

Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book was not only a record of his activities in the garden but a chronicle of his relationships with fellow gardeners.

## Jefferson's Horticultural Neighborhood: A Rational Society of Gardeners

THOMAS JEFFERSON is regarded as the essential cerebral figure in American history. As well, he was so immersed in public life, his family, farms, and a staggering world of outside interests that his consistent search and cultivation of personal friendships is a surprising facet of his personality. Jefferson wrote that "Agreeable society is the first essential in constituting the happiness and of course the value of our existence." He referred to friendships as a "rational society" which "informs the mind, sweetens the temper, cheers our spirits, and promotes health."

This was expressed early in Jefferson's youth and his close friendships with boyhood pals like John Page, William Fleming, and Robert Skipwith. This rational society based on a warm and open intellectual commerce was experienced by Jefferson in Williamsburg with George Wythe, Governor Francis Fauquier, and William Small. Jefferson elevated conversation to one of the fine arts in the salons of Paris, in dinner parties at the President's House in Washington, and in retirement at Monticello. The University of Virginia was a way for Jefferson to draw into his companionable orbit of intellectual sociability another group of like-minded friends. Rational Society was expressed by the free and easy flow of conversation at the dinner table and over wine after dinner: Jefferson wrote,

"from dinner to dark I give to society and recreation with my neighbors and friends."

One of the central themes that defined Jefferson's interest in gardening was the union of gardening and sociability. Jefferson used plants and gardens as a way of relating to friends, family, neighbors; even political allies. A thread of garden gossip weaves its way through the letters published in *Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book*, as Jefferson would preface letters on the future of the American republic with a discussion of how his gardens fared at Monticello. Plants, from the golden rain tree obtained from seed from Lafayette's aunt, Madame de Tessé, to the geranium houseplant Jefferson offered to the Washington socialite, Margaret Bayard Smith, were tangible tokens of friendship. Jefferson's granddaughter, Ellen Randolph Coolidge, recalled the heyday of flower gardening at Monticello: Jefferson, his daughters and granddaughters, would assemble on the West Lawn to admire the colorful displays of tulips and hyacinths. She wrote, "When the flowers were in bloom, and we were in ecstasies over the rich purple and crimson, or pure white, or delicate lilac, or pale yellow of the blossoms, how he would sympathize in our admiration, or discuss...new groupings and combinations and contrasts. Oh, these were happy moments for us and for him."



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Peas in the Monticello Vegetable Garden.

The pea contests held between Jefferson and his Charlottesville neighbors were a poignant expression of the way in which Jefferson used plants as a vehicle for social intercourse. The Jefferson family history held that whoever harvested the first spring pea hosted a community dinner which included a feast on the winning dish, or teaspoon, of peas. George Divers, a wealthy merchant and owner of what is now Farmington Country Club, was regarded as the “king” of the pea contest. The story passed down through the family suggested that the one year Jefferson won the pea contest he refused to divulge the victory to Mr. Divers in fear of rocking the pride of what was probably Jefferson’s closest personal friend outside the world of politics. Jefferson was reputed to have stated, “No, say nothing about it, it will be more agreeable to our friend to think that he never fails.”

Jefferson’s reluctance to claim the first pea was affirmed by a reminiscence of his oldest granddaughter, Anne Cary Randolph: “Mr. Jefferson lost

no opportunity of getting new seeds, choice roots, slips and grafts and was most anxious that his neighbors should enjoy the benefit of his acquisitions. He had less the spirit of rivalry than any one I ever knew, and took the most genuine pleasure in the success of others, heartily enjoying the triumph of his friends where they were more fortunate than himself in the cultivation of their grounds. Several of his neighbors had better gardens and orchards than his own and with them he was

particularly ready to share any prize in the way of roots, seeds or slips sent him from a distance.”

