From the 1830s on Germans migrated to the Midwest in large numbers. Most of them were avid plantsmen and wherever they settled, from Wisconsin to Louisiana, from Missouri to Ohio, they grew gardens just as they had in the homeland. Their gardening traditions have been among the longest lasting of the traditional Old World lifestyles they brought with them. These old methods are still recognizable in rural areas, a wonderful example of the longevity of ideas and customs imported with immigrants.

Hermann, the town in which Deutschheim is located, was established in 1837. Unlike many villages and towns in Germany, where space was far more limited, each town lot was set up as a generous 60x120 feet, giving householders a large back garden to plant in any way they chose and on which to keep small livestock. In the European fashion, houses and other buildings were put as close to the street as possible. All early householders did this, but peasant property owners were particularly thrifty and did not believe in wasting an inch of potentially productive space. Every scrap which could be planted or otherwise put to work was planted or worked. German peasant folk were firm believers in never spending cash if you could do it or grow it yourself.

Though middle class gardens were not so ruthlessly utilitarian, they shared the philosophy of usefulness. In this respect they are distinctly different from the English middle class model of garden primarily as beauty spot. Practical gardens abound in Germany. Even upper class Germans want their own fruit trees and berry bushes scattered around the lawn. In a country where certain cherished foods are even yet deliberately available only at certain times of the year, these brief periods being valued as highlights of the annual natural cycle when foods taste their best, Germans treasure their cherry trees, their strawberry beds and asparagus patches. The further down the economic ladder one goes, the more of the yard’s space is devoted to utilitarian purposes. Lawns
tend to disappear. In the 19th century when grass had to be maintained with scythes and sickles, few people indulged in lawns. Unless there was a need for a grass patch (i.e., as a bleaching yard for linens) peasants put their land to use for gardens.

Immigrants laid out their gardens in Missouri just as they had done in Germany. The most common layout, if the land was fairly flat, was a rectangular or square plot subdivided into four equal sections separated by two generously wide permanent paths which crossed in the center. This might be thought of as the Four Square Plan and has been used to organize garden space for centuries. It was a plan used by the Romans and by Medieval monks, and it has sound horticultural reasons for its continuation.

The permanent paths were laid out in rigorously straight lines. In the Old Country they were topped with the owner’s choice of one of the following, depending on the soil type, cost and local tradition: fine gravel, pebbles, flagstone, sand, brick or tanbark. Paved paths offered the benefits of being mud-free and decorative. They were labor-saving as the paving cut down on the weeding. They also added to the garden’s appearance of neatness and made it possible for people to stroll for pleasure among the plants, a favorite Sunday recreation even today.

The same patterns were established here, though what surfacing the permanent paths may have received is now conjectural. Almost no garden has survived intact to the present. Roto-tillers and other small mechanical plows have done more to destroy the old garden layouts than any other single thing, replacing as they have the laborious double dug hand-spading involved in the old techniques. Roto-tilling encourages long rows, not short beds, and permanent paths must have gotten in the way.

A useful garden’s permanent paths were defined and beautified by borders. The most common edging was boxwood, partly because it was evergreen and partly because people thought of it as having religious and magical connotations. Boxwood’s evergreen and slow-growing characteristics made it a symbol of life everlasting; in that sense it appears as an important Christmas decoration. As for magic, in some parts of Germany it was
believed to protect a house from lightning. Boxwood was raised and sold commercially by Germans from at least the 1850s on.

Just as in Germany, the garden was right outside the house door if possible, with the house forming a fourth side of the fencing which protected the plantings. The fact that kitchen gardens (Krautergarten) were generally called “useful gardens” (Nutzgarten) denotes their vital function in a household.

Unlike Yankees in mid America, according to letters and journals written by German observers (who called all Anglo Americans “Yankees” or English and who faulted them as shoddy gardeners), Germans were dedicated and committed soil improvers who knew the value of green and animal manures. Every fall each quadrant of the useful garden received a layer of well-rotted cow manure. Horse manure was applied only to asparagus patches. Lime was applied if deemed needful, the four plots were deep spaded (double dug), cold weather vegetables were set out or a winter cover crop was seeded in.

Crops were scrupulously rotated each year. Germans believed in companion plantings for vigor and insect resistance, and in succession planting so that the garden was kept fully productive at all times. Beds were densely sown, often in wide rows. Foot paths between plantings were exceptionally narrow, only about 4 to 6 inches wide, too narrow to turn your foot sideways. Any paths in the middle of the beds were impermanent because the crops in each plot changed each year, therefore so did row spacing.

Flowers, herbs and vegetables were intermingled freely with none of the segregation deemed essential today. Unlike the Anglo practice, all rows ran the same way, parallel to each other, across the narrow direction of each quadrant. Raised beds with board sides were seldom used except for the occasional asparagus patch. Mulching was practiced if the plants did not offer themselves enough shade through close planting, or with brassicas (the cabbage family) which must be set fairly far apart. (Brassicas offered a fine opportunity for succession plantings of radishes, cresses, and lettuces in the early weeks before the cabbages grew to fill the available space.)
The kitchen garden was “useful” in its function because of its close proximity to the house. It was not the winter food production area, as it was normally too small for that. In some parts of Germany a second garden was maintained in the fields, sometimes as a single plot set aside for the whole village and sometimes on each individual farmer’s land. There bulk crops of potatoes, turnips for people and livestock, carrots and cabbages were raised.

Since this practice also came to Missouri, only limited amounts of those vegetables would be found in the kitchen garden. (An 1870 photo of Hermann shows vacant lots entirely planted to cabbages and farm records prove that long terms storage crops were raised in huge quantities as cash crops.) The rule of thumb in many households was to provide one hundred head of cabbages per person per year as the winter food allowance. The kitchen garden would have had to be extremely large in order to have had space for these and for the immense crops of potatoes and carrots required for a family for a whole year. Earth clamps and root cellars were an important adjunct to any German household.

Various items were grown in a useful garden. The list includes vegetables, cooking herbs, flowers, medicinals, and plants with magical attributes such as house leeks (said to protect against building fires). Dye plants were left to specialists to raise in quantity. But Germans planted much else: rhubarb, onions, leeks, garlic, chives, shallots, white cabbage, red cabbage, kohlrabi, kale, broccoli, peas to be eaten fresh and to be dried for winter soups, runner beans, sorrel, cresses, various lettuces, radishes, brussel sprouts, celery, celeriac and tomatoes. In the early days they grew a surprising number of fruit trees from seed.

Germans loved fresh fruit and incorporated fruit trees into their gardens whenever they could. Appropriate trees for a nineteenth century German garden would be a cherry or a peach; both were widespread from the 1830s on and both were beloved by immigrants.
German gardening practices led to amazing amounts of produce from small areas. They grew food plants well known to the English settlers of the 1600s, but forgotten by their nineteenth-century descendants. Germans ate salads at least once a day, even in winter if the late crops held up, and filled in the gaps with fresh and dried fruit, pickles and sauerkraut, all health-giving foods. They may not have known about vitamins but they knew from centuries of folk knowledge and experience what was good for them.

Anyone familiar with current organic or “green” gardening practices will recognize the wisdom of the German gardeners of the 19th century. We are re-discovering the value of heritage seeds, locally produced food, organic fertilizers, companion plantings for pest control, and the value of naturally enriched soil from crop rotation and composting. The collection of rainfall in rain barrels for our gardens follows the tradition of cisterns so essential to the survival of the settlers in 1840. The value of these long lost traditions has been recognized and “useful” gardens are again the source of both good health and pleasant recreation.