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Planting by the Moon

Medieval Science and New Age Religion

The purpose of this essay is to distinguish between late medieval and New Age responses to astrology in the realm of gardening. Medieval garden writers took a practical approach to gardening and understood astrological gardening as fundamentally true but less relevant than empirically observable aspects of seed germination and plant growth. In contrast, New Age writers invest gardening with philosophical and spiritual significance, drawing on an understanding of astrology as ancient wisdom that can bring greater self-understanding. New Age gardening is a practice engaged with the symbolic value of interaction with nature for the individual as a member of a community.

Readers familiar with modern almanacs often assume that the folk wisdom offered in these books derives from medieval traditions. Popular, present-day guides concerned with life "in harmony with nature" such as Llewellyn's *Moon Sign Book* and *The Old Farmer's Almanac* include medieval woodcuts and gothic lettering to bring to mind the connection between past

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and present.[1] Similarly, scholars of medieval scientific literature have often observed connections between the material they study and modern literature. For example, in an essay about the relationship between plants and planets in the Middle Ages, Linda Ehrsam Voigts notes that in modern almanacs "distributed by garden centers, one finds—besides a zodiac man and zodiacal calculations for the seasons—discussion of each of the planets …[the modern almanac] contains eclipse tables, a table of phases of the moon, and a table on planting by the phases of the moon. Beliefs about the relation of planets to plants die hard."[2]

Astrology had a long history before it became important in the European Middle Ages, of course, and in this regard both medieval and modern garden writers' reflections on this subject can be seen as re-interpreting and re-inventing understandings of the world through a blending of categories that we now differentiate: religion and science. My argument is that medieval garden writers took a practical approach to gardening and understood astrological gardening as fundamentally true but, in practice, less relevant than empirically observable aspects of seed germination and plant growth. In contrast, New Age writers invest gardening, above all, with philosophical and spiritual significance. They incorporate astrology into their gardening accounts because astrology is understood as ancient wisdom that will bring greater self-understanding. New Age gardening is a practice engaged with the symbolic value of interaction with nature for the individual and for her sense of herself as a member of a larger community. The first half of the essay establishes the nature of lunar gardening as described in medieval garden writing from the later Middle Ages. The second half takes up ideas about planting by the moon's phases that inform writing associated with New Age religious or philosophical beliefs.

It is well known that people in the Middle Ages held pervasive and, during the time, uncontroversial beliefs about celestial influences on the terrestrial. Medieval medicine linked the theory of humours with astrological accounts that claimed particular elements of the zodiac controlled specific body parts. Lunar prognostics circulated widely, becoming especially popu-

[1] *Llewellyn's 2012 Moon Sign Book* (Woodbury, Minnesota: Llewellyn Worldwide, 2011); *The Old Farmer's Almanac 2012*, ed. Janice Stillman (Dublin, NH: Yankee Publishing, 2012). "Live in harmony with nature" is the tagline on the back cover of the *2012 Moon Sign Book*.

[2] Linda Ehrsam Voigts, "Plants and Planets: Finding the Vegetable and the Celestial in Late Medieval Texts," in *Health and Healing from the Medieval Garden*, ed. Peter Dendle and Alain Touwaide (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2008), 46.

lar in the fifteenth century, as scholars such as Irma Taavitsainen and Laurel Means have demonstrated. These texts offered advice based on the cycles of the moon ranging from the best days to make a journey to the best days to receive various kinds of medical care.[3] The poet Geoffrey Chaucer composed a treatise explaining how to use an astrolabe. He valued the skill so much that he wished, as the prologue explains, to teach his son to use this instrument to understand the influence of the stars. Chaucer's treatise circulated widely and is considered the first piece of technical writing in the English vernacular.[4]

Belief in astrology was widespread and, although many people now think of astrology as superstition, as Laura Smoller observes, in the Middle Ages "astrology was considered a science, even the highest of sciences, capable of assisting the noble study of theology."[5] Linda Ehrsam Voigts, too, notes that

> Because educated people today understand astrology as a superstition, it is important to recall its pre-modern role as the cosmological model on which most medieval science was based. As the eminent historian of science Lynn Thorndike observed, the underlying "law" of medieval science was that natural phenomena are controlled by the celestial.[6]

In some fields of study, such as medieval medicine, there can be no question that astrological theory informed practice to a very great extent.[7]

Given the wealth of evidence available and the rigorous work of scholars in the field, we might easily assume that astrological considerations shaped

[3] On lunar prognostic writing see Irma Taavitsainen, *Middle English Lunaries: A Study of a Genre*, Mémoires de la Société Néophilologique de Helsinki 47 (Helsinki: Société Néophilologique, 1988) and Laurel Means, *Medieval Lunar Astrology: A Collection of Representative Middle English Texts* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993).