Among those neighborhood friends who “had better gardens and orchards” than Jefferson’s at Monticello was George Divers, who lived at Farmington, now an exclusive country club west of Charlottesville. Judy Walker Rives, a close friend of the Divers family, wrote, “the nearest road to his heart was through



VILMORIN-ANDRIEUX, THE VEGETABLE GARDEN, 1888

Sea kale, a perennial cabbage-like vegetable, was grown by Jefferson.

his garden.” She also observed how, “It was sometimes laughingly said by malicious people, that whenever Mr. Jefferson had any distinguished visitors of the *bon-vivant* order, he always had them invited to Farmington, as furnishing rather a higher specimen of Virginia good cheer than they found at Monticello.” Rives also recalled, “Everything about [Farmington] was fat except its owner...the horses...The gardens, of which he had three equally well nurtured, produced every fruit and flower that a temperate climate can bestow in rare perfection, and high brick walls fostered many that might have perished in a less genial situation.”

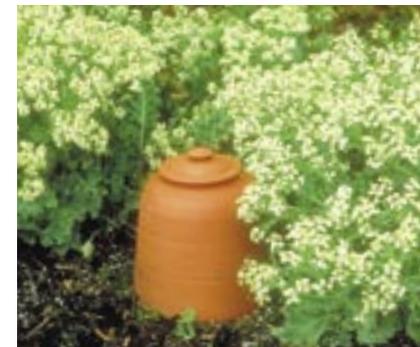
George Divers was not just a personal friend who named his still-born, and only, child after the sage of Monticello, but he served as a personal nurseryman for Jefferson. His gardens at Farmington functioned as a seed bank or safety net for the special plants initially introduced into Albemarle County and planted by Jefferson that somehow perished at Monticello. In 1809 Divers sent Jefferson the “early black eye pea which you brought from France,” perhaps twenty years earlier. Seeds of Jefferson’s sea kale, obtained from Philadelphia nurseryman Bernard McMahon, never germinated in Monticello plantings in 1809, 1811, 1812, and 1819, but in 1820 Divers forwarded 400 plants to Jefferson, who finally enjoyed harvests of this perennial cabbage-like species from 1822-1825. It must have been comforting for Jefferson to have the skillful Divers backing up his experimental efforts at Monticello. Peas were harvested at Farmington as early as late April, a testament to Divers’ horticultural wizardry.



J.A. FINELLI / SALVATORE CENTER FOR MAZZEI STUDIES  
Philip Mazzei

Divers also provided other plants to the gardens at Monticello. The first documented mention of tomatoes in the Monticello kitchen garden was the result of a Divers gift in 1809. One of Jefferson’s favorite dessert apples, Esopus Spitzenburg, in my opinion the finest eating variety of all time, plus novelty vegetables

like crowder peas, Brussels sprouts, and lima beans came from Divers. Two months before his death, in June of 1826, Jefferson sent Divers seeds of a three-foot-long cucumber: “to multiply chances of securing it, I send you 9. seeds, assured that nobody will be more likely to succeed than yourself.” Although Jefferson reputedly backed off in claims of pea contest victory, one cannot help



Sea kale is blanched under a terra cotta pot in the Monticello Vegetable Garden.

but hear some playful, mock-competitive banter in an 1807 letter to Divers, “we had strawberries yesterday—when had you them?” One also senses some boyish one-upmanship when Divers would chide Jefferson for mixing up his pea varieties in 1814.

Philip Mazzei (pronounced “Motts-ay”) was a multi-faceted Italian physician and gentleman farmer who also had a

profound effect on the gardens of Monticello. Born in 1739 at Poggio-a-Caiano, near Florence, Mazzei recruited ten Tuscan vinedressers and enough Italian capital to sail to the colony in 1773. The Mazzei party, burdened with tools, vines, and grandiose visions of a Mediterranean paradise on the Virginia frontier, set off from Williamsburg for land in the Shenandoah Valley. They were waylaid, however, at Monticello where Jefferson, smitten with the project and the ebullient Italian, offered them 193 acres of an adjacent property Mazzei was later to enlarge to 1,000 acres and name Colle. Mazzei, with Jefferson, formed and participated in a local militia, inspired Jefferson's efforts at a state of Virginia constitution, and wrote a four-volume history of the colonies (1788). Mazzei's philosophical allegiance to the ideals of the Revolution eventually brought him into the fold of public, political life. He went to Europe as an envoy of

## 'Costoluto Genovese' Tomato

In Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, written in 1781, he listed tomatoes as produce common to Virginia kitchen gardens. Jefferson began planting tomatoes at Monticello in 1809, the first summer of his retirement, and grew them until his death.

