

Authors and Gardeners from the Classical Tradition

Many well-known classic authors were also gardening enthusiasts who drew inspiration from their gardens.

Pride and Prejudice

By Jane Austen

Written in 1813, *Pride and Prejudice* is one of the most popular and enduring novels in the English language, spawning many adaptations for film and TV. The story centers on the Bennett family, minor English landed gentry, that includes five very different daughters. While it is a work of romantic fiction, it has elements of social commentary and satire, particularly of the family matriarch who is obsessed with finding husbands for all the daughters. Elizabeth Bennett, the high-spirited and intelligent heroine, was said to be Austen's favorite. Love triumphs and all ends happily in this charming story.

Jane Austen (1775 – 1817) was born into a large and affectionate family. Her father, a rector, was a scholar who encouraged a love of learning. When her father died in 1805, she and her family settled in the town of Chawton, where she wrote most of her novels. Her first book accepted for publication was *Sense and Sensibility*, which, like all her books published during her lifetime, was published anonymously. She and her sister Cassandra never married. Her books have never been out of print in 200 years. *Gardens figure prominently in many of them. Her home and gardens at Chawton can be visited today.*

The Age of Innocence

By Edith Wharton

The Age of Innocence is a portrayal of the lives of the upper class in New York's Gilded Age. It depicts the conflict between conformity with societal and family obligations and forbidden love. As in her other masterpiece, *Ethan Frome*, the protagonists, whether upper class or poverty stricken, must decide whether to fulfill their duty or follow their hearts. *Age of Innocence* won the Pulitzer Prize and was made into a lavish film in 1993 by Martin Scorsese.

Edith Wharton (1862 – 1937) told stories from an early age, but this passion was quashed by her family, not wishing to see her name in print, as writing was not considered a suitable occupation. *Widely traveled, she was also a famous garden and interior designer.* In WW I she worked tirelessly for refugees, injured, unemployed, and displaced while living in France. She was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize, in 1921, for *The Age of Innocence*. The Mount, in Lenox, Massachusetts, is Wharton's historic home and garden, designed and built by her. The spectacular site is a National Historic Landmark and every aspect evokes the spirit of its creator.

Photo courtesy of Charles Wesley Hearn, Beinecke Library, Yale University

Short Stories and Poems

Edgar Allen Poe

“Once upon a midnight dreary” and “Quoth the Raven: Nevermore” are words that echo 180 years since being written. Short stories such as “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”, “The Pit and the Pendulum”, “The Tell-Tale Heart”, “The Fall of the House of Usher”, and “The Masque of the Red Death” have the ability to horrify and yet they also explore the mysteries of self, of others, of nature, and the universe. Who doesn't remember memorizing these poems and reading these short stories in school? Time to re-examine this influential master!

Edgar Allan Poe (1809 – 1849) was an American poet, short-story author, literary critic, and editor. He is considered the architect of the modern short story, the detective story, and science fiction. The atmosphere in his tales of horror is unequalled, and he has had a profound and ongoing influence on films, literature, music, art, and graphic novels. He inspired greats such as H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. While his life was short and mostly sad, and he died under mysterious circumstances, his legacy endures. *He also had a great interest in gardening. He wrote many pieces about nature, landscape gardens, and flowers. The Poe Museum Enchanted Garden opened in Virginia in 1922 as a memorial to him.*

A Tale of Two Cities

By Charles Dickens

Full of symbol and metaphor, this great historical novel is set in London and Paris before and during the Reign of Terror of the French Revolution. As with all Dickens' novels, it is peopled with memorable major and minor characters: the bloodthirsty revolutionary Madame Defarge; sweet Lucy Manette, daughter of an English physician; Charles Darnay, her French aristocrat husband; and the flawed but heroic barrister Sydney Carton, who ultimately sacrifices everything for the woman he loves. See why the novel ends with Carton's words: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done".

