

Experiencing the Ancient Garden

Gardening is an ancient human activity that students today often have little knowledge of or experience in doing. Exposing students to hands-on learning in the garden brings the ancient world to life, teaches life-long skills, and provides the opportunity to raise their awareness of critical issues in the modern world, such as the need for diversity of plant life, seed preservation, and the role of sustainable practices in keeping the earth productive for ever-increasing human and animal populations. In the fall of 2017 I taught a course “The New Ancient Garden” to eighteen first year students at my university. Resources included modern gardening studies, Greek and Latin texts in translation, modern monographs and collections of essays, archaeological evidence, and visual images of ancient and modern gardens, all of which provided the tools for comparing ancient and modern knowledge and methods, including instances of unsustainability as well as sustainable practices.

In addition to readings in translation from a variety of ancient authors, such as Pliny the Elder, Columella, Pedanius Dioscorides, and Theophrastus, and various Greco-Roman myths associated with plants, I exposed students to modern scholarship on ancient gardens, especially the work of Jashemski on the gardens and natural history of Pompeii. As often as possible we also went outside. We are fortunate to have an area already in use as an ancient garden at my university, but any unused area of land that has adequate drainage, sunlight, and soil can be transformed into an ancient garden. Collaborations with colleagues from other departments, such as Environmental Studies, Botany, and Health and Wellness, filled in gaps in my expertise and exposed students to the benefits of interdisciplinary studies. I also incorporated service learning into the course, collaborating with a local gleaning organization to teach students this ancient practice, with the food donated to our local food pantry. Our experiential learning activities

included preparing the soil, planting, weeding, and mulching in the garden, preserving herbs, seeds, and other products from it, collaborating with other campus gardening groups, and helping with events pertaining to foodways, notably a campus-wide winter festival of Dionysus at the end of November. But perhaps the most important aspect of the course is the work the students did with their newly acquired knowledge to transform the garden into a didactic space on campus for future students and visitors to learn about the plants and gardening methods of the ancient world.

The interdisciplinary nature of this topic makes it suitable for various educational contexts, and can be adapted to any level of instruction. For the instructor, personal experience of gardening helps, but one can learn as the students learn by bringing in experts from time to time and accessing the enormous amount of master gardening information online.

This paper presents best practices from my course along with brief discussion of the academic and outside resources I used, and student perspectives on the effectiveness of this course as an introduction both to university life and to the ancient world.

Bibliography

- Jashemski, Wilhemina. 1979. *The Gardens of Pompeii Herculaneum and the Villas Destroyed by Vesuvius* (Caratzas Bros.: New Rochelle, NY).
- Jashemski, Wilhemina and Frederick Meyer, eds. 2002. *The Natural History of Pompeii* (CUP: Cambridge).