[4] Geoffrey Chaucer, "A Treatise on the Astrolabe," ed. John Reidy, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 661–83.

[5] Laura Ackerman Smoller, *History, Prophecy, and the Stars: The Christian Astrology of Pierre d'Ailly, 1350–1420* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.

[6] Linda Ehrsam Voigts, "The Declaracions of Richard of Wallingford: A Case Study of a Middle English Astrological Treatise," in *Medical and Scientific Writing in Late Medieval English*, Studies in English Language, ed. Irma Taavitsainen and Päivi Pahta (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 206–7 n. 4.

[7] Chaucer is, again, useful for considering how astrological theory influenced practice: in his General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales he describes the physician-pilgrim as grounded in "astronomye" and able to "fortunen the ascendent" for his patients. This, coupled with knowledge of "the cause of everich maladye/Were it hoot, or coold, or moyste or drye" made Chaucer's physician supremely qualified to treat patients (*Riverside Chaucer*, 30).

every aspect of life in the Middle Ages. Further, based on modern almanacs, we might think that medieval horticulture, like medieval medicine, was an art especially influenced by astrological concerns. After all, this "medieval" material lives on in popular works that purport to teach readers how to garden in accordance with the sun, moon, and stars such as the *Old Farmer's Almanac* or *Llewellyn's Moon Sign Book*. Although these books have shed some of this material—we rarely find tables of natal dates and personality characteristics in modern almanacs, for example—some of it has remained appealing to modern readers including ideas about planting in accordance with the stars and, especially, in relation to the moon's phases. It would be natural to assume for this reason that practical accounts of astrological gardening in the modern age follow their medieval antecedents.

Surprisingly, however, this is not in fact the case. First, modern accounts describing lunar planting as a system based on exposure to the light of the moon ("waxing" moons grow increasingly light until they are full; "waning" moons grow increasingly dark) and the manner in which a plant bears fruit (above or below ground) are now standard but were not in the Middle Ages.[8] Second, and more importantly, medieval literature about gardening is curiously vague when it comes to relationships between the sowing of vegetables and the celestial. Astrologists of the period had developed elaborate and highly technical theories of astral influence but these theories had only a minor impact on practical medieval guides to horticulture.[9] The present

[8] For instance, the well-known author of books and essays about organic gardening, Nancy Bubel, observes in *The Adventurous Gardener* (Boston: David R. Godine Publishers, 1979): "Try planting by the moon, just for fun! How does it work? Very briefly, sow seed of root crops when the moon is waning, preferably in the third quarter. Above-ground crops, including leafy plants and those that bear fruit and seeds, are said to prosper when planted or transplanted while the moon is waxing. The fourth quarter is generally considered, by serious moon-sign planters, to be a barren time, but ideal for weeding, mending, and putting things in order. Moon planting, as I see it, is solid folklore that is difficult to refute, even though some aspects of the practice seem contradictory or superstitious. If you're looking for a garden experiment that couldn't hurt and costs nothing, here's a place to start" (193–94).

[9] There were, however, works that were astrologically-oriented that included information about gardening. For example, item L4 in Means's edition of lunar works, MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole 396 is a prognostic work based on the "mansions of the moon," subdivisions of the zodiac. It includes instructions about when to plant trees and sow seeds among the other kinds of advice: when to travel; when to marry; and when to "buy" servants. The manuscript is oriented toward readers with extensive interest in and knowledge of astrology and includes a diagram of the zodiac man, a section about eclipses, and a Middle English "Electionary" (The Hours of the Planets). See Means, *Medieval Lunar Astrology*, 57; 105–11.

essay discusses, instead, what can be found by looking at three of these practical guides, John Gardener's *Feate of Gardening* (c. 1440, English); Nicholas Bollard's *On the Growing and Grafting of Trees* (late-fifteenth century, English); and the Menagier de Paris's houshold book, which includes a treatise on gardening (late-fourteenth century, French) in relation to the practice of planting a garden in the later Middle Ages.