Charles Dickens (1812 – 1870) was considered the greatest novelist of the Victorian era. Extremely popular during his lifetime, the greatest celebrity of his era, his works are still widely read today. A keen observer of society, he was a social reformer who wrote about poverty, injustice, and crime. The word "Dickensian" has come to be associated with the grim plight of children and the urban poor (think *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol*). *He loved all flowers, but his favorite was the scarlet geranium, which he wore in his buttonhole when he gave his famous readings. He wrote "There is no feeling in the human mind stronger than the love of gardening"*. He is buried in Westminster Abbey.

Walden; or, Life in the Woods

By Henry David Thoreau

Part memoir, part spiritual quest, and part social critique, the book details Thoreau's experiences over the course of two years in a cabin he built on Walden Pond, near Concord, Massachusetts. His intention was to see if he could survive in an environment free from luxuries, to live simply and self-sufficiently. It is a difficult book to read because of its archaic prose style, long and complicated sentences, and detailed descriptions. Despite slow initial sales, later critics praised it as an American classic that explores independence, wisdom, harmony, and beauty.

Henry David Thoreau (1817 – 1862) was an American naturalist, essayist, poet, and philosopher. He was a leading Transcendentalist of the time, along with Ralph Waldo Emerson. Transcendentalism was a philosophical and social movement which developed in New England in the 1830's. It believed that divinity pervades all of nature and humanity but that humans are corrupted by society and institutions. Transcendentalism was anti-materialist, anti-conformity, anti-slavery and held progressive views on feminism. As a literary movement it had essay writing and poetry at its heart. *Thoreau was an avid plant collector and was versed in binomial nomenclature. Some of his specimens still survive in an herbarium at Harvard University.*

Little Women

By Louisa May Alcott

This coming-of-age autobiographical novel was published in 1869 and was an immediate success. It tells the story of four sisters and their indomitable mother, growing up during the Civil War with a father who was away serving in the Army: talented tomboy Jo, frail Beth, lovely but domestic Meg, and romantic dreamer Amy. The characters had gardening as a hobby and each of their gardens were as different as their personalities. The story has retained a seemingly inexhaustible and enduring fascination among readers of all ages and filmmakers in particular, who have interpreted it in various ways, as recently as 2019.

Louisa May Alcott (1832 – 1888), an American novelist, short story writer, and poet is best known for her autobiographical *Little Women* and its sequels. Her father associated with Thoreau, Emerson, and Hawthorne, but he often failed to provide adequately for his family. This became a lifelong concern of Louisa's. She and her sisters worked as seamstresses and governesses, and Louisa was a nurse during the Civil War. She never married, but once she achieved success as a writer, she was able to provide for her parents until they died. Orchard House in Concord, MA is where Alcott did her writing and where she set *Little Women*. *The house and gardens can still be visited today.*

Uncle Tom's Cabin

By Harriet Beecher Stowe

In 1852, goaded into action by the Fugitive Slave Act, Stowe set out to “paint a picture of slavery” and to inspire Northerners to defy the Act. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* portrays all the evils of slavery: family separation, slave hunters, sadistic and brutal plantation owners. Uncle Tom is the main character and the actions of all the other characters revolve around him. Uncle Tom is a staunch Christian, and the Christian faith and Christian references have an important role in the story. Stowe did her best to portray the slaves as distinct human beings with feelings. Stylistically, the novel has been criticized as being overly sentimental, but this style was not uncommon in the 19th century. It was one of the most popular books of the 19th century, exceeded only by the Bible, and was translated into 70 languages. It fueled the abolitionist movement and is credited with laying the foundation for the Civil War.

Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) wrote over 30 books, but it was *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that propelled her to international celebrity and affirmed the ability of women to have great influence in social causes. The daughter of a prominent Congregational minister, she was well educated and met many of the great minds and reformers of her day. The death of her son in a cholera epidemic inspired her empathy for enslaved mothers who had their children sold away from them. *Stowe was an accomplished and enthusiastic gardener and had flower and vegetable gardens in all her homes. She equated an orderly and beautiful garden with a productive life.* She wrote many gardening articles and poems. Visitors to the Stowe Center in Hartford, CT will see eight distinctive gardens, including a woodland garden, wildflower meadow, antique rose garden and color coordinated gardens that were the fashion in her day. She wrote “A garden is a place of healing to the soul”.