

Heirloom Treasures*
By Judy Giguere, Plymouth Town Historian

Ever wonder why certain plants seem to be in unexpected places? Why is there a yucca plant by an old grave? It's a rather ugly plant, it doesn't make sense, at least to this generation. How about that ivy that is everywhere or the scraggly rose? Makes you wonder if there once was a purpose, doesn't it!

An heirloom can be a locket, family photos, a piece of furniture, or family memories passed down from generation to generation; or maybe an ancient rose planted by the grave of a much loved relative. The tradition of flowers at gravesites can be traced back thousands of years. Neanderthals buried their dead with flowers. It is surprising what one may find heirloom plants in an old cemetery?

Gardens and memorials take many forms. Alexander Hamilton's drawings of his proposed gardens included many varieties of tulips, lilies, hyacinths, iris and others. Large jonquils were common around slave quarters. Symbolic flowers include Jack-in-the-Pulpit also known as the Indian turnip, lilies imported from China in the early 1900's along with peonies known as Asian petunias, tiger lilies came from Japan. Iris were used as early as the 1500's in some countries and crossed the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas. Daffodils were from China and made their way across the Silk Road often to be found on river embankments and eventually here. Each can be found by old homesteads or old graveyards-their purpose and their loved ones long forgotten.

The yucca plant or eternity plant can live for a hundred years. It is symbolic of motherhood or eternal mourning but was also used to keep evil spirits in their graves. The elegance of the Japanese maple is symbolic of patience, practicality, calm or peaceful retreat. The marigold's bright flowers are considered a beacon to guide the soul of the deceased home. Roses have long been used as a symbol of hope. The lily of the valley is used to symbolize a return of happiness after a loss. The tiny white flowers are the tears of lost love but also the power to envision a better world.

Use of the cedar tree dates back to biblical times as it is symbolic of strength even in times of mourning or grief as well as providing a fragrant wood. Blue periwinkle is planted in memory of friendship disrupted by death. White periwinkle is for memories of one that will not fade even in death. Plants and trees have long been used in our yards, fields and for the finality of life. Our older homes may have two trees planted on either side of the front door. These are called, "marriage trees" as the couple that planted them hoped their marriage would grow and prosper along with the marriage trees.

Even proper watering of decorative or memorial plantings was described in a gardening book from the 1600's which states the best water for plantings of flowers and herbs is the running water of a river or stream, not water from a well or shaded pond as it was considered corrupt. In conservation of old cemeteries or homes one may find wooden pavers that were used for sidewalks, or iron slag bricks which were dark in color but looked ceramic. The iron slag may have come from Plymouth's own iron manufacture at the Andrew Terry Company. Even erosion was considered with the use of such plants as thyme or ferns that now have become unruly due to years of neglect.

Ivy, that green sprawling mass, is to remember the one that others have forgotten. Using flowers or plants are an ancient tradition that winds its way across many cultures. Remember these symbols before weeding our old cemeteries. The plant or tree may have had a special meaning or purpose for a family long gone.