As the second term of Jefferson’s presidency was winding down, he began planning for his retirement at Monticello, where his beloved family and gardens awaited him. In April 1807, Jefferson arrived at Monticello for his usual spring visit, and before returning to Washington in mid-May, he and enslaved gardener Wormley Hughes laid out oval and circular beds around the house. A wide selection of spring flowering annuals, perennials and bulbous roots were planted, and one entire oval flower bed was designated for double pink, yellow, white and blue hyacinths. The following spring, as Jefferson celebrated his 65th birthday with his retirement less than a year away, granddaughter Ann Cary Randolph wrote to him in Washington, “April 15 1808 … I have been twice to Monticello … the hyacinths were in bloom, they are superb ones. The Tulips are all bud[ding].”

Finally back at Monticello following his years of public service, Jefferson was able to fully pursue his fascination with flowers. Documentary evidence suggests that he grew approximately 105 species of herbaceous flowers, and there were undoubtedly numerous species not mentioned in his Garden Book and other memoranda. For example, Jefferson received a yearly shipment of as many as 700 species of seeds from the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. Jefferson typically distributed these seeds to other devoted American gardeners, but many were surely planted at Monticello and not noted.

Jefferson also shared his passion for horticulture with his family. He, along with his daughters and granddaughters, often worked the plots themselves, usually with the help of Wormley Hughes. The flower gardens were hubs of family activity — tending them was something that people did for the enjoyment of being in each other’s company and to appreciate natural beauty.

The flower gardens virtually disappeared after Jefferson’s death in 1826. Fortunately, the gardens were brought back to life by The Garden Club of Virginia’s restoration efforts between 1939 and 1941. Researchers found Jefferson’s sketches of the winding walk and the oval bed plan and, by shining the headlights of their automobiles across the West Lawn at night, observed the depressed path made by the Winding Walk.

Today, the species recorded by Jefferson provide the foundation for the contemporary flower gardens at Monticello. Here are just a few of the flowers that add life and color to the grounds — and that Jefferson and his family would have likely enjoyed more than two centuries ago.
“the flowers come forth like the belles of the day, have their short reign of beauty and splendor, & retire like them to the more interesting office of reproducing their like. the hyacinths and tulips are off the stage, the Irises are giving place to the Belladonnas, as this will to the Tuberoses Etc.”

— Thomas Jefferson
May 1811

Tulips
The tulip was probably the most prominent and successful flower in the garden at Monticello — it’s mentioned more than any other flower in Jefferson’s Garden Book and correspondence. Philadelphia nurseryman Bernard McMahon regularly sent the “best Tulips of Various kinds.” Annually, Monticello gardeners plant approximately 7,000 to 8,000 bulbs to ensure a spectacular bloom season. This year, the planting was sponsored by The Richard D. & Carolyn W. Jacques Foundation.

Sensitive Plant
Seeds of the sensitive plant were first sown in an oval flower bed at Monticello on March 22, 1811. A favorite feature of a child’s garden, the unusual leaves fold together when touched. The seeds were sent by McMahon, who discussed the plant in his 1806 *The American Gardener’s Calendar*, writing, “The sensibility of this plant is worthy of admiration, that ... [with] the least touch, ... the leaves just like a tree a dying, droop and complicate themselves immediately ... so that a person would ... think they were really endowed with the sense of feeling.”

Globe Centaurea (opposite page)
Also called Great Golden Knapweed, this flower is a robust perennial from the Caucasus introduced to Britain by 1805. Bernard McMahon sent seeds to Jefferson in 1812, which was documented in Jefferson’s Garden Book.
Cockscomb
Jefferson noted the planting of seeds of “Cockscomb, a flower like the Prince’s feather” in 1767. This is likely the crested form of Celosia with its strange scarlet combs that are furrowed and lobed. In 1811, Jefferson wrote McMahon: “I have an extensive flower border, in which I am fond of placing handsome plants or fragrant. Those of mere curiosity I do not aim at.” Still, the shockingly curious flowers of the cockscomb must have delighted visitors to Monticello in Jefferson’s time, just as they continue to do today.

Joseph’s Coat
This popular annual, which grows up to four feet tall, is one of the most dramatic flowers in the summer display at Monticello. Jefferson included the Joseph’s Coat, or “three-coloured Amaranth,” in a shipment of seeds from Paris to his brother-in-law Francis Eppes in 1786. Its edible leaves have a walnut-like flavor and can be eaten raw in salads or steamed.
Winding Walk
The winding walk and border is not a traditional “garden.” Instead, the meandering, relaxed lines of the walkway reflect Jefferson’s interest in the latest, informal style of landscape design, which he had admired during his visit to English gardens in 1786. British garden designers attempted to imitate the picturesque scenes of 18th-century landscape painters by removing the rigid, formal designs of an earlier era.

“...I find that the limited number of our flower beds will too much restrain the variety of flowers in which we might wish to indulge, and therefore I have resumed an idea ... of a winding walk ... with a narrow border of flowers on each side. This would give us abundant room for a great variety." — Thomas Jefferson, June 1807

In Bloom
Monticello is surrounded with flower gardens designed by Jefferson. Design your own garden inspired by Monticello’s Favorite Flowers Seed Collection, which includes a selection of 10 seeds. Additionally, Monticello’s Center for Historic Plants offers a wide selection of vegetable and herb seeds, annual flower seeds, and seeds for perennial and biennial flowers — all available for purchase at monticelloshop.org/garden.

The Favorite Flowers Seed Collection includes the following:
- Corn Poppy
- Love-in-a-Mist
- Globe Amaranth
- Pot Marigold
- Joseph’s Coat
- Pincushion Flower
- Cupani Sweet Pea
- Cockscomb
- Johnny-Jump-up
- Sensitive Plant