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Early California Gardens

In the December issue of 1890, the publishers of Century Magazine must have been interested in historical California for in that issue they featured articles by John Bidwell, pioneer of 1841 and associate of John Sutter of Sutter's Fort, and James W. Marshall, the discoverer of gold at Coloma on January 24, 1848 and Guadalupe Vallejo, son of Don J.J. Vallejo and grandson of Don Ygnacio Vallejo.

In one of the interesting articles written by this pioneer of early California, Guadalupe Vallejo, he told of early California gardens and horticulture of that day. "I have often been asked about the old mission and ranch gardens," he wrote. "They were, I think, more extensive and contained a greater variety of trees and plants than most persons imagine.

The Jesuits had gardens in Baja California in 1699, and vineyards and orchards a few years later. The Franciscans in Alta California began to cultivate the soil as soon as they landed. The first grapevines were brought from Lower California in 1769 and were soon planted at all the missions except Dolores, where they did not think the climate was suitable.

Before the year 1800 the orchards at the missions grew apples, pears, peaches, apricots, plums, cherries, figs, olives, oranges, pomegranates. At San Diego and San Buenaventura Missions there were also sugar cane, date palms, plantains, bananas and citrons. There were orchards and vineyards in California sufficient to supply all the wants of the people.

"I remember that at the Mission San Jose we had all varieties of seedling fruits which have now been lost by cultivation," wrote Vallejo in 1890. "Of pears we had four sorts, one ripening in early summer, and two in autumn and winter. The Spanish name of these two pears were the "Presidenta," the "Bergamota," the "Pana," and the "Lechera." One of them was as large as a "Bartlette," but there are no trees of it left now."

The apples, grown from seed, ripened at various seasons, Vallejo explained, and there were seedling peaches, both early and late. An interesting and popular fruit, he said, was that of the Nopal, or prickly pear. This fruit, then called "tuna," grew on great hedges which

protected part of the mission orchards and were 20 feet high and 10 or 12 feet thick.

Vallejo goes on in this 62 year old article, to tell of the ways in which to eat this prickly pear. It is to be peeled so as to escape the tiny thorns on the skin, then it is delicious. The missions also had avenues of fig, olive, and other trees about the buildings, besides the orchards. In later years American squatters and campers often cut down these trees for firewood, or built fires against the trunks, which killed them. In this way several hundred large and valuable olive trees at the San Diego Mission were killed. The old orchards were pruned and cultivated with much care, and the paths swept by the Indians, but after the sequestration of the mission property they were neglected and ran wild. The olive mills and wine presses were destroyed, and cattle were pastured in the once fruitful groves, relates Vallejo from stories told him by his grandfather.

The flower gardens were gay with roses, chiefly a pink and very fragrant sort from Mexico, called by the early Californian a Castilian rose and still seen in a few old gardens, although few persons know the real Castilian rose. Besides roses the early Californians had pinks, sweet peas, hollyhocks, nasturtiums which had been brought from Mexico, and white lilies.

The vegetable gardens contained peas, beans, beets, lentils, onions, carrots, red peppers, corn, tomatoes, squash, cucumbers and melons. A fine quality of tobacco was grown to some extent. A fine large cane, a native of Mexico, was planted in those days before the "Gold Rush," and the joints found useful as spools in the blanket factory, and for some domestic purposes. The young shoots of this cane were sometimes cooked for food. Other kinds of plants were grown in the old gardens, but these were all that Vallejo was able to remember in 1890, the year he wrote the article from memories related to him by his grandfather, Don Ygnacio Vallejo.