

Kurt Sprengel, *The Botanical Garden at the University of Halle* (1800)

Abstract

The following history of the botanical garden at the University in Halle (Saale) was written by Kurt Sprengel (1766–1833), a botanist, physician, and writer who served as garden director. Sprengel begins by describing the configuration of the garden and its potential use in botanical instruction for young people. He goes on to argue that the garden also serves the more general purpose of promoting science [*Wissenschaft*] itself. He ends by discussing the garden's design with an eye toward contemporary aesthetics.

Source

[...]

II.

Current configuration of the botanical garden

1. *The instruction of students.*

The preeminent purpose of an institution of this kind is the instruction of young students in the natural history of plants.

This instruction is useful in two senses, as far as the state and civil society are concerned. For one, beginning doctors can become acquainted with the remedies they should constantly use; then, the future cameralist has an opportunity to become familiar with nature and the cultivation of the plants that are recommended as food for humans, as feed and dye plants, and as useful types of wood.

The present overseer of the botanical garden here has made a change in this instruction that seems very useful to him. At other universities, botanical instruction consists in the explanation of terminology, at most in the explication of the Linnaean system, and in the exhibition of a few hundred plants, whose names are briefly mentioned.

Although the author recognizes the utility of terminology, he has entirely separated the teaching of terminology from the presentation of philosophical and practical botany. He has put Professor Bergener, who was assigned to him as demonstrator of botany, in charge of explaining the basic foundations of botany and the terminology; but he himself gives public lectures free of charge in the summer on the structure of plants, which he seeks to explain through microscopic and physical experiments. In addition, in private lectures he presents practical botany in a way that offers instructions for the systematic study, identification, and differentiation of the various species of plants. In winter, however, he explains the structure and describes how to differentiate ferns, mosses, and lichens, using both fresh and dried specimens.

In this way, a complete botanical course has been set up, and the author must admit that the zeal for botany is currently extremely high among the students, and that these lectures are attended in large numbers and eagerly.

As far as the actual use of the botanical garden for the cultivation of medicinal and economical plants is

concerned, leaving aside the field (II) that contains the plants native to the land and the potted plants, it is chiefly the section (2.), under the name Medicinal Section, which is intended for medicinal plants. Here, hemlock, belladonna, monkshood, madder, various types of mint and so forth are cultivated on such a scale that the local apothecaries can largely supply themselves with them.

[...]

2. The promotion of science.

One of the primary intentions in the establishment of botanical gardens must be the promotion of science itself.

By constantly increasing the stock of plants, the knowledge of plants is promoted: by cultivating them, one has an opportunity to identify the species more accurately and to undertake interesting studies about their structure.

This purpose of our institution can be furthered only by an extensive plant exchange. When the present author assumed his position, he found that this trade and the attendant correspondence had been almost entirely neglected. He therefore sought to procure numerous contacts in Germany and abroad, through whose help he has succeeded in bringing together so many rare plants as are likely to be found in very few gardens in Europe.

Although he was not able, during the first years in his post, to send as many seeds to his correspondents as they had sent him, he now finally finds himself in a position to more or less reciprocate their kindness. He has made it his duty to collect most seeds himself; he can therefore promise that the seed strains are as genuine as one could possibly ask for.

[...]

3. Arrangement of the garden in consideration of art.

The observance of the laws of the fine arts could only be a secondary consideration on our grounds: but where nature has already offered so much, it would have been unforgivable not to pay attention to these hints. Indeed, one will see few larger gardens whose location is as advantageous and whose surroundings are rendered as beautiful by nature as ours.

The garden is situated on a hillock, which is interrupted to the west by the precipitous, rocky bank of the Saale. A fertile valley, full of country houses, tiny woodlands, and tidy villages is traversed by several meandering branches of a quiet river and finally rises so gently on the distant horizon that the whole western region, at least for a mile and a half, can be seen from the rocky ridges in the garden, especially from the König Square (11.).

By virtue of its natural location, our garden has the character of serenity. The pleasure offered by the views unique to this location, and wherein the soul seems to rise above the world, above all its cares, even above its needs, the cheerful contentment of this state, the joyfully invigorating feeling at the sound of waterfalls and the bustle of the herds on flowery meadows, the calm at the sight of the softly meandering river: all this could completely make up for the lack of inner beauty, the lack of splendid works of art. One merely had to extract enough land from the rough, rocky foothills for restful places of the simple kind, for walkways planted with airy birches and aspens to be able to invite the wanderer to contemplate the lovely landscape.

Although the garden itself had to be laid out according to the laws of the fine arts, it was done with constant consideration of its main purpose, and with careful avoidance of all anxious trivialities. A perfectly straight, broad

promenade of poplars had to lead from the great portal (13.) to the observatory (IX.), because the view of that interesting building had to be preserved unaltered. In the remaining sections of the garden, winding paths alternate with straight ones, because that gradually creates a multiplication and constant alternation of views, and because it allowed for more plantings on both sides of the walkways. Near the residential building (I. II.) the walkways had to be straight because that preserves the idea of symmetry that is created by the sight of the human dwellings. Thus, the wise creator of these grounds sought the satisfy every refined artistic sensibility by seeming to meet only the needs of science.

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Source: Kurt Sprengel, *Der Botanische Garten der Universität zu Halle im Jahre 1799*. Halle: C.A. Kümmel, 1800, pp. XI–XIII, XVII–XVIII, XX–XXII. Available online at:
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