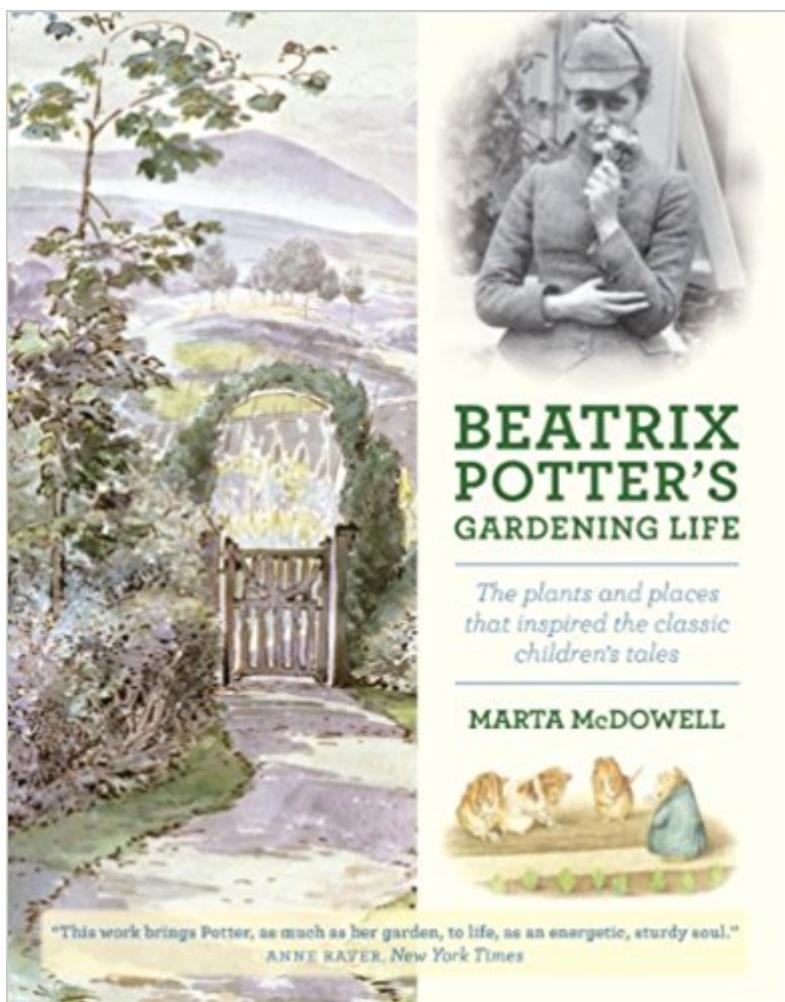


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Beatrix Potter's Gardening Life: The Plants And Places That Inspired The Classic Children's Tales



Synopsis

An enchanting and original account of Beatrix Potter's life and her love of plants and gardening. Judy Taylor, vice president of the Beatrix Potter Society There aren't many books more beloved than *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and even fewer authors as iconic as Beatrix Potter. More than 150 million copies of her books have sold worldwide and interest in her work and life remains high. And her characters—Peter Rabbit, Jemima Puddle Duck, and all the rest—exist in a charmed world filled with flowers and gardens. Beatrix Potter's *Gardening Life* is the first book to explore the origins of Beatrix Potter's love of gardening and plants and show how this passion came to be reflected in her work. The book begins with a gardener's biography, highlighting the key moments and places throughout her life that helped define her, including her home Hill Top Farm in England's Lake District. Next, the reader follows Beatrix Potter through a year in her garden, with a season-by-season overview of what is blooming that truly brings her gardens alive. The book culminates in a traveler's guide, with information on how and where to visit Potter's gardens today.