John Gardener and *Feate of Gardening*

> *Ho so wyl a gardener be*
> *Here he may both hyre & se*
> *Euery tyme of the yere & of the mone*
> *And how the crafte schall be done*
> *Yn what maner he schall delue & sette*
> *Bothe yn drowthe and yn wette*
> *How he schall hys sedys sowe*
> *Of euery moneth he most knowe.* JOHN GARDENER (C.1440)

> *John Gardener must certainly have been a practical gardener, as the poem is a series of most sensible and reasonable instructions for growing fruits, herbs, and flowers, and his work is singularly free from the superstitious beliefs in astrology, and the extravagant fancies and experiments in grafting and rearing plants, especially fruit trees, so prevalent in the writings of this period.*
>
> ALICIA AMHERST (1893)[10]

John Gardener's *Feate of Gardening* is one of the earliest works on the sowing of vegetables and herbs in the English vernacular. At the beginning of the verse treatise, the author equates "real" gardening with knowledge of the effects of the changing seasons and the progress of the moon. According to

[10] Alicia M.T. Amherst, ed., "A Fifteenth-Century Treatise on Gardening by Mayster Ion Gardener," *Archaeologia* 54 (1894): 157–72. Here is the passage in Modern English: "Whoever wants to be a gardener/He may hear and see in this poem/Each type of the year and the moon/And how each practice shall be done/In what manner he should dig and set/Both in dry and rainy seasons/How he shall sow seeds/For each month [what] he needs to know." The quotation is from page 160. See also A. G. Rigg, *A Glastonbury Miscellany of the Fifteenth Century: A Descriptive Index of Trinity College, Cambridge MS. 0.9.38* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) and John H. Harvey, "The First English Garden Book: Mayster Jon Gardener's Treatise and Its Background," *Journal of Garden History* 13 (1985): 83–101.

the poem, the gardener's "craft" is largely a matter of timing: garlic and leeks should be planted on St. Valentine's Day; parsley should be sown in March; and more than seventy-five herbs are identified as requiring planting in April.

Surprisingly, given this level of detail concerning timing as well as the mention in the poem's third line of the great significance of knowledge of the moon's progress, no further information about lunar, solar, or astral influence is included in *The Feate of Gardening*. Instead, the *Feate of Gardening* dwells on gardening as a practice that requires attention to physical change that revolves around the "nature" of plants. For example, the poem provides a detailed verse paragraph on grafting, including how to use the tools to do this: "Make thy Kyttyng of thy graffe/By-twyne the newe & the olde staffe/So that hit be made to lyfe/As the bake & the egge of a knyfe/A wegge thu sette yn myddys the tre/That euery syde fro other fle/Tyl hit be openyd wyde" (161).[11] Here, the "sides" of the tree as well as the "newe" and "olde" staffs are described as if they are live characters (and, in fact, the point is to bring the newly grafted tree to "lyfe").

Similarly, Gardener's account of sowing onions to produce seed for sowing is a dramatic, dynamic narrative. After planting this seed "yn the grownde" in April or March, the gardener watches as the plants "bygynnyth to grow hye" and must thin them out so that "none of ham towche other nye" and provide supports to keep them off the ground (163). The gardener will know that the seeds are ready to harvest when they "schewe blake." After this blackness can be seen by the gardener, the onion seeds should be spread on a cloth and dried in the sun.

There are similar dramatic "lays," as the poet calls his gardening narratives, including one about the "Sowyng and Settyng of Wurtys," that is, sowing and setting of cruciferous vegetables such as cabbage, and another concerning the "Kynde of Perselye," which is an account of the life of parsley over time. These brief, verse "lays" are dynamic and depend on seasonal variation as well as the nature of the plant in its environment. Despite this concern with positioning in the world, however, they include no details about the influence of the celestial in general or of the moon in particular.

The absence of such information could mean any number of things, but the most obvious is that if John Gardener knew about the moon's influence

[11] "Cut the graft between the new and old staffs so it will come to life using the back and edge of the knife. Set a wedge in the middle of the tree so each side is separated from the other and there is a wide opening."

he did not think he needed to explain how it worked. On the other hand, perhaps he was aware of the significance of astrology but uninterested in explaining how it worked. Then again, maybe he thought that his audience needed advice about the life cycle of plants more than it needed to know about lunar influences that were largely out of the individual gardener's control. Whatever his reasons for omitting this information, the third line of the poem makes clear that the venerable tradition of attending to the moon's influence was understood by the poet as important. Even without being described, it constituted part of the late medieval cultural understanding of what a gardener *should* know.[12] That this importance did not translate into practical advice, however, is also significant.

