

# HARDY HERBACEOUS PLANTS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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With the current interest in historic landscapes and period gardening, landscape architects, nurserymen, garden historians, and educators often are challenged with the task of identifying and producing appropriate plant material for period landscaping, taking into account regional variations in the popularity and availability of particular plant species and cultivars for different eras. During the past few years among my own limited circle of acquaintances in Columbus, Ohio, at least eight garden designers have indicated to me their involvement in historic projects. Little has been documented on the development of ornamental gardening and the herbaceous perennial industry for specific states, particularly any west of the Alleghenies. By studying the development of nurseries, their plant offerings, and design recommendations in the literature for specific regions and individual states, better choices can be made concerning hardy plant selection and incorporation into period gardens and landscapes.

This study documented the commercial availability and landscape use of hardy herbaceous ornamental plants in the nineteenth-century northeastern American landscape. Herbaceous plants, by their very nature, are relatively ephemeral in the landscape, with some exceptions such as specimens of *Paeonia* and *Hemerocallis*, which have survived unchanged at many old homesteads. Documentation therefore must rely more on written records, utilizing period books, nursery catalogues, diaries, photographs, and business records and inventories.

Most landscape historians agree that the nursery plant or seed catalogue is the best source for reliable information on nursery activities and plants available during a certain period, superseding information in the garden literature of the time. There are, unfortunately, several biases inherent in this type of documentation. Catalogues typically are representative of those nurseries or seed houses that were prosperous enough to issue them for distribution. For example, there is evidence that over 700 different nurseries existed in the state of Ohio at some point or another during the nineteenth century. Of these, only 36 firms are represented in the 90 nursery and seed catalogues located for this study. Obviously data based on just those catalogues had to be skewed toward a few representatives. Moreover, catalogues had to be of sufficient quality to survive for one hundred-plus years in often less-than-optimal

conditions. And someone, somewhere, had to be motivated to save their catalogues. The *Vick's Floral Guide* of 1872 reported that it issued 200,000 copies for distribution. Only a handful of these have survived. Today rare book and paper dealers classify trade catalogues as "ephemera," a term that states the case succinctly. An additional concern is that, without sales records, it is impossible to determine the extent of the actual exchange of any particular plants or even to prove that the listing insured availability. Still, catalogues remain the soundest means for studying horticultural tastes of a previous era.

Table 1 (page 32) is a summary of the nursery and seed catalogues used in this study. Places of repository for these catalogues include The Massachusetts Horticultural Society, The Smithsonian Institution, The National Agricultural Library at Beltsville, Maryland, The University of Delaware, The Bailey Hortorium at Cornell University, The Ohio Historical Society, The Cleveland Medical Library, the Lloyd Library of Cincinnati, and the author's own collection. There were 357 catalogues representing 139 firms in northeastern United States.

As can be seen, nearly 2700 taxa were represented in these 357 catalogues. In order to rank them by frequency of availability, a formula was used that took into account the number of sources listing the plant, the number of years between the first record and the end of the period (1900) and the total number of sources.<sup>1</sup>

In Table 2 (page 33) those hardy herbaceous plants that were offered most frequently in the nineteenth century are listed in a composite numerical ranking of availability. The heading "first year" refers to the year of the first nineteenth-century citation which this author found for each particular plant. This table is useful to gain a general perspective of the relative importance of various plant species. Because it is based on but 357 catalogues which still exist, out of the many thousands which were produced by nineteenth-century firms, only presumptive generalizations can be made, recognizing that more information is missing than is available. Yet the generalizations are based on the surviving evidence and will not likely be greatly modified in the future.

When the plants are arranged by the region (Table 3 below) in which they were available, some significant differences become obvious. The breakdown for the regions:

**Table 3: Breakdown of regions with number of firms indicated for each state.**

<b>Midwest (143 catalogues)</b> 62 firms	<b>Mid-Atlantic (138 catalogues)</b> 50 firms	<b>New England (76 catalogues)</b> 27 firms
Illinois, 14	District of Columbia, 1	Connecticut, 2
Indiana, 10	Maryland, 1	Maine, 2
Michigan, 2	New Jersey, 3	Massachusetts, 21
Ohio, 36	New York, 26	New Hampshire, 1
	Pennsylvania, 19	Vermont, 1

Table 1:  
Distribution of extant catalogues by states and decade.