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Customer Reviews

Part of the charm and eye-delighting intricacy of Beatrix Potter's beloved children's books about such endearing and enduring characters as Peter Rabbit and Jemima Puddle-Duck are the precisely and vitally rendered illustrations of the English gardens,

farms, and landscapes her characters so actively occupy. In this sumptuously illustrated “gardening biography,” horticultural consultant McDowell, who is fascinated by writers who garden (her first book was *Emily Dickinson’s Gardens*, 2004), fully illuminates Potter’s deep botanical knowledge and joy in cultivation. When publishers rejected her first attempt at a children’s book, Potter self-published *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* in 1902, launching a brilliant career. When she purchased Hill Top Farm in the fabled Lake District, she set out on the path that led to her becoming an intrepid gardener, savvy landowner, sheep breeder, and conservationist, ultimately leaving thousands of pristine acres to the National Trust. With wit and expertise, McDowell highlights the stamp of Potter’s horticultural know-how on her indelible books and chronicles a year in her exuberant gardens to create a visually exciting, pleasurable appreciation of Potter’s devotion to art and nature. --Donna Seaman

“Stir your imagination. . . . a biography written through plants.” •The New York Times Book Review “With wit and expertise, McDowell highlights the stamp of Potter’s horticultural know-how on her indelible books and chronicles a year in her exuberant gardens to create a visually exciting, pleasurable appreciation of Potter’s devotion to art and nature.” •Booklist “A loving portrait.” •Better Homes and Gardens “You will be charmed by this book.” •Gardens Illustrated “A richly illustrated exploration of Beatrix Potter’s evolution as an author-illustrator, gardener, sheep farmer and land preservationist.” •Shelf Awareness “In her new book, Beatrix Potter’s *Gardening Life*, Marta McDowell expands our knowledge of Miss Potter horticultural expertise and background, explaining what she grew and where. There are photographs here that I have never seen before of Beatrix and her gardens, and delicious watercolors of rose hips and violets, clematis and honeysuckle, snapdragons and waterlilies.” •with and without rabbits, frogs and guileless ducks. •The Telegraph “A volume rich with photographs and Potter’s own enchanting sketches and watercolors.” •The Chicago Tribune “McDowell brings to light a delightfully different side of the celebrated author. . . . The book recounts Potter’s life through a gardening lens and is copiously illustrated with her sketches and watercolors of plants.” •American Gardener “McDowell’s book is beautiful in every way. The fascinating narrative is liberally illustrated with both photographs and Potter’s original artwork, which includes botanical prints and paintings of gardens in

addition to her iconic collection of children's illustrations. "This is not an historical novel with a plot, but neither is it a mere documentary of facts. It is the perfect blend of both." Alaska Airlines Magazine "You may well want to buy a copy to keep and several to give friends. . . . McDowell's well-researched book (including plant lists) is nearly as good as a visit to the farm. From a watercolor of Jemima Puddle-duck hiding from a fox among the foxgloves, to sepia photos of Potter strolling the garden paths on a frosty morning, the book is a visual delight." • The Seattle Times

A Review of "Beatrix Potter's Gardening Life" The plants and places that inspired the classic children's tales By Marta McDowell Only rarely in a reader's life will a book come along a book that is so perfectly suited for the reader's character that it brings out the schoolgirl in her and perhaps a squeal of delight and a series of silly, wistful sighs. Reader, that is what Marta McDowell's latest book has done for me. I admit I didn't exactly love her book on Emily's Dickinson's garden but perhaps it was just my lack of enthusiasm for Dickinson herself that underwhelmed me. What a contrast is this treasure before me now. Shall I tell you all the things I love about it? The cover is what delights the eyes at once. Part of the wonder of Beatrix Potter was that she was an amazingly accomplished artist, even from a young age. The cover is beautiful and includes a watercolor of a sweet garden gate, another of a handful of adorable little guinea pigs busy at their vegetable patch (both done by Potter, of course) and a wonderful old black and white photograph of Potter herself looking young and radiant with a posy under her nose. The colors are charming in the way that all her watercolors are. Of course that sent me, with schoolgirl squeals, diving into the book where I was happy to discover a most generous selection of photographs and examples of her art; watercolors, sketches and even maps of the places important in her life. The book is organized into three main parts. The first is about her life in general and all the people and places that influenced her work and her gardening. The photographs of these people and places are the best collection of such that I've seen. The second part is about "The Year in Beatrix Potter's Garden". Here McDowell explores the day to day gardening life of Potter through each of the seasons of winter, spring, summer and fall. She really is gifted writer. Here's an example of what could have been just a simple intro to the bit about winter. See for yourself how skillfully she takes the reader to Sawrey in winter. "Winter perches on Sawrey like a large black bird. The nights draw out into the darkness of the north, cut by glow of lamplight and the smell of fireplaces burning wood and coal in the village cottages. It is the selvedge of the year." See what I mean? The book is full of bits like that. So pretty. The third part, "Visiting Beatrix Potter's Gardens" left me delighted and deeply, deeply envious of McDowell, who