Nicholas Bollard

Like John Gardener, Nicholas Bollard considered himself a professional, or at least an "expert," gardener with knowledge of the fine points of horticulture. His gardening treatise, *On the Growing and Grafting of Trees*, circulated widely in Latin and in the vernacular.[13] In the complete edition found in British Library MS Sloane 686, Bollard, too, like John Gardener, declares that gardeners must attend to the stars, sun, and moon if they are to succeed. Unlike Gardener, however, he provides a learned basis for making this claim: the gardener should know, based on the "secres of aristotle" and "Ptolome

[12] Walter of Henley's *Husbandry*, one of the other early English works on horticulture (thirteenth century) includes no astrological information but a a great deal of practical advice about sowing seed. See Elizabeth Lamond, ed., *Walter of Henley's Husbandry, Together with an Anonymous Husbandry, Seneschaucie, and Robert Grosseteste's Rules* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1890).

[13] W. L. Braekman states that Bollard's tract is extant in Latin in three manuscripts and the English version in at least eleven manuscripts. He also observes that in England Bollard's treatise circulated with another concerned with similar material written by Geoffrey of Franconia. Braekman maintains that Geoffrey (or Gottfried, as he is called in the published edition of the German version of the tract) was the more widely known author on the continent. See Braekman, "Bollard's Middle English Book of Planting and Grafting and Its Background," *Studia Neophilologica* 57 (1985): 19–39. Pages 30–39 of Braekman's essay are a transcript of the complete English version of Bollard's treatise found in British Library MS Sloane 686, fols. 41r-48v. This essay refers to the version published by Braekman. Geoffrey's German treatise has been edited by G. Eis, *Gottfrieds Pelzbuch: Studien zur Reichweite und Dauer der Wirkung des mittelhochdeutschen Fachschrifttums*, *Südeuropäische Arbeiten* 38 (1944). Versions of both Bollard and Geoffrey appear in the facsimile of the *Tollemache Book of Secrets*, ed. Jeremy Griffiths, A.S.G. Edwards, and Nicholas Barker (London: Roxburghe Club, 2001). The introduction to the facsimile provides useful information about manuscript circulation.

in oon of his praktikes" about the summer and winter equinox, that is, "of the hours or stedes of the sonne in Somere and in Wynter" (30). Emphasizing technical terms related to astrological horticulture such as "putrefaccion," which, according to Bollard, Aristotle is said to have defined as the decay "of oon thing" but the "gendring of an other thing," and which occurs most frequently at the equinox, Bollard begins by asserting the paramount importance to the gardener of knowing the sun's precise relationship to the earth.

Despite this learned and technical opening, however, Bollard quickly moves away from discussion of the sun and zodiac and simplifies astrological terms. Explaining that "borrell clerkes," that is, uneducated readers, might not be familiar with these authors and their ideas, he states that he will dispense with the terms: "for the equinoccion of Somer let [readers] take ver [spring] and for the equinoccion of wynter let hem take heruest [fall]" (30).[14]

The move toward astrological simplification continues as Bollard explains that "fewe" people "knowe the place of the mone in the zodiac" and for this reason "vs behoueth to passe forth by other things more comoun" (30). Irma Taavitsainen observes that the vernacular works of lunar influence can be divided into three broad groups: those that divide the lunar month into days of the moon, usually in thirty, twenty-eight, or twelve sections; those that detail the so-called "mansions" of the moon, usually in twenty-eight parts; and those that describe the moon's progress through the signs of the zodiac.[15] Bollard boils the moon's passage through the zodiac down to three principles: woody-stemmed plants grown from seed should be sown when "the mone is in Tauro"; those that are "newe spronge" can be transplanted when the moon is "in cancro or leone or in libra"; and when the moon is in Virgo "it is good tyme to sowe al manere thinges" (30).

This is extremely general information, but even expecting this level of astrological knowledge seemed problematic to Bollard, however, and he continues by specifiying planting times in terms of calendar months: "To borell folk I sey that from the middes of Septembre vnto the middes of Decem-

[14] "Borrell" referred to a type of rough woollen cloth; "borrell clerkes" seems to have been used in a somewhat condescending fashion. See, for example, the Franklin's use of the word to refer to himself (*Riverside Chaucer*, 178 [l. 716]); Langland's in A. V. C. Schmidt, ed., *Piers Plowman: A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C and Z Versions*, 2nd ed. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2011), 424 (B.10.286); and Bollard's second use of the word (Braekman, 30).

