

# English Cottage Garden Flowers

by Phyllis Williams

In attempting to create an English cottage garden, hundreds, if not thousands of flower possibilities present themselves. Because of horticultural "progress", new hybrids have replaced traditional varieties. It is nearly impossible to locate the original varieties of many of these plants. Remember too how important the selection of improved varieties was to these early gardeners. They risked a great deal sometimes to bring home that new flower from the manor house. Bigger, brighter, more fragrant; these objectives have always been dear to the gardener's heart. Do you really suppose they would begrudge today's gardeners the beautiful range of possibilities available?

More important than planting the actual varieties grown in those early cottage gardens is re-creating the shapes, forms, and feeling of an English garden of long ago. Certain flowers will suit that goal more than others. The following list is only the briefest outline of some perennial and annual flowers for your cottage garden. Some, such as bee balm, were never found in English cottage gardens, being native to North America. I have included those plants because they have many of the traits valued by English cottage gardeners: hardiness, easily propagated by division, and sometimes culinary or medicinal applications. Use these suggestions as a starting point for your own garden discovery. Cottage gardens were highly individualistic then; they should remain your own special vision in today's garden too.

## Herbs

*Thyme* Low, creeping with tiny leaves and even tinier flowers, perfect for tucking between flagstones or along pathway edges. When stepped on the unmistakable fragrance will fill the air; no harm done unless trampled regularly. Perennial

*Mint* Robust, if not downright aggressive. This hardy perennial can be invasive, so you may want to contain it in a sunken pot. It will thrive in shady, moist locations, creeping to fill all the little bare spots between plants. Perennial

*Rosemary* Not Winter-hardy, but worth bringing in each winter. Can be easily trained into a small topiary tree or left to become the most deliciously pine-ish scented herb. Tender perennial.

*Sage* A fully hardy perennial herb, growing about 24" tall and very full. The gray leaves have long been important in cooking, and the rounded form makes a pleasing mass. Try one of the variegated or purple leafed varieties too.

*Chives* Another hardy favorite; this perennial herb has the largest, showiest flowers. The grassy texture adds real interest to the garden, and the leaves add wonderful green onion flavor in dishes.

*Oregano* The "Italian" herb, growing about 16" tall. The flowers attract butterflies and bees. Hardy Perennial.

*Parsley* When sowing the seeds for this annual, water them initially with boiling water. It sounds a little crazy, but will greatly hasten germination. The tasty leaves are also a favorite of yellow swallowtail butterfly caterpillars.

*Lavender* In our harsh Winters, lavender needs a bit of protection. It won't become the 3' tall shrub it can in milder climates, but it worth growing just the same. It's soap and water scented leaves and flowers were traditionally used to freshen linens. Half-hardy perennial.

## Flowers

*Babies Breath (Gypsophila)* Not a traditional choice, but a wonderful addition. The large double varieties, perennial, will grow almost 3' tall and wide. Valuable if you want to include everlastings to your garden.

*Bachelor Buttons (Centaurea)* Known as cornflowers in English, this true blue flower was grown as early as 1629. A common weed in medieval times, it had several medicinal uses. For your garden, select the tallest variety you can find.

*Balloon Flower (Platycodon)* Another true blue flower, fully hardy. It's late to emerge in the Spring, so be careful not to dig it up. Flowers in late Summer.

*Bea Balm (Monarda)* An American native, this perennial grows 3' tall or more. The flower colors vary from soft pink to rich plum, even red. The leaves and blossoms can be used as tea. A member of the mint family.

*Bellflower (Campanula)* A very large versatile family of plants, growing from 8" to 18". Most flower in white or blue. Canterbury bells, biennials, are in this family. Most are hardy perennials.

*Bleeding Heart (Dicentra)* Not available in England until 1846, it soon became a garden favorite. The old fashioned pink and white variety is probably still the best, but Alba, an all-white variety, is charming too. A large, ungainly beauty, the foliage generally dies down in mid-Summer. Plant a few zinnia seeds to mark the spot and give a bit of late color.

*Butterfly Bush (Buddleia)* Actually a tender shrub that dies back to the roots, this plant's flowers will attract so many butterflies, you might be accused of witchcraft! The deep lavender shades are most effective.

*Cockscomb (Celosia)* Grown as early as Elizabethan times, this gaudy flower still finds a spot in many old fashioned gardens. It does dry without any fading; the large crested variety the most spectacular. Annual

*Columbine (Aquilegia)* Used for a plague cure-all, this flower has long been grown in English gardens. It reseeds in wonderfully unique color combinations if you don't cut off faded flowers or cultivate too cleanly. Perennial.



*Coneflower (Rudbeckia)* Found in America, but as early as the 1700's valued in English gardens. Adding lots of color to the late Summer garden, the seed heads are attractive to birds. Perennial.

