

Women in the 16th Century

Women were raised to be good housewives. They were instructed in cooking, baking, brewing, distilling, preparing medicines, and caring for the sick. They were also taught to be obedient, modest, temperate, and patient. A good wife was, in Shakespeare's words, "both dame and servant" to her husband. While many women could not read and depended on instructions handed down by word of mouth, others could turn to printed books or to handwritten volumes of recipes which they and members of their families compiled.

For keeping their houses clean and bright, housewives concocted mixtures from ingredients at hand - in their gardens, meadows, and ponds. Looking after the kitchen garden of herbs was one of a women's many duties. She also looked after the bees, fattened the chickens, milked the cows, and gathered the plants that became the ingredients for her cosmetic, medicinal, and cleaning preparations. Recipes for preserving her produce were particularly valuable. Numerous books give directions for drying or making conserves of herbs, for candying flowers, and for drying fruits, pickling vegetables, preserving eggs, and salting meats. Instructions for discovering "defects" in dried hams and bacon and for "recovering" tainted flesh, oil, cider, and wine occur frequently, indicating that efforts to preserve food were not always successful

Keeping garments stain-free and bright was a challenging and time-consuming duty. In addition to soap and water, the housewife used other ingredients common to her household: ashes, alum, bread, gum dragon, urine, vinegar, and the whites of eggs. Mother nature provided the bleaching power of the sun. This recipe for whitening cloth from a manuscript cookery book of the late 17th and early 18th century also calls for "blue water," water tinted with indigo to counteract a yellowish tinge in white fabric

Ideas about sanitation were far different from ours. In city streets the dung of animals mingled with refuse thrown from nearby houses, attracting insects and vermin. People seldom bathed and rarely changed their bedding or the rushes on their floors. They accepted the resulting fleas and lice as a normal part of their life, but they created numerous concoctions and contrivances to outsmart them.

God was praised whenever a mother and child safely passed through the perils of childbirth, but many children and the women who bore them did not survive. The skills of a good midwife were crucial to housewives, who were nearly always pregnant. Even though midwives rarely knew Latin (the language of medicine) and were denied much of the knowledge available to male physicians, they drew on a long oral tradition. By the 17th century, midwives and the women they served could consult published texts in English. There they could find instructions on the care of mother and infant, advice on choosing a mate and insuring the birth of a male child, "antidotes to venerie," and the methods to avoid having a child at all (birth control)

1. **What skills were women taught in order to become good housewives?**
2. **What does it mean to be both Dame and Servant?**
3. **What chores were women responsible for?**
4. **List some things that women used to remove stains from clothes.**
5. **How clean was the average person? Explain.**
6. **How did women pass on knowledge to each other?**
7. **In your opinion, was the Renaissance a good time for the average woman?**