

ground. It is surrounded by a fence composed of unhewn granite posts with squared rails of wood between. Virginia Creeper, Japanese Ampelopsis, and perhaps other twining or climbing plants, might convert this old fence into a thing of beauty. In public parks the requirement for protection of the borders sometimes necessitates guards of wire and stakes along the paths. These are often great disfigurements, and their offensive aspect, in places where they seem to be required permanently, might be at least mitigated by the use of Virginia Creeper after the German fashion . . .

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### THE FLOATING GARDENS OF MEXICO.

THE famous chinampas, or floating gardens, are a never-ending attraction of the City of Mexico, and yet little is known to the general reader regarding these curious places. Contrary to the general belief, the so-called floating gardens of the present day do not float. Many years since, however—in fact, before the conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards—the name was appropriate, for real floating gardens were then common on the lakes in the Valley of Mexico, especially in the immediate vicinity of the city. But when Humboldt visited Mexico (then called New Spain) in 1803, and Abbé Francesco Clavigero (a missionary among the Indians) a few years later, these peculiar possessions of the Mexicans were rapidly diminishing in number; and in 1826 Captain G. F. Lyon informs us that “the little gardens constructed on bushes or wooden rafts no longer exist in the immediate vicinity of Mexico (the city); but I learned that some may yet be seen at Inchimilco.”\*

Abbé Francesco Clavigero describes the true floating gardens as follows: “They plait and twist Willows and roots of many plants, or other materials, together, which are light, but capable of supporting the earth of the garden firmly united. Upon this foundation they lay the light bushes which float on the lake, and over all the mud and dirt which they draw from the bottom of the same lake.”†

The common form was a quadrangle, and the average size about fifteen by forty feet, although some of the largest were a hundred feet in extent. Many of the latter contained a small hut, in which the cultivator sometimes lived; one or more trees were also growing in the centre of these largest plots. The earth used was extremely rich, and this being kept in a moist state by its proximity to the water (the elevation above it being not over a foot), the gardens were productive of the choicest vegetables and flowers, including also Maize.

The gardens of the present day are very different affairs. They do not float, but, on the contrary, are composed of strips of solid ground, usually about fifteen by thirty feet in extent, although some are larger. These plots are intersected by small canals, through which visitors are propelled in canoes. They are constructed by heaping up the earth about two feet above the water. Willows, and sometimes Poplars or Silver Maples, also a species of Cane, are often grown along

\* *Journal of a Residence and Tour in the Republic of Mexico in 1826*, vol. ii.

† *History of Mexico*, 1807, vol. ii.



their banks to keep them from washing down. The nearest gardens to the City of Mexico are along La Viga Canal, a public waterway about forty feet in width and of varying depth. Its source is Lake Texcoco (formerly known as Tezcoco), two and a half miles west of the city, from whence it flows to a point near the town and then returns by a circuitous route to the lake. The gardens are located where the ground is naturally low or swampy.

All produce the choicest vegetables, flowers, and not infrequently fruits, in great abundance, embracing nearly every variety grown in the United States, and others unknown to us. Even in the ditches or little canals beautiful Water-lilies often line the way, while many of the plots are one mass of vari-colored flowers, the most common ones being Roses, Pinks, Geraniums, Poppies and Fuchsias. The great variety of shades and the enormous size of many kinds astonish and delight the visitor from more northern latitudes. The Poppies are more attractive than our finest Pæonies; on certain feast days every one wears a wreath made exclusively from these showy flowers.

The quick and luxuriant growth of the products is mainly due to the daily application of water, which is dipped up in gourds attached to long swinging and pivoted poles, and deftly thrown about. It is needless to say that the cultivator never depends upon rain. Some of the plots are occupied by their owners and their families, who live in charming little houses constructed of cane, and surrounded by all their possessions, often including cows, horses, pigs and chickens. La Viga

Canal is almost impassable on Sundays especially, and the same may be said of the beautiful driveways along its tree-lined banks; for Sunday in the City of Mexico is the liveliest and, in many respects, the busiest day of all the week. It is the great market day as well as holiday, and a large number of the craft on La Viga are loaded with produce of every description from the gardens and elsewhere. The visitor to the floating gardens seldom hides his disappointment on discovering that they are stationary, but he never regrets having visited them; indeed, a day spent on the canal and among the chinampas will long be remembered as one of the pleasantest in Mexico.

Little is certainly known regarding the origin of these famous places. Abbé Clavigero says that when the Mexicans were driven from their native country, ages in the past, they were forced to occupy small islands in Lake Texcoco, where "they ceased for some years to cultivate the land, because they had none, until necessity and industry together taught them to form movable fields and gardens, which floated on the waters of the lake. . . . These were the first fields which the Mexicans owned after the foundation of Mexico." The custom may have originated as above stated, but the following view, founded on a careful examination of some of the oldest works on Mexico, is advanced as the more probable, especially since the Mexicans still retained and cultivated the watery plots after their independence was again established.

For long ages the Valley of Mexico was subjected to devastating inundations. The valley is about sixty miles in diameter, and is surrounded by a continuous wall of hills and mountains. The waters collected on these flow into six principal lakes. The plaza mayor, or great square, in the City of Mexico is elevated a few inches only above the nearest lake—Texcoco. In former times, a prolonged rainy season caused the surplus waters in the other lakes—which have an elevation of from three to thirteen feet above the plaza mayor—to burst their banks and flow into Lake Texcoco, which in turn overflowed and flooded the valley. In June, 1629, the date of the last great flood, the city was covered with water to a depth of three feet, and it remained in that state for five years.

The regular fields were, of course, ruined whenever a freshet traversed the valley, and necessity finally compelled the people to depend upon floating gardens for a supply of produce at all seasons, and to prevent a famine. These were moored in places where the rise and fall of the lake waters would not affect them. During the period when floods were looked for at any time, these floating patches were very common, but when the city and valley were partially protected by a gigantic canal in 1789 (commenced in 1607\*), by which the main overflow was carried off in safety, they gradually disappeared, until at the present time nothing but the pretty name and stationary plots surrounded by water remains to perpetuate an ancient custom.

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\* The drainage canal, commenced by the Aztecs, has been greatly improved and only recently finished by the Mexican Valley Drainage and Canal Company, so that all surplus water and the sewage of the city is now completely carried off.