has tromped all over England to write this book. One thing I've liked about reading since I first picked up the habit is that it can take you anywhere in the world you care to go for the trouble of opening a book. After reading this section, I feel like I, too, have tromped 'round the lake district and seen the green gate of Hilltop Farm. I have believe I was there in another life or in a dream. Just when you think the charming journey into the life of dear Beatrix Potter is over, you find one final gem at the back of the book. Something those of us who garden and also love our favorite writers like sisters will pounce upon with glee, and perhaps another squeal. It is a lovely list of Potter's plants. But not just any old list. No! It includes each plant's common name, botanical name, type of plant (shrub, perennial, etc) and the primary source from where she found it (which exact letter written by or to Potter where it was mentioned). I know. You're in raptures. But I'm not done. Next there's a chart/list of plants in her books. It includes what book, date, common and botanical names, and whether the reference was text or artwork. Squeal! I do apologize to non-gardening readers, you probably don't understand the pleasure to be found when traipsing through ones' own garden and pointing out to a friend and saying, "Look there. That's a variegated geranium I planted after reading that Beatrix Potter book. It's just like the one on page 20 of *The Fairy Caravan*." Sigh. The rest of the book is a fancy index and lists of books for further reading. It's a lovely book, sure to delight the following: children's literature fans, children's lit illustrators fans, gardening enthusiasts and Anglophiles. Sigh, I am all of the above. Thanks to Ms McDowell for sending this lovely autographed copy of what has become one of the great treasures of my library.

Marta McDowell's "Beatrix Potter's Gardening Life" is almost sure to delight all who lovingly remember the stories of Peter Rabbit, Squirrel Nutkin, and Jemima Puddle-Duck which readied us for meeting Mole, Water Rat, Toad, and Badger. Even better, if these admirers of Beatrix Potter are slightly mad about gardens and wander in their dreams among the dreaming spires of English foxgloves & delphiniums. (In this review, as in McDowell's book, Beatrix Potter is sometimes referred to as Beatrix, sometimes as Beatrix Potter, and after her marriage, sometimes as Mrs. Heelis. Hopefully, this won't be confusing.) This richly created book offers on almost every page superbly reproduced water colors of landscapes, plants, and the small creatures of hedgerow and streams, or photographs of the more than 10 homes in which Beatrix lived and gardened. No one, not even Durer, has drawn bunnies like Beatrix Potter, bunnies with the softest fur, and on p. 106, the roundest tummies, as six lie together sleeping off the soporific effects of a lettuce orgy. Part One of this three part tale describes Beatrix Potter's life in McDowell's framework of a plant: germination, offshoots, flowering, roots, ripening, and setting seed (140 pages bursting with the child's

