



*Artist G.B. McIntosh imagines Jefferson planting seeds in the Vegetable Garden during his retirement.*

# Jefferson's Retirement Garden

VEGETABLE GARDENING captivated Thomas Jefferson well into his 80s, years after he'd abandoned fruit garden plantings or ornamental landscaping at Monticello, and his exertions went far beyond the playful recreation of a Virginia gentleman. The physical process of gardening — of setting up string lines and sowing seeds — became for Jefferson a willful defiance of the pathos of age. Year after year, from 1809 to 1824, infirm with arthritis, bent with age, Jefferson would walk into this garden to sow peas in a dogged and ritualistic display of recreational playfulness. Thomas Jefferson's retirement garden was a Revolutionary American garden. One wonders if anyone else had ever before assembled such a collection of vegetable novelties, culled from virtually every western culture known at the time, then disseminated by Jefferson with the persistence of a religious reformer, a seedy evangelist. The western traditions of gardening — in England, France, Spain, and the Mediterranean — were blended into a dynamic and unique Monticello cookery through the influence of emerg-



JOSEF BERBY

*English Pea*

ing colonial European, Native American, slave, Creole and southwestern vegetables.

Gardening at Monticello during

Jefferson's 40-year service

in political office was only a rehearsal to the climactic development of the sweepingly-long, vegetable garden terrace, an Edenic garden that welcomed Jefferson's final marriage to the land and his ultimate retirement in 1809 to "my family, my books and farms." Horticulture was chief among Jefferson's retirement recreations, and as President he looked to March 4, 1809, the end of his second term, with happy visions of sowing peas, laying out flower beds, and planting his "pet trees." During the stressful Washington spring of 1807, in the throes of violent headaches as well as the Aaron Burr treason trial, Jefferson sketched plans for his retirement flower garden, assembled a menagerie of 24 European table and wine grapes for his Monticello vineyards, and wrote home with instructions for Wormley Hughes, Monticello's Head Gardener, to sow seeds in the nursery and plant clumps of trees around the house. Beginning in 1806, Jefferson sent scores of letters to his



*Archaeological excavation of the Vegetable Garden Wall.*

Monticello overseer, Edmund Bacon, urging him on to complete the terracing of the 1,000-foot-long vegetable garden: on June 7, 1808, Jefferson wrote, “Consider the garden as your main business, and push it with all your might when the interruptions permit.” This retirement garden was the ultimate realization of his horticultural dreams.

During the winter of 1809, the pace quickened to complete the third, or final, platform of the 1,000-foot terrace. Jefferson chided Bacon, stating how “inconvenient” it would be to have to complete the earth moving after the construction of another essential garden element, the “enclosure” or paling fence that ultimately surrounded the entire seven-acre fruit and vegetable complex. Jefferson had assigned this to a separate crew headed by the newly-hired carpenter, Stewart Watkins, aided by three slaves, Davy, Abram, and Shepherd. This monumental barrier, ten-foot-high and nearly three-quarters of a mile long, was recalled by Jefferson’s slave Isaac: “My Old



*The paling fence originally enclosed the entire seven-acre garden.*

Master’s garden was monstrous large: two rows of palings, all ‘round ten feet high.”

Another parallel assignment, carried out by “head gardener” Wormley Hughes, was the manuring of the garden by hauling 60 to 70 wagon loads of dung from Milton, the river port along the Rivanna River. Not only was this a long, uphill journey of three miles,

but the road itself required substantial improvements. Meanwhile, Bacon had managed the completions of 887 feet of garden terracing by late January, complaining about the struggle to efficiently haul the dirt, likely mud in mid-winter, to fill behind the garden wall, which at this point was over twelve feet high. Jefferson, surely balancing his financial anxieties with the goal of completing the garden for his homecoming (“we must not sacrifice the crop of the year for it”), wrote Bacon “to quit the garden” in order to prepare for corn planting, an essential field crop for sustaining the plantation community.

Following the inauguration of James Madison on March 4, Jefferson spent an extra week in the President’s House tidying his affairs, including the payment of \$11,000 in debt he had incurred in office. Three wagon loads of the ex-President’s worldly goods departed Washington on March 9, one devoted to 10,000



seedling trees of the Washington hawthorn, obtained from the Georgetown nursery of Thomas Main and intended for planting at

*“Never did a prisoner, released from his chains, feel such relief as I shall on shaking off the shackles of power.”*

THOMAS JEFFERSON

Monticello as living thorn hedges. Jefferson himself departed on horse on March 11 and spent the night at the Fairfax County home of Richard Fitzhugh. Here, again showing how horticulture and retirement were intricately woven, Jefferson obtained a precious field pea he named after Fitzhugh's estate,

Ravensworth.

The three-day journey home was “very fatiguing” because of bad roads, snow, and general spring slop. Jefferson finally arrived at Monticello on March 15, greeted by his daughter Martha, and began planting his heroic garden with frame peas

six days later, on March 23, 1809. Despite



*The Vegetable Garden Pavilion atop the restored garden wall.*

the “backward” (i.e. cold) season the garden was apparently in a state of general completion, near miraculous considering the haste in which work had proceeded over the previous winter. The main garden was organized into eighteen squares of uncertain size, and they were designated by Roman numerals, beginning at the southwestern end and running east. An inner or northwest border, the “warm beds,” extended the length of the garden and a grass walk, described by Margaret Bayard Smith in her visit during the summer, ran along the outer or southeastern side. Jefferson inaugurated a new feature of his Garden Book, a “Kalendar” that documented plantings in neat columns, each describing the seasonal process by which a vegetable was grown: who (or what), “where,” “sowed,” “transplanted,” “come to table,” “gone,” “seed gathered,” and “observations.”



*Globe Artichokes in the Monticello Garden.*

## *Spiny Delicacy*

### **Globe Artichoke**

(*Cynara scolymus*) Globe Artichoke was included on one of Jefferson's first lists of vegetables grown at Monticello in 1770. To grow as an annual, sow seeds in pots indoors during late winter and transplant seedlings to the garden. Globe Artichokes need rich, well-prepared soil, plenty of sun, and even moisture. The edible “chokes” develop by mid-summer and several can be harvested during the season. If left on the plant, they will develop into a purple, thistle-like flower. USDA Zones 8-10.

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*Beet greens flourish in Monticello's garden.*

1809 was the most active and prolific vegetable gardening year in Jefferson's lifetime, with the Kalendar including nearly 100 distinct plantings. The growing season, the climax of 40 years of an onerous and burdensome political career, the fruition of years of frantic preparations that included the epic task of moving 360,000 cubic feet of red earth, was like a long sigh, a happy release from

*"...the failure of one thing is repaired by the success of another."*

THOMAS JEFFERSON 1809

"the boisterous ocean of political passions." Jefferson wrote to DuPont de Nemours, "Never did a prisoner, released from his chains, feel such relief as I shall on shaking off the shackles of power." Plantings exuberantly spilled out from the terrace itself; to the asparagus squares, nursery, orchard and vineyards below the garden, even to the "low grounds," perhaps an area along the Rivanna River, over a mile away. So many new, and what were to become favorite, vegetable varieties were, for the first time,

documented at Monticello, including novelties like sea kale, tomatoes, okra, and eggplant; Leadman's Dwarf and Prussian Blue peas; Tennis-ball, Brown Dutch, Marseilles, and Ice lettuce; Early York cabbage, Arikara and dwarf kidney beans; Jerusalem artichokes and "Chinese" melon. Many of the seeds, at least 30 of the new vegetable varieties, were

purchased from Washington seedsman, Theophilus Holt, a month before Jefferson left Washington. Philadelphia nurseryman, Bernard McMahon, provided Early York and Sugarloaf cabbages, neighbor George Divers contributed tomatoes, black-eyed peas, and parsnips,



*'Spotted Aleppo' is one of several period lettuce varieties available from the Center for Historic Plants.*

## *Jefferson-era Lettuces*

### **'Spotted Aleppo' Lettuce**

This 18th-century Romaine lettuce was sold by Philadelphia seedsman, Bernard McMahon, in 1804. The leaves are speckled with a bright reddish-brown variegation that is highly ornamental. Spotted Aleppo is best sowed in very early spring or in late summer. Large loose heads.

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# A CATALOGUE OF GARDEN SEEDS, &c.

FOR SALE BY

*Theophilus Holt,*

At his Nurfery Garden, City of Washington.

<b>PEAS.</b> Early Frame Hotspur Green Marrowfat Blue Prussian Dwarf Marrowfat	<b>BROCOLL.</b> Green White Early Purple Late do.	Brown Dutch Tennis Ball Lammersaish Coss	Scorzonera Salafic Scurvy Grass Artichoke Fennel Dill Fennugreek Anisee Garlick (roots) Shallotts do.
<b>BEANS.</b> Early Mazagan White Blossom Winsor Scarlet Runners White do. Lima Dwarf Red Speckled Brown do. Cream Coloured	<b>CARROT.</b> Early Horn Long Orange	<b>ONION.</b> White Pickling Spanish Mixed Welsh	<b>GRASS SEED.</b> Rye Grass White Clover Lucern
<b>CABBAGE.</b> Early Dwarf Heart Shaped York Battersea Sogatoaf Large Battersea Drumhead Flat Dutch Red Pickling Green Curled Savoy Yellow do Turnip Cabbage Do. rooted do.	<b>SPINAGE.</b> Winter Spring	<b>RADISH.</b> Early Scarlet Salmon Turnip Spanish Summer	<b>BIRD SEED.</b> Hemp Rape Canary Maw
<b>PARSLEY.</b> Double Hamburg	<b>CELERY.</b> Solid Hollow Red Bulbous rooted	<b>PEPPERGRASS.</b> Double Winter	<b>GARDEN TOOLS.</b> Garden Hoes different sizes Dutch do. do. do. Iron Rakes do. do. Garden Sheers Reels Lines