

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Bountiful Mission Gardens

The story of Alta California's bountiful mission gardens is a fascinating history of horticulture in the state. They were a deep source of comfort to the Franciscans who brought civilization to the strange, heathen land of California, "In them, the padres paced softly back and forth, telling their beads in the light shade of rustling palms or grey-green olive trees, reading the office beneath fruit trees which showered them with fragrant petals or temptingly offered delicious peaches, pears, and apples as symbols of God."

Beans, corn and wheat were the first crops which they naturally planted being busy with the production of the adobes and tile for the church and housing which should come first during the first year or two. These were supplemented by dried figs, dates and raisins shipped up from Baja California, and by the harvest of that vast natural garden from which the Indians gathered fruits, berries, wild vegetables, roots, acorns, pinon nuts, and edible seeds of many kinds.

Father Crespi wrote to Father Palou on June 5, 1769, shortly after reaching San Diego, the site chosen for the first settlement: "All the plain is dotted over with wild grape vines, which look as if they had been planted, and at present their many branches are in bloom."

Portola discovered so many grapevines in the valley where San Juan Capistrano was established that he compared the region to a great vineyard, while the riverbank at San Gabriel was lined with blackberries, grapes, and roses, as well as with wild celery and onions.

After Father Font's scurvy had been cured by the vegetables at Mission San Carlos, he declared it was "a delight to see the garden so beautiful and full of vegetables - all around it was a border of azaleas - the beds full of cauliflowers, lettuce, and other vegetables and herbs.

"The gardens of the governor and the missions were filled with an infinity of culinary plants, which were gathered for our use," the French explorer, Comte de la Perouse wrote in 1786, "and our seamen never had greater abundance of vegetables in any part of the world." Whaling vessels and Manila galleons were able to rehabilitate their stricken crews (scurvy) with

vegetables and fruit taken on at various ports in California,

Langsdorff, who accompanied the Russian expeditions of 1806, praised the kitchen gardens at San Jose, which he described as "exceptionally well laid out" and in good order. The fruit trees were still small, but the vineyards were already yielding bountifully.

The padres' accounts tell of the edible fruit of the tuna cactus, introduced from Mexico, which had an appetizing, tartly refreshing flavor. As mission and rancho cattle roamed in ever-increasing numbers about the countryside, growing things had to be protected by high walls of adobe and tiles laid along the top, or by these impenetrable hedges of cactus.

The abundance of wild roses gave the padres an infinite delight. Father Serra wrote: "Blessed be He who created them." Crespi liked them, too.

He wrote: "There are many Castilian rose bushes with very fragrant roses, which I have held in my hand and smelled - in short, it is a beautiful land, quite distinct from that of Antigua California." The padres transplanted so many of these wild-rose bushes - called "teczuma" by the Indians, who made flour from the very oily seeds that almost every mission still proudly displays its "roses of Castile."

Date seeds presented to Mission San Diego by Visitador Galvez in 1869 eventually developed into stately trees, two of which remain near the ruins of the first settlement. The English walnut was probably propagated from nuts brought from Spain. Seeds of the pepper tree, the "Schinus molle," from Peru were planted at San Luis Rey in 1830 by Father Peyri. Descendants of these trees have spread throughout the state.

"We enriched the gardens of the governor and the missions with our various seeds we brought from Paris." la Perouse wrote in his journal. "Our gardener gave the missionaries some potatoes, from Chili, perfectly well preserved, which I by no means consider one of our meanest gifts, as I am of the opinion this root will succeed perfectly in the light and highly vegetative soil of the environs of Monterey."

De Mofras, a French scientist who visited California in 1841, declared that San Luis Obispo's olive grove rivaled the finest in Andalusia. San Gabriel had an orchard, which furnished the plantings for the first commercial

grove, set out by William Wolfskill in 1841. Mission pear trees, some of them still bearing, are the oldest deciduous fruit trees in California. San Luis Obispo had the first cruciform grape arbor in California. Father Catala, the "Holy Man of Santa Clara," had the Indians gather black willow cuttings from the creek banks and plant them in rows along the Alameda from San Jose to Santa Clara. The mission garden at Santa Cruz specialized in chili peppers, melons, pumpkins, gourds for drinking cups, and herbs essential to the Spanish-California cuisine.