	<u>OH</u>	<u>IL</u>	<u>IN</u>	<u>MI</u>	<u>NY</u>	<u>PA</u>	<u>MA</u>	<u>VT</u>
1810					2(141)	2(155)		
1820					8(559)	3(263)		
1830	1(77)				7(586)	none	10(456)	
1840	5(162)				10(557)	2(187)	8(497)	
1850	4(170)	7(190)			6(601)	4(164)	7(384)	4(115)
1860	10(166)	5(173)	3(19)		8(887)	9(244)	12(404)	NONE
1870	13(127)	6(104)	4(90)	4(99)	17(732)	13(677)	12(382)	2(111)
1880	18(200)	7(165)	2(40)	2(63)	9(435)	13(254)	11(604)	1(67)
1890	38(320)	6(90)	5(67)	2(43)	9(290)	15(411)	7(406)	2(81)
<b>Total</b>	90(628)	31(425)	14(142)	8(115)	76(1748)	62(1075)	67(1201)	9(236)

x(y)= Number of catalogues in category (total number different taxa represented)

OH=Ohio; IL=Illinois; IN=Indiana; MI=Michigan; NY=New York; PA=Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Washington, DC, Maryland; MA=Massachusetts; VT=Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, and Connecticut



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**Table 2:**  
**Most Available 100 Hardy Herbaceous Plants of the Nineteenth-Century Northeastern United States 1804-1899.**