*Coral Bells (Heuchera)* Dainty rose pink flowers with low foliage that turns a beautiful reddish orange in the Fall. Hardy perennial.

*Daffodils (Narcissus)* Early color in the garden! Use the flat-faced bi-colored varieties or the strong trumpets, especially in white.

*Daylily (Hemerocallis)* Brought to English by French refugees in the late 16th century, the flower buds were widely eaten. I suggest you plant them for their long flowering period rather than for dinner. Look for fragrant varieties.

*Forget-Me-Not (Myosotis)* A tiny blue flowering perennial, found in gardens throughout the world. Many quaint legends surround its name. Biennial, will reseed.

*Foxglove (Digitalis)* The classic English Cottage Garden flower. Tall spires of spotted bells, in shades of pink or white. Connected with tales of fairies, this plant was sometimes used by herbalists. Since it contains the powerful chemical digitalin, your chances of a cure were slim. Biennial.

*Hollyhocks (Alcea rosea)* Another classic garden beauty, again with the spike flower form so necessary if you desire a cottage garden effect. The papery blossoms were used by little girls forever to make flower dolls. Tall, reseeding biennials. Will flower the first year if started early indoors.

*Lamb's Ear (Stachys)* The thick gray furry leaves of this hardy perennial were associated with healing in medieval times. A valuable gray accent plant

*Larkspur (Delphinium)* Tall and absolutely magnificent when protected from wind, the rich blue shades of these blossoms will make it a memorable June. Perennial.

*Lily of the Valley (Convallaria)* Cultivated for over 400 years, you might want to grow it for a decade or two in your garden. Surrounded by legends of love and purity, this tiny white flower is one of the most fragrant. Perennial, and quite a abundant grower. Share with your friends

*Nasturtium* These bright annual flowers were introduced to England from Mexico in 1574. They soon found use with the British sailors who ate the pickled seeds to prevent scurvy. The vining forms can help cover a modern eyesore in your cottage garden.

*Pansy (Viola)* Tiny Johnny jump-ups are the origin of today's pansies with larger "faces". Shakespeare mentions pansies and markings on the petals were used by knights of the round table to predict the outcome of battles, especially of the heart. Use these annual flowers near your garden bench; each different face is special and will require some quiet time to enjoy properly.

*Peony* This lush, loose beauty, with flower heads measuring 4-6" across will fill your garden with scent when in bloom. Brought to England by the Romans in 1200, this is an authentic cottage garden flower. The single flower varieties aren't as likely to flop after rainy weather, but I'd choose for the fragrance, not the form.

*Pinks (Dianthus)* Sweet and spicy, these pink flowers are known today as carnations. Our modern hybrids are fully double, and most dianthus are hardy, whether classified as annuals or perennials. A mid-sized plant.

*Primroses (Primula)* How could you have an English garden without primrose. Save a shady, moist spot for these half-hardy perennials in primary colors. Remember to mulch them for the Winter,; you would definitely miss their cheerful color next Spring if you didn't.

*Roses* Although roses were not grown in the original cottage gardens, they soon became a basic garden element throughout England. In your cottage garden, try something other than the modern hybrid teas. The re-created English roses, very full and fragrant would be a good choice. Floribundas, with their clusters of many smaller flowers would also fit right in. Climbing roses are a challenge in our area, but the results can be unforgettable.

*Snapdragon (Antirrhinum)* These annuals are called bunny toes in England. With a heavy mulch, they'll often overwinter, why not try it? Again the flower spires are classic cottage garden.

*Snow in Summer (Cerastium tomentosum)* A handy creeper with gray leaves and pure white flowers in Summer. Use it with thyme as a crack filler, or in a stone wall. Perennial.

*Stocks (Matthiola)* In the 1600's, gardeners planted this annual during a full moon for double flowers. This highly fragrant flower thrives in cool early Summer days

*Tulip* Try a few groupings of the low botanical tulips, with clusters of smaller blooms for early color in your cottage garden. Remember too that quite a few tulips are fragrant.

*Wormwood (Artemisia)* A hardy group of perennial plants, grown mainly for their gray foliage. Recommended in the 16th century as a snake repellent, it's also said to discourage moths. Some varieties can be invasive; choose wisely.

*Yarrow (Achillea)* Common in Middle Ages, yarrow was supposed to make all other herbs and medicinal stronger when planted in the garden. It grows full and tall, appx. 3' by 3'. The foliage is aromatic and the gold flowers are easy everlastings. Tradition folklore says that yarrow beneath ones pillow will cause dreams of love. Be careful though, to dream of cabbages when yarrow is under your pillow is sure to bring bad luck! A hardy perennial.