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the young republic in 1779, where he became a vocal advocate of the patriot's cause. Perhaps most importantly, Mazzei's enthusiasm for grape growing and wine making captivated Jefferson. Although Mazzei's grape growing and wine making experiments were generally inconclusive, Mazzei's Tuscan farmers planted the first vineyards at Monticello, described in painstaking detail by Jefferson in the Garden Book in 1774.

Even if the loquacious Mazzei at times tried Jefferson's patience (Jefferson had once written that Mazzei's arrival would result in a "double quotidian head-ach"), no Jefferson neighbor contributed so much to the Monticello garden as Mazzei did in 1774. Jefferson's 1774 Garden

Book included the entry of dozens of Italian vegetables, or vegetable varieties described in Italian. Most were new to Jefferson, such as garlic from Tuscany, sorrel from Pisa, and

Italian radicchio, and some were exotic novelties like the white pumpkin, Zucche Bianca, or the Spanish cabbage from



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## White Eggplant

Jefferson was growing the white eggplant along with a purple variety in the Monticello Kitchen Garden in 1812. Seed is available from the Center for Historic Plants.

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Pisa, Capov capuccio spagnola di Pisa, or Neapolitan watermelons, Cocomere di seme Neapolitane. Never before had the Monticello dinner table included such a sophisticated array of gourmet vegetables. Jefferson's exuberant compilation reflects both his friendship with Mazzei and an enthusiasm for Italian culture that would persist throughout his lifetime. In addition, following Mazzei's return to Europe, two of his skilled workmen, Anthony Giannini and Govannini di Prado, worked as gardeners in the vineyards and orchards of Monticello. The Giannini name is still prominent in the social and cultural life of Albemarle County.

The Mazzei horticultural connection continued during the early years of the Jefferson Presidency. In 1801 Jefferson asked Mazzei for "plants of good fruit, and especially of peaches and eating grapes." Mazzei responded with a series of shipments that contained both cuttings and seeds of grapes, plum, peaches, and apricots, many of which were unknown in the United States: Peach Apricot, "the finest fruit which grows in Europe, according to Jefferson"), Breast of Venus peach, and the Alberges and Vaga Loggia peaches. Mazzei also sent the Apple peach, which he had never seen grown outside Italy and the Angelica apricot which Mazzei had "baptised" or discovered himself. Although Jefferson tried unsuccessfully to start these seeds and cuttings in the Monticello nurseries, he gave most of this propagating stock to a Washington nurseryman, Alexander Hepburn, who successfully propagated some 140 trees that were sent to and planted at Monticello in 1804.

James Madison was an integral figure in this rational society of neighborhood gardeners. Although Montpelier is nearly a day's horseback ride from Monticello, twenty miles away, Madison often stayed

with the Jefferson's and was invited by Divers to the pea contest dinners. Jefferson's grandson, James Madison Randolph, was the first child born in the President's House, and was delivered during the visit of James Madison. No individual outside the Jefferson family is mentioned more times in the Betts edition of Thomas Jefferson's Garden book than James Madison — sixty-five times.

Jefferson and Madison shared a passion for science, and the future



James Madison is mentioned many times in Thomas Jefferson's *Garden Book*.

Presidents traveled together on a botanical excursion—a boys' road trip—through upstate New York and New England in 1791. Although the two friends took boat trips on Lake George and visited Fort Ticonderoga, Jefferson confessed, "We were more pleased with the botanical objects which continually presented themselves." Jefferson rhapsodized about the paper birches, wild azaleas, and wild strawberries that they'd observed in a letter to his son-in-law, Thomas Mann Randolph, and the trip inspired him to

GILBERT STUART, COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION



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*Bremono, the Palladian-style home of John Hartwell Cocke, on the James River.*

return home to Monticello to plant sugar maples and native shrubs, and to propagate fruit trees.