Rank	Species	First Year	Rank	Species	First Year	Rank	Species	First Year
1	<i>Dianthus barbatus</i>	1810	36	<i>Hemerocallis lilio-asphodelus</i>	1811	70	<i>Armeria maritima</i>	1822
2	<i>Alcea rosea</i>	1811	37	<i>Filipendula rubra</i>	1804	71	<i>Digitalis ferruginea</i>	1811
3	<i>Dianthus caryophyllus</i>	1811	38	<i>Dianthus plumarius</i>	1827	72	<i>Paeonia suffruticosa</i>	1820
4	<i>Lychnis chalcedonica</i>	1811	39	<i>Centranthus ruber</i>	1822	73	<i>Primula veris</i>	1811
5	<i>Digitalis purpurea</i>	1810	40	<i>Iris germanica</i>	1819	74	<i>Catananche caerulea</i>	1822
6	<i>Phlox paniculata</i>	1804	41	<i>Paeonia 'Humei'</i>	1810	75	<i>Lobelia syphilitica</i>	1804
7	<i>Campanula medium</i>	1822	42	<i>Dicentra spectabilis</i>	1853	76	<i>Hedysarum coronarium</i>	1810
8	<i>Convallaria majalis</i>	1811	43	<i>Dodecatheon meadia</i>	1804	77	<i>Lilium martagon</i>	1810
9	<i>Lobelia cardinalis</i>	1804	44	<i>Linum perenne</i>	1820	78	<i>Oenothera macrocarpa</i>	1823
10	<i>Lathyrus latifolius</i>	1810	45	<i>Paeonia officinalis</i>	1811	79	<i>Liatris spicata</i>	1811
11	<i>Antirrhinum majus</i>	1820	46	<i>Aquilegia canadensis</i>	1804	80	<i>Lavandula augustifolia</i>	1822
12	<i>Tanacetum parthenium</i>	1810	46	<i>Monarda didyma</i>	1804	81	<i>Myosotis palustris</i>	1852
13	<i>Bellis perennis</i>	1822	47	<i>Aurinia saxatilis</i>	1830	82	<i>Lupinus polyphyllus</i>	1830
14	<i>Lilium candidum</i>	1810	48	<i>Senna marilandica</i>	1840	83	<i>Rudbeckia laciniata</i>	1804
15	<i>Yucca filamentosa</i>	1818	49	<i>Polemonium caeruleum</i>	1822	84	<i>Hibiscus moscheutos</i>	1804
16	<i>Hesperis matronalis</i>	1810	50	<i>Lilium superbum</i>	1804	85	<i>Astilbe japonica</i>	1844
17	<i>Viola tricolor</i>	1822	51	<i>Dianthus chinensis</i>	1827	86	<i>Iris germanica var. florentina</i>	1810
18	<i>Dictamnus albus</i>	1822	52	<i>Papaver bracteatum</i>	1829	87	<i>Aster novae-angliae</i>	1804
19	<i>Papaver orientale</i>	1822	53	<i>Filipendula vulgaris</i>	1822	88	<i>Hibiscus militaris</i>	1811
20	<i>Viola odorata</i>	1811	54	<i>Lupinus perennis</i>	1804	89	<i>Stipa pennata</i>	1844
21	<i>Aconitum napellus</i>	1820	55	<i>Primula auricula</i>	1811	90	<i>Paeonia tenuifolia</i>	1819
22	<i>Delphinium grandiflorum</i>	1822	56	<i>Helianthus x multiflorus</i>	1804	91	<i>Lychnis flos-cuculi</i>	1829
22	<i>Lychnis coronaria</i>	1811	57	<i>Aquilegia glandulosa</i>	1830	92	<i>Asclepias incarnata</i>	1804
23	<i>Paeonia lactiflora</i>	1810	57	<i>Lythrum salicaria var.</i>	1829	93	<i>Campanula trachelium</i>	1822
24	<i>Lilium lancifolium</i>	1823	58	<i>Delphinium formosum</i>	1857	94	<i>Phlox divaricata'</i>	1804
25	<i>Hosta ventricosa</i>	1811	59	<i>Phlox subulata</i>	1804	95	<i>Lilium auratum</i>	1866
26	<i>Hosta plantaginea</i>	1828	60	<i>Lilium speciosum</i>	1852	96	<i>Digitalis lutea</i>	1827
27	<i>Baptisia australis</i>	1804	61	<i>Echinacea purpurea</i>	1804	97	<i>Phlox maculata</i>	1804
28	<i>Platycodon grandiflorus</i>	1829	62	<i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>	1822			
29	<i>Campanula pyramidalis</i>	1820	63	<i>Physostegia virginiana</i>	1804			
30	<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>	1804	64	<i>Lilium longiflorum</i>	1833			
31	<i>Campanula carpatica</i>	1829	65	<i>Tradescantia virginiana</i>	1818			
32	<i>Delphinium elatum</i>	1820	66	<i>Achillea ptarmica</i>	1844			
33	<i>Penstemon barbatus</i>	1811	67	<i>Hemerocallis fulva</i>	1811			
34	<i>Aquilegia vulgaris</i>	1820	68	<i>Iberis sempervirens</i>	1834			
35	<i>Coreopsis lanceolata</i>	1804	69	<i>Aquilegia caerulea</i>	1829			
36	<i>Erysimum cheiri</i>	1820						

Although the first five plants were similar for each, regional variation is displayed as the lists developed in Table 4. In the first column, the table shows the most available 20 species and cultivars for northeastern United States. The adjacent three columns indicate the corresponding rank for each species and if a top 20 species is not in the national list, it has been added to that the top 20 plants for each region are also indicated.

The first five species are fairly consistent between the national figures and each region. Then, with the exceptions of *Phlox paniculata* and *Lobelia cardinalis*, the next seven plants have similar availabilities based on the extant catalogues.

After that regional variation becomes apparent. *Bellis perennis*, *Paeonia lactiflora*, *Dicentra spectabilis*, *Dianthus chinensis*, and *Achillea ptarmica* were widely available in the Midwest but, unusually, not quite as much in the other areas. On the other hand, only six of the 143 Midwest catalogues listed *Penstemon barbatus*, which was more available in the other two regions and on a national basis. Delphinium species were considerably higher on the list for New England than the other two regions. And *Aconitum napellus* was more apt to be found in a New York or Massachusetts catalogue, than in an Ohio catalogue.