[15] Taavitsainen, *Middle English Lunaries* 45. Means is particularly concerned in her edition to describe the "hybrid" nature of many of these texts (esp. 24–74).

bre is open tyme of planting, and right soo from the middes of Januer vnto the middes of Marche" (30). The division into two groups appears to refer to "a priuite among cunnyng" gardeners that is mentioned in a later section of the first part of the treatise: spring "is moost counuenable tyme for sedys, greynes and pepyns" and autumn "of springes and plantes" (31), advice that experts continue to offer modern gardeners about planting annual and perennial seeds in spring versus fall planting of perennial plants.

Bollard does list the best days of the moon for planting.[16] This should be done either as the moon waxes, five to nine days before it is full, or as it wanes when it is "xxi. or xxii. or xxiii. or xxiiii. or xxv. daies olde, for in thies quarters the coniunccion is moost temperat" (30-31). But it looks as if he includes this information without any expectation that most of his readers will follow it: the rest of the treatise uses the seasons and months nearly exclusively to identify when gardening activities should take place.[17] Further, the treatise with which Bollard's "travels" in England, Geoffrey of Franconia's *Book of Trees and Wine*, includes no astrological information. Instead, like the rest of Bollard's treatise, it emphasizes fundamental requirements of gardening: moisture levels, the condition of the soil, and the temperature of the air and soil in the various months of the year. Even the sections of both treatises about grafting, which is described by Bollard as "marvellous" and presented as a secret art in both texts, refrain from further mention of astrological information.[18]

Le Menagier de Paris

Like Bollard, the author of the work referred to as *The Good Wife's Guide* by its most recent translators, Gina L. Greco and Christine M. Rose, composed a book of gardening instructions for a (relatively) uneducated audience.[19]

[16] See Taavitsainen, *Middle English Lunaries*; also Means.

[17] There is one exception: large trees or those bearing fruit that are to be moved should be moved on a full moon (31).

[18] On marvellous grafting see Krug, "Plantings" in *A Cultural History of Gardens, vol. 2*, ed. John Dixon Hunt and Michael Leslie (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 60–63. Mention of abstruse, astrological details would have fit neatly with Bollard and Geoffrey's interest in the "art" of grafting, which included making pennies appear in apples or growing fruit trees that bore multiple types of fruit.

[19] The standard French edition is *Le Menagier de Paris*, ed. Georgine E. Brereton and Janet M. Ferrier (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981). My citations refer to this edition. See also the Greco/Rose translation, *The Good Wife's Guide* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2009).

Writing for his much younger wife, the Menagier's household book includes a treatise on the art of gardening.[20] Sometimes called a horticultural "menology," a month by month guide to gardening, the Menagier's gardening advice begins with a short section about the need for moisture when sowing seeds and then opens the menology proper with the planting of beans on All Saints Day, November 1.[21]

The Menagier considered the months of the year and the phases of the moon significant in terms of ordering gardening activities. The Menagier's book includes specific reference to the moon's phases as they applied to the planting of specific herbs and vegetables. His wife needed to know, for example, when to sow sorrel seeds (sorrel is a leafy green related to dock): he instructs her to do so "at the waning of the moon" through March and later.[22] The Menagier often combines the month of the year, the progress of the moon, and religious holidays in his dating of appropriate gardening activities. The herb savory, for instance, should be planted in February, at the waning of the moon, and is good only until St. John the Baptist's feast day.[23] Concerned to instruct his young wife about gardening as "proper conduct" for a woman of her station, the Menagier offers precise information to help her succeed as a gardener and housekeeper.[24] The three pieces of information—the month, the religious holiday, and the progress of the moon—allow her to calculate exactly when to have crops sown and vines set.

Although much of the Menagier's advice about sowing seeds and caring for a garden is extremely practical and detailed (for example, he advises his wife that "rainy weather is good for planting but not for sowing seeds;" this is because in rain "the seeds will stick to the rake"), his treatment of the moon in relation to agriculture appears to be almost useless to a beginning gardener.[25] With the exception of one passage that encourages planting grape vines when

[20] Other parts of the book address topics such as treatises on cooking, hunting, and hawking as well as devotional material and guides to proper conduct for the bourgeois woman running a household.

[21] On such menologies, see Thomas M. Capuano, "Capitols Singulars Deles Llauors Que Deuras Sembrar: A Late Medieval Guide for the Spanish Levant," *Catalan Review* 12 (1998): 24.

[22] "Oysille soit semee ou decours et jusques a mars et plus" (118).

[23] "[S]ariete ne dure fors que jusques a la saint Jehan" (119).