Although Jefferson and Madison shared cuttings and seeds, Madison was not as avid a plantsman as Jefferson and their correspondence focused more on agricultural matters, particularly the unrelenting calamities to their wheat crops, the vagaries of the Virginia climate, and their joint conspiracy to distribute Merino sheep to every county in the state. Jefferson didn't seem to mask his feelings in their letters. It was within a letter to Madison that he composed the ringing lament: "So that in the lotteries of human life you see that even farming is but gambling."

John Hartwell Cocke (1780–1862) was a friend of Jefferson's who developed his 3,184-acre estate, Bremono, into a model agricultural and architectural village along the James River forty miles southeast of Monticello. Cocke was a visionary pragmatist like few early Americans: a General in the War of 1812, abolitionist, progressive agriculturist, the first President of the American

Temperance Society, and one of the founders and designers of the University of Virginia. He possessed both a superb command of the practical arts and an inspired creative genius. The Palladian-style Upper Bremono, one of the three architectural masterpieces he designed and built at Bremono, was described by Samuel Eliot Morrison and Henry Steele Commager as "perhaps the most beautiful country house in America today." His farms were a model of skilled management, and included grandiose stone barns, pisé stone walls constructed from a compacted mixture of mud and straw and unusually productive fields of wheat, corn, and tobacco. Still today, Bremono is the most magical of settings.

Cocke was also a gardening activist: his essay on a clever technique for the eradication of peach tree borers was published in the *American Farmer*, the first national periodical devoted to agriculture. Cocke also organized the local Fruit Tree Association, a society of twenty-two residents formed "to promote the introduction and diffusion of the finest kinds of fruit trees," and

1,200 trees were purchased from the Benjamin Prince Nursery on Long Island in 1815. Cocke also planted an "elegant orchard of the finest fruits" to celebrate and commemorate the Peace Treaty ending the War of 1812, and, according to his wife, Ann Barrand Cocke, he was "so deeply engaged in planting our orchard, by a mathematical rule, that he is off directly after breakfast and sometimes does not return until midnight." Jefferson described him as "rich, liberal, patriotic, judicious, and persevering ... there is no person in the United States in whose success I should have so much confidence."

Cocke and Jefferson engaged in an exciting exchange of plants. In 1816, for example, Jefferson sent Cocke paper mulberry trees and Marseilles figs, plus Monticello aspens, prickly

locusts, and snowberry bushes—some of the greatest hits of the Monticello collection—in return for Cocke's scuppernon wine, which Jefferson said "would be distinguished on the best tables of Europe, for its fine aroma, and crystalline transparency." Cocke also kept a garden diary similar to Jefferson's Garden Book. Just as Jefferson would jot down George Divers' recommendations for how many rows of carrot were sufficient for a family's consumption, Cocke recited Jefferson's plant histories: how the weeping willow and Lombardy poplar were introduced into America, or how the first cedar known in Albemarle County was planted by Jefferson's brother in law at Shadwell in 1755.

The gardens at Monticello hardly existed in a horticultural vacuum, but were nourished generously by a society of gardeners, "brothers of the spade" as Peter Collinson referred to his Williamsburg correspondent, John Custis, in 1735. We hope this spirit of the union of gardening and sociability continues to this day. At Monticello we aspire to share our gardens with the community: some of our programs include the popular Saturdays in the Garden series of natural history walks, lectures, and horticultural workshops, the Thomas Jefferson Parkway, the most visited park in central Virginia, and, of course, the Center for Historic Plants, our means of exchanging the plants of the past, and of Thomas Jefferson, with our "rational society" of fellow gardeners.

Peter J. Hatch, Director  
Monticello Gardens and Grounds



GIORGIO GALERIO, POMONA ITALIANA, 1817

*Jefferson shared the Marseilles fig with his friend John Cocke of Bremono.*