It has been difficult to ascertain exactly why certain species appeared more often than others in the catalogues. Certainly tradition played an important role, as did the efforts of the professional cultivators who hybridized and promoted selections in several main genera including *Dianthus*, *Paeonia*, *Lilium*, and *Phlox*. Ease of propagation and culture appears to have been a significant attribute tied to the highest availability. Color also was an important consideration, often given as the reason to include, for example, *Lychnis chalcedonica* in the garden. Because the indexing system implicitly favors those plants available throughout the 1800s for century tabulations, the following table indicates the relative availability of hardy herbaceous plants which were first apparent in the catalogues after 1850. The indicated year is the first occurrence in

the extant catalogues, which may or may not be the actual date of introduction into American gardens. When looking at the rankings of specific genera, we can see that several have either remained popular, or perhaps are popular once again, in our contemporary nursery industry. *Hosta* and *Hemerocallis*, current front-runners, are found in the nineteenth-century top-thirty. *Phlox*, *Delphinium*, and *Iris* have also maintained a top-ranking among available perennials. Table 6 indicates the major genera from which the nineteenth-century nurseries offered a variety of species as compared with contemporary (1994)<sup>2</sup> sales rankings of genera.

Through their choice of plants, it may be argued that the nurseries effectively controlled much of the cultivated landscape in nineteenth-century United States. C. S. Sargent, at the end of the century, enumerated his view of the responsibilities of nurserymen and florists:

“In a late issue attention was invited to the important influence exerted by florists, seedsmen and nurserymen in forming the public taste in horticultural matters. In some directions this influence becomes almost absolutely controlling....The growers and dealers in plants and flowers owe it as a duty to their patrons to see that public taste is developed by being fed on what is good...The desire for novelties as such—for things new, irrespective of their intrinsic excellence—is a strong passion in the human breast, and one upon which a trader of any kind is tempted to play...Every season bring new claimants for favor to the front; rivalry in the introduction of novelties often prevents a thorough testing of the merits of older plants; novelty rather than beauty is often their chief merit; and if they are generally cultivated it can only be at the sacrifice of other kinds.” He continued...

“If in recommending plants or flowers to his patrons, he should consistently make beauty his criterion, and pride himself upon supplying the most excellent varieties in the most perfect condition, rather than those which are ‘very expensive because they are new or scarce,’ he would, in the long run, distance his competitors.”<sup>3</sup>

**Table 5: Hardy herbaceous plants that were available in the catalogues after 1850.**

<i>Dicentra spectabilis</i>	bleeding heart	1853
<i>Delphinium formosum</i>	delphinium	1857
<i>Lilium speciosum</i>	Japanese lily	1852
<i>Myosotis palustris</i>	forget-me-not	1852
<i>Lilium auratum</i>	gold-band lily	1866
<i>Cortaderia selloana</i>	pampas grass	1860
<i>Anemone hupehensis</i> var. <i>japonica</i>	Japanese anemone	1851
<i>Aquilegia skinneri</i>	Skinner's columbine	1852
<i>Saccharum ravennae</i>	ravenna grass	1860
<i>Lilium maculatum</i>		1854
<i>Tanacetum coccineum</i>	painted daisy	1859
<i>Kniphofia uvaria</i>	red hot poker	1860
<i>Gypsophila paniculata</i>	baby's breath	1862
<i>Tanacetum parthenium</i> 'Aureum'	golden feather	1871

**Table 4:**

***A Comparison of Availability of Three Regions' Top 20 Most Available Hardy Herbaceous Plants in the Nineteenth Century. (Top 20 plants for each region are listed in bold numerals.)***