[24] The subject of conduct is addressed in Greco and Rose's introduction to the translation: see esp. 18-24. See also Krug, "Plantings," 68–72.

[25] *Le Menagier*, 118: "Nota que en temps pluieux fait bon planter, mais non mie semer; car la graine se retient au ratel."

the moon waxes in February, all of his instructions involve the period when the moon is waning. This advice is presented repetitively throughout the menology: his wife is told nearly a dozen times to sow a particular seed "*ou decours*." There is nothing further in the Menagier's book about the particular day of the period of the waning moon or about the zodiac.[26] It is certainly possible that his understanding was that any time during the waning moon was good for planting seeds, but the particularity of the Menagier's other instructions suggests that the phrases about the moon's waning were simply thrown in because everyone "knew" that the moon mattered as a general and fairly unimportant principle of gardening.

In contrast, the Menagier's sense of the specificity of individual plants and the growing conditions required for optimum yield is careful and precise. He offers the beginning gardener extremely helpful information about germination times, for example: the herbs savory and sweet marjoram will sprout eight days after being planted (119). He also describes methods for speeding germination. Squash seeds, for instance, should be soaked in water for two days before sowing (120). And he describes the necessary process of "thinning" seedlings—lettuce plants, for example—that need space to grow (120). To an experienced gardener, these are all things that would be taken for granted but to someone who has never done this work before and now must, this information would have been extremely valuable. The Menagier thought about his wife's conduct, like that of his plants, in relation to time: he explains to her what things need to be done and provides her with a timetable for taking care of these matters. The responsible wife, the treatise asserts, will see to it that her gardening activities are accomplished according to schedule.

It is worth noting that not all horticultural menologies eliminated the astrological. Thomas M. Capuano has published one, for example, from late-medieval Spain that indicates when particular vegetables should be planted according to the month and according to the moon's phases.[27] This guide matter-of-factly approaches the lunar material and notes, in fact, when this information is unimportant: "onion seed should be sown in the waning moon but when setting them out the moon doesn't matter" (31). Further, as vernacular almanacs became increasingly widespread with the rise of print, they sometimes included identification of specific days as "good for planting

[26] *Le Menagier*,123: the instructions are provided for growing seedless grapes.

[27] Capuano, "Capitols Singulars," 23–35. Capuano provides an English translation of the text (31–33).

or sowing" based on the lunar month and identified those days as such.[28] But on the whole, the Menagier's streamlining of the process and substitution of specifics of germination seems typical of the garden writing that appeared in the later Middle Ages. Information about astrological influence was available, but when it came to practical, horticultural instruction, late medieval writers seem to have been concerned with the terrestrial rather than the celestial.

In particular, medieval garden writers emphasized the nature of the plants being grown and the responsibility of the gardener to accommodate the "kynde," as John Gardener calls it in relation to parsley, that is, the plant's nature, characteristics, and life "story." Astrological theory appears to have been widely accepted as true and important, but it rarely entered into the pragmatic discussions of plant characteristics and growing conditions found in late-medieval garden literature.

New Age Beliefs and the Modern Gardener

So, if practical gardeners in the Middle Ages dispensed with astrological theory despite widespread acceptance of such ideas, why has it, and in particular the idea of planting according to the moon's phases, remained popular in modern times? The answer, I think, has more to do with the different status of gardening in the two periods and less about the perceived scientific validity of astrological theory. Although the vast majority of people in the Middle Ages never grew all of the food for their individual households—this was not "subsistence" living in that sense—the much more precarious nature of the food supply in the period meant that far more people were involved in activities related to horticulture. In contrast, many people in the modern, western world have never grown any of the food they have eaten. If vegetable gardening is, as Jamie Durie, host of HGTV's "Outdoor Room," claims "sexy"—instead of being a "granny sport" as it was (again, Durie's

[28] Linne Mooney discusses one almanac from the mid-sixteenth century (STC 464, Oxford, Bodleian, Douce H. 273), for example, that marks good days to plant with a clover leaf (18). See Mooney, "English Almanacks from Script to Print" in *Texts and Their Contexts: Papers from the Early Book Society*, ed. John Scattergood and Julia Boffey (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), 11–25. Mooney's essay helpfully describes the changes that came about when almanacs came to be printed. It seems likely that the inclusion of specific "best days" for planting became easier to incorporate in printed manuals that came out yearly (in contrast with perpetual calendars found in manuscripts).

assertion) in the past—that popularity has little to do with utility.[29] Gardeners in the United States and the Western world grow only a tiny fraction of the food they consume. The question, then, is why do modern gardeners *garden*? More particularly for the present discussion, why would a subset of these modern gardeners choose to follow the "medieval" wisdom of planting by the moon?

