

Eighteenth Century Housewifery

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A man must work from sun to sun, but a woman's work is never done.

Housewifery, the work of the housewife, is now called women's work. In the eighteenth century, this covered the work done indoors, with some exceptions. One such was the kitchen garden, where useful plants were grown. Since its products were processed indoors, the garden was considered part of the housewife's sphere. She was responsible for its care and production, with the assistance of daughters and any female servants. Digging, planting, sowing, weeding, harvesting, dunging, and saving seeds took much of her time from the end of March to early November.

Food preparation also required a great deal of time, but sometimes there were shortcuts. A busy woman could put everything in a pot over the fire and go on to other tasks. Some foods were enjoyed fresh; others were preserved for out-of-season use. Food preservation began in June and continued until the killing frost put an end to the garden harvest. Some plants were dried; others were pickled using vinegar, salt, and spices. This wide variety of plants was eaten as sallets [cooked vegetables] during the winter. Many are familiar today - cabbage, cucumbers, beets - while others are unknown. Purslane, considered a weed today, was pickled in vinegar, stale beer, and salt; it's one of the most popular pickles I make. Another is radish pods. We think of radishes as roots today. I let the plant flower and set seed, then collect the pods and pickle them. They have an agreeable peppery tang, not as strong as the roots.

Sugar was available and relatively inexpensive. Preserved fruits, called jams, marmalades, and quidannies, were stored for use in tarts, puddings, fools, and creams. Jellies were usually animal-based, set with calves' feet, hartshorn (similar to baking soda), and/or isinglass, a fish-based gelatin. Apple jelly was also made, to assist in gelling other fruits. Sugar was also used to make wine. Since grapes were difficult to grow in England, people there looked for other things



Clarissa Dillon and one of her "living history" colleagues prepare a colonial meal. *All images courtesy of the author.*

to use for wine-making. My feeling is that if it didn't get up and walk away, the English made it into wine: rosehips, turnips, sage, balm, and more. Some of these were considered healthful drinks; others were served instead of the expensive imported wines, like Madeira and claret.

Although the care and dispatching of large animals was man's work, women handled some butchering processes, such as making sausage, potting meat, and rendering fats. Tallow from rendered fat was made

into candles and soap. Women also dealt with the care and dispatching of smaller animals like poultry, rabbits, and even small pigs. Birds provided eggs much of the year; some of these were rubbed with fat to keep them for out-of-season use. Feathers were collected for beds and pillows.

Dairying occurred from mid-April through the end of September. As the supply of grass diminished with the season, cows were allowed to go dry. Cows were bred to drop their calves when the grass had begun to grow again. Calves were allowed to suckle for a few weeks, and were then switched to other feed, slaughtered, or sent to market. The stomach of a suckling calf was salted and dried for making cheese. Milk was sometimes used in cooking but more commonly was made into cheese. Cream could be skimmed and churned into butter, used fresh or salted. Butter could also be preserved for use after the cows had gone dry. As processes go, butter is easy and cheese is difficult. The housewife learned her dairying skills from women with experience and transmitted them to the younger generations. Research in this area is difficult because so much of the transmission of knowledge was oral and as such, did not survive.

Men were responsible for producing grain and having it ground. Women took the meal and flour and baked bread, cakes, pies, and puddings. If there were no bake-oven, things could be baked on a griddle or in a bake-kettle. The “fast food” of the colonial period was bread, cheese, pickles, and beer. All of these were produced, kept and then used as needed; they were available any time, especially when there was a lot going on, such as haying season.

Clothing was another important part of women’s work. Although imported fabrics were available, homespun was often used to clothe men, women, and children. Linen, spun from flax, was woven into fabric for shirts, shifts, breeches, waistcoats, petticoats, shortgowns, gowns, aprons, caps, and handkerchiefs. Wool and silk were also spun for yarn and thread. Weaving was not a household activity among the English. Weavers were craftsmen who produced cloth from the yarn and thread brought to them. The finished cloth was taken home and converted into clothing. When too worn to be used, garments were cut down for children’s clothing or household textiles. The back panel of a woman’s shift makes two cheese-cloths when cut and hemmed. Mending was done as



The author mends a shift.

needed—a stitch in time saves nine—while making garments was probably done during the winter months, when the garden was resting. Knitting produced stockings and other small items. Laundry occurred several times a year for the household.

In addition to her other domestic duties, the housewife performed the tasks of physician, apothecary, and nurse to restore health. Some women also filled these roles within their community. As physician, a woman diagnosed ailments and then prescribed treatment. Unlike professionally trained physicians of the time, she was concerned with ameliorating discomfort and was willing to change any treatment that was not working. As apothecary, she made medicines for internal and external use; ingredients were grown, foraged, and purchased. Plants like sage, roses, and calendula from the kitchen garden were processed fresh or dried for later use. Snakeroot, yarrow, and wormseed were gathered from the wild. Peruvian bark, quicksilver, and brimstone had to be purchased. Peruvian bark was a source of quinine, and used to treat fevers. Brimstone, or volcanic rock, contained sulfur, which, when burned, was used to disinfectant the surrounding area. A number of housewives had small household stills for making simple and compound waters. The former used water as the liquid; the latter used alcohol. Housewives made salves, syrups, and such to keep for use. Plants for infusions and decoctions were dried and stored until needed, then prepared and administered.

Unless the children went to school, the parents were responsible for teaching them to read and write. Mothers frequently took on this task, probably after

their other daily work had been completed. Daughters received training in all of the household tasks, and might spend some time at a neighbor's house, learning more.

While working on my dissertation, I found the following "poem," created as fillers in Benjamin Franklin's 1748 *Poor Richard's Almanack*. I've never found anything that describes 18th century housewifery so well:

Don't after foreign Food and Cloathing roam
But learn to eat and wear what's rais'd at Home.
Kind Nature suits each Clime with what it wants
Sufficient to subsist th'Inhabitants.
Observing this, we less impair our Health,
And by this rule we more increase our Wealth.
Our minds a great Advantage also gain,
And more sedate and uncorrupt remain.

When great Augustus rul'd the world and Rome,
The cloth he wore was spun and wove at Home.
His EMPRESS ply'd the Distaff and the Loom.
Old England's Laws the proudest beauty name,

When single, Spinster, and when married Dame,
For Housewifery is Woman's noblest Fame.
The Wisest household Cares to Women yield,
A large, and useful, and a grateful Field.

To make the cleanly Kitchen send up Food,
Not costly vain, but plentifully good,
To bid the Cellar's Fountain never fail,
Of sparkling Cyder, or of well-brew'd Ale;
To buy, to pay, to blame or to approve,
Within, without, below-stairs and above;
To shine in every Corner, like the Sun,
Still working every where, or looking on.

One glorious Scene of Action still behind,
The Fair that likes it is secure to find;
Cordials and Med'cines gratis to dispense,
A beauteous Instrument of Providence;
Plaisters, and Salves, and Sores to understand,
The Surgeon's Art befits a tender hand,
To friendless Pain unhop'd for Ease to give,
And bid the Hungry eat, and Sickly live.

Poor Richard's Almanack, 1748, reproduced in facsimile in *The Complete Poor Richard's Almanacks* (Barre, MA: The Imprint Society, 1970), Vol. II, p. 8, 18, 20, 22.