<b><i>National Ranking of Hardy Herbaceous Plants</i></b>	<b><i>Midwest</i></b>	<b><i>Mid-Atlantic</i></b>	<b><i>New England</i></b>
<b>1</b> <i>Dianthus barbatus</i>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2</b> <i>Alcea rosea</i>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>3</b> <i>Dianthus caryophyllus</i>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>4</b> <i>Lychnis chalcedonica</i>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>5</b> <i>Digitalis purpurea</i>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>6</b> <i>Phlox paniculata</i>	<b>2</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>7</b> <i>Campanula medium</i>	<b>5</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>8</b> <i>Convallaria majalis</i>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>9</b> <i>Lobelia cardinalis</i>	<b>24</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>10</b> <i>Lathyrus latifolius</i>	<b>15</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>11</b> <i>Antirrhinum majus</i>	<b>9</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>12</b> <i>Tanacetum parthenium</i>	<b>10</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>13</b> <i>Bellis perennis</i>	<b>12</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>14</b> <i>Lilium candidum</i>	<b>16</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>15</b> <i>Yucca filamentosa</i>	<b>11</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>16</b> <i>Hesperis matronalis</i>	<b>55</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>17</b> <i>Viola tricolor</i>	<b>20</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>18</b> <i>Dictamnus albus</i>	<b>34</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>19</b> <i>Papaver orientale</i>	<b>22</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>20</b> <i>Viola odorata</i>	<b>37</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>43</b> <i>Dicentra spectabilis</i>	<b>13</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>24</b> <i>Paeonia lactiflora</i>	<b>14</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>25</b> <i>Lilium lancifolium</i>	<b>17</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>53</b> <i>Dianthus chinensis</i>	<b>18</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>69</b> <i>Achillea ptarmica</i>	<b>19</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>21</b> <i>Aconitum napellus</i>	<b>69</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>26</b> <i>Hosta ventricosa</i>	<b>48</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>34</b> <i>Penstemon barbatus</i>	<b>116</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>30</b> <i>Campanula pyramidalis</i>	<b>96</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>33</b> <i>Delphinium elatum</i>	<b>65</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>22</b> <i>Delphinium grandiflorum</i>	<b>32</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>29</b> <i>Platycodon grandiflorus</i>	<b>43</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>35</b> <i>Aquilegia vulgaris</i>	<b>35</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>16</b>

**Table 6:**  
**Most available genera in the nineteenth-century perennial and biennial nursery trade compared with a 1994 trade survey.**

1800s	Genera	1994	1800s	Genera	1994	Notes/References
1	<i>Phlox</i>	8	16	<i>Iris</i>	12	1. Robert R. Harvey, "An Approach to Developing a Documented and Quantified Plant List." <i>The Journal of Preservation Technology</i> , Vol. 21, No. 1 (1989):51-57.
2	<i>Aquilegia</i>	20	17	<i>Antirrhinum</i>	—	
3	<i>Campanula</i>	21	18	<i>Tanacetum</i>	—	
4	<i>Dianthus</i>	14	19	<i>Penstemon</i>	—	2. Tim Rhodus and James Hoskins, "Views on Management," <i>Perennial Plants</i> , (Autumn, 1995):34.
5	<i>Alcea</i>	—	20	<i>Papaver</i>	—	
6	<i>Viola</i>	—	21	<i>Bellis</i>	—	3. Editor [C. S. Sargent], "The Responsibilities of Florists and Nurserymen," <i>Garden and Forest</i> 1. (September, 1888):337.
7	<i>Delphinium</i>	10	22	<i>Yucca</i>	—	
8	<i>Lychnis</i>	—	23	<i>Hesperis</i>	—	
9	<i>Digitalis</i>	26	24	<i>Primula</i>	31	Reprinted with permission from <i>Perennial Plants Quarterly Journal of the Perennial Plant Association</i> , Volume 6; Summer, 1998; Number 3.
10	<i>Paeonia</i>	24	25	<i>Dictamnus</i>	—	
11	<i>Lilium</i>	28	26	<i>Hemerocallis</i>	2	
12	<i>Convallaria</i>	—	27	<i>Aconitum</i>	—	
13	<i>Lobelia</i>	—	28	<i>Anemone</i>	34	
14	<i>Oenothera</i>	—	29	<i>Hosta</i>	1	
15	<i>Lathyrus</i>	—	30	<i>Baptisia</i>	—	

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