Although occasionally claiming a "scientific basis" for their methods, New Age writers are primarily concerned with creating connections with a "niche" readership. For these writers and readers, gardening by the sun, moon, and stars is a way of distinguishing themselves from people who are deemed less thoughtful, caring, and spiritual. Further, the vaguely "medieval," mystical overtones (including incorporation of illustrations, such as the zodiac man) found in this literature contributes to this image. Nostalgia-based publications such as the *Old Farmer's Almanac* (widely identified colloquially as the almanac grandma had in her house, or something along those lines) take a folksy approach to this mystification of gardening.[30] The reader of the *OFA* is encouraged to see herself as wise to the modern world's attempts to hoodwink her. Following the age-old wisdom of the *OFA* is a way of asserting continuity with the past.

It matters very little, in fact, if there *is* any science behind such methods since the point seems to be that the most important thing is to resist changes brought about by new, modern ideas. Jackie French, a garden writer, recently published an essay called "Why Moon Planting Works" (2005) in which she argues that there is a "rational explanation for the claims of Moon planters" that has to do with the timing of planting. In particular, she argues that the regimen of moon planting works because in spring, when soil temperatures are cooler, it leads to later planting:

> no sensible cool-climate gardener will plant beans in winter. It's too cold for them to germinate, and many seeds will rot or be taken by ants. But come the first warm spell Gardener B [the gardener who is not following the moon signs] assumes that spring has arrived and plants his beans. Gardener A [the Moon planter], on the other hand, waits until the next good Moon

[29] Kim Palmer, "He's on a Mission to Make Gardening Sexy," *Star Tribune*, June 5, 2012.

[30] Old Farmer's Almanac 2012. It is worth noting that the *OFA* states that it follows a "heliocentric" system and that it relies on "astronomy" rather than "astrology" in every case with the exception of three pages on the "Secrets of the Zodiac"(105).

> planting time before planting his beans. Early warm spells are usually followed by a cold one … plants that suffer set-backs when they are young rarely do as well as plants that have flourished right from the start.[31]

Yet such explanations are beside the point for people eager to follow age-old traditions, as the continuing interest in the *OFA* demonstrates.[32]

Those guides to astrological gardening with a stronger "New Age" bent than the *OFA*, such as *Llewellyn's Moon Sign Book* work even harder to create an identity for their readers that is about being in tune with cosmic forces and not really, despite much practical information, about gardening.[33] The *Moon Sign Book*, dismisses critics of astrology as ignorant "city dweller[s]" who have "never had any real contact with nature and little experience of natural rhythms" (61). Objections to the claims of the lunar gardeners by these city slickers are shown to be further examples of their deep ignorance. The authentic person who trusts the *MSB* is represented by the editors as taking part in a timeless tradition: openess to nature's rhythms has always been possible. Wise people, they claim, know this is so.

The *Moon Sign Book* identifies itself explicitly as teaching "*Conscious Living* by the Cycles of the Moon" rather than agricultural methods exclusively and it does this, in part, by incorporating little nuggets of wisdom into its fairly pedestrian advice about gardening.[34] The book's brief discussion about planting annuals in early June, for example, is accompanied by a quotation attributed to the behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner: "Education is what survives when what has been learnt has been forgotten" (29).[35] Advice that herbs can be frozen along with instructions to plant perennials and destroy weeds in September is accompanied by the Buddhist activist Thich Nhat

[31] Jackie French, "Why Moon Planting Works," *The Skeptic* 25 (2005): 20–21. A slightly expanded version appears online: www.undeceivingourselves.org/S-plan.htm.

[32] Gardening is particularly susceptible to assumptions based on coincidence rather than causality. If something succeeds, the gardener may decide that the "cause" for this success is something that happened at the moment but this "cause" may have no basis. For example, many gardeners responding to online gardening questions insist that to germinate delphinium seeds darkness is required. This will work, but delphinium seeds will also germinate in light (and some brokers, such as Thompson and Morgan, indicate that light is required on their seed packets).

[33] *Llewellyn's 2012 Moon Sign Book*.

[34] Front cover of *Llewellyn's 2012 Moon Sign Book* 2012 (my emphasis).

[35] The editors seem not to find any incongruity between their use of this quotation from the inventor of the "Skinner Box" and their New Age philosophies.