precociously talented paintings through her final flowering as a conservationist who wills 4,000 acres of Lake District lands to the National Trust). Beatrix was the only daughter of second generation wealth. To her supremely status-conscious parents, almost no one was good enough for her company or her love, making her early life lonely. She turned to drawing & botanical research. But a scientific society rejected her exquisite portfolio of mushroom paintings & original studies of spore germination, turning her forever away from formal scientific work. We share her sorrow at her first betrothed's sudden death and we cheer for her eventual declaration of independence in marrying a second suitor, Mr. William Heelis of Sawrey in the Lake district, with whom she shared 33 years. Part Two has the happy format of classics on gardening: following a year in Beatrix Potter's gardens. The wealthy Potters had summer, winter and spring abodes & Beatrix planted where she bloomed. Here, McDowell relies on Beatrix's letters and diaries as well as her own professional knowledge to tell what Mrs. Heelis & her Willie were seeing, planting, harvesting---and she uses the Tales & their paintings to show how closely Potter intertwined her plants and the poetry of her stories. For instance, the plants surrounding that devious ginger-whiskered fellow, Mr. Tod, are foxgloves. Peter's iconic radish picture is so precise, we can plant seeds of the same fine nibble. The writing in this section is enchanting: for instance, "Poppies unfurl their buds like butterflies from cocoons." (p 127). That's McDowell, not Potter. The third major section is to me, most magical. McDowell followed the path of Potter, visiting each place she once lived or visited. The result is both a travel guide and history. Photographs and paintings of Beatrix's gardens in her time are shown next to pictures and descriptions of what remains now. This is written as informally as letters home, with details on roads to take, car parks (or not), inns, B&Bs, as well as the gardens themselves. As with all gardens, even those as lovingly maintained as Sackville-West's Sissinghurst, much is changed. McDowell writes of Hill Top Farm, Beatrix's first "all hers" home place: "As you look at the garden and its swath of flowers, [you must] realize that few of [Beatrix's] actual plants...are still growing in the garden. The trick to preservation gardening is to keep the garden looking more or less as it did in her day, while dealing with the inexorable fact that plants grow, spread, and sooner or later die." So do we all, but in this book, the landscapes of Jeremy Fisher and of Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cottontail live again, as does that remarkable artist, gardener, and woman, Beatrix Potter. For gardeners, this book is enhanced by lists of plants Beatrix Potter grew in her farms and showed in her books (splendid idea!). In "The Tale to Tom Kitten," for instance, 18 plants are painted in loving detail, from Japanese anemones to water lilies. Any reader alerts? This is a gardening biography, not a comprehensive analysis of Potter's tales & writing, not an in-depth analysis of her life and art, and definitely not a guide for gardeners on design & planting. McDowell

gives generous and extensive recommendations for in-depth reading on all these points, together with a good index and a comprehensive bibliography of Potter's books. It is rather something magical, the tale of how a great talent unfolded against the odds, and was realized in earthly gardens and in the numinous landscapes of her stories. If this appeals to your child, reader, artist, and the gardener within----highly, very highly recommended. It is a unique, beautiful, and altogether lovely book.

This is a very interesting and well-designed book focusing on an important part of BP's life and work that falls between art and farming. Pictures take up more than 50% of this smallish book, but the pictures are good-sized (many full page or double page) and very well reproduced, and include many I haven't seen in other books, including early photos of BP in her gardens or Lake District landscapes, her drawings of Lakeland views, her watercolors of flowers (which I particularly love; they remind me of Japanese flower prints), and modern photographs of her gardens as they are today. The text is also excellent, including quotes from many letters about her gardening experiences, and discussions of how her interests in plants are expressed in the little books. Gardening as Beatrix approached it included flowers, shrubs, trees, vegetables, and fruits, often mixed together; her gardening aesthetic was anything but formal. As she went about her mission of saving and restoring great swathes of Lake District landscape, eliminating anything unsightly, perfecting and protecting views, and creating harmony between agriculture and nature, her ideas as to what actually constituted a garden continued to expand; this work was, "in a sense, landscaping on a regional scale."

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