journalist founded his seed company and created the country's premier gardening journal.



IMAGES COURTESY OF THOMAS MICKEY

Quincy's Thomas Mickey, above left, has written a new book, "All About Flowers," about James Vick, above right, and his enduring influence on American gardens. Right, an illustration of a petunia from "Vick's Illustrated Monthly" in 1879.



"I wanted to tell Vick's story," he said.

Before he started his seed company, Vick's writing and editing career included a stint as managing editor for Frederick Douglass's anti-slavery newspaper, "The North Star." After starting up his seed company Vick acquired an influential gardening magazine to help persuade Americans to grow flowers at home and advise them on what to plant. By 1872, the Vick Seed Company was annually sending out 200,000 illustrated catalogues.

"He systematized the seed business," Mickey states in promotional material for his book, "growing seeds, drying them, packaging them, and shipping them around the country, well before both Sears and Montgomery Ward sent out their first catalogues."

A few years later the journal-

ist and entrepreneur created what became America's most influential gardening magazine, "Vick's Illustrated Monthly." The journal, Mickey writes, set the standard for the nation's horticultural writing.

In a foreword to "All About Flowers," Cultural Landscape Foundation president Charles Birnbaum cites Vick's accomplishments as a horticulturist (crossbreeding flowers such as white-double phlox), a seedsman, nursery owner, publisher, and author. "Among so many other aspects of the man, we learn that Vick was a communication and marketing master," Birnbaum states.

Vick's company sold most of the commonly used flowers we still grow today, and those flowers largely derive from English gardening habits that go back to the century before. He also sold native species and now popular

exotics such as dahlia and chrysanthemum.

In the course of his research Mickey met a descendant of Vick, who shared material from a family archive about his great-great-grandfather. Illustrations shared by the descendant were digitized and some were used in the book.

"We take the growing of flowers in a garden as a custom that must have been around forever," Mickey writes in his book's final chapter. But, in fact, he states, cultural attitudes had to change for growing flowers to emerge "as essential for both medicine and personal and home decoration."

Those changes include the emergence of magazines to women and the growth of newspapers after 1850, providing a medium for education and advertising. "Flower gardening became a status symbol" for a new

middle class, and the flower garden became a female arena.

"Women became the major gardeners in the household and exercised power in their own domain," Mickey said. "The women were completely in charge of the flower garden. Vick catered to that interest."

Many trends established in the middle of the 19th century continue today. Among the top-selling plants at the country's big box stores last year are flowers Vick sold in the 1850s, including pansies, petunias, marigolds, alysium, impatiens, geraniums, chrysanthemum, and dahlia.

Including some 50 illustrations, "All About Flowers: James Vick's Nineteenth-Century Seed Company," is available on Amazon and through the Ohio State Press.

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