Hanh's observation that "we have more possibilities in each moment than we realize" (43). Gardening by the moon is offered as one way to increase the level of "consciousness." An essay by Clea Danaan that follows the menology, tables, and forecasts, "Return to Now: Finding my Center in the Garden," sums up this approach to gardening. Danaan explains that "The garden connects me to life, to death, and to life again. I return to some inner Self that can so easily be lost in the whirlwind of daily life" (256).[36]

Danaan's essay is the first among the *MSB*'s "2012 Moon Sign Book Articles," a separate section appearing at the back of the volume. Several of the essays are practical such as "How Does Your Roof Grow?"—an elementary guide to "green roofs," an age-old practice that goes back, according to this author, to the Vikings.[37] Others, like Danaan's are concerned with the spiritual or philosophical and represent gardening as both a means to understanding one's place in the universe and as a metaphor for the individual. As Danaan puts it, "Like the garden, I am the growth unfurling in the mystery of life. The garden brings me back to my home, to my feet on the ground, to myself" (257). Similarly, in Pam Ciampi's essay, "Using Your Moon Sign to Plant Your Garden," the purpose of gardening is to grow in self-knowledge. She begins the essay by stating that "The idea of finding out more about yourself by the type of garden you grow is fascinating" (303).

The extent to which modern, astrological gardening is more religious than scientific is made explicit by Danaan. She remarks on the difficulty of growing one's own food and asks, rhetorically, "My garden is not large enough to grow all the food I need, so most of our food comes from the store any way. So why, year after year, season after season, do I keep planting, keep feeding my chicks, keep dreaming of the garden to come?" (256).[38] Gardening, as I have argued elsewhere, is never simply about productivity, but in the case of modern adaptations of medieval astrological inclinations it is even less concerned with yield than we might imagine possible.[39] This has

[36] It is important to note that many medieval writers associated gardening with spirituality, too. For example, Walahfrid Strabo's poem *Hortulus* sees the gardener as engaging in a practice that unites him with nature and through nature with the divine. See Krug, "Plantings," 63–68. However, medieval spirituality was far less concerned with self-knowledge.

[37] MSB, 264.

[38] Walahfrid Strabo, too, describes the "warfare" against nature that is part of gardening: nettles had overtaken his garden, "they grew, their barbs/Tipped with a smear of tingling poison," *Hortulus*, [parallel text edition], trans. Raef Payne (Hunt Botanical Library, 1966), 27.

[39] Krug, "Plantings," 57–73; 194–196.

only become the case because in modern times gardening is, for most people in the West, a leisure activity and not a means of survival.

What is interesting about New Age gardening in the context of this essay is that it takes the "medieval" as synonymous with holistic connections with nature. Much like current interest in other kinds of material labeled "medieval"—the Arthurian tradition, for example, or the supernatural/mystical unicorn—there is little concern with historical realities or everyday practices. Rather, medievalism is a license for fantasy: a past is created in which things are imagined to be *as they should be*. This is allowed by the hundreds of years between the medieval and the modern. It is also fueled by Americans' physical lack of connection to an actual European medieval past. The romance of planting by the phases of the moon lies precisely in its elusiveness. And if New Age gardeners value it, they value the practice because it is not practical.

Medieval readers of practical gardening guides, in contrast, were much more dependent on nature and directly involved in gardening for sustenance. It is this practical urgency that, despite widespread belief in celestial influences, made medieval writers less inclined to include astrological details in their discussions. This suggests that "belief" in the stars' influence was, probably not consciously, separate, for gardeners, from "belief" in the practical and observable results of carefully germinating seeds and caring for a garden with respect to atmospheric as opposed to celestial conditions. The medieval garden writers' careful attention to both the details of the process of gardening and the observable results of careful attention to the plants' needs made it far less likely that they would concern themselves with astrological theory even when they"believed" in it. It is only with the emergence of modern systems of food production that gardening by the moon became primarily a religious rather than scientific practice.[40]

[40] Planting by the moon could only be understood as a scientific practice when actual scientific information was not available. Further, it can only be embraced by gardeners who do not depend on agricultural yield for their livelihood. So, for example, Danaan, who apparently does not support herself and her family from her garden, embraces New Age lunar gardening but an independent, organic garlic farmer and writer such as Ron L. Engeland (in *Growing Great Garlic: The Definitive Guide for Organic Gardeners and Small Farmers* [Okanogan: Filaree Productions, 1991]) offers careful, empirical analysis aimed at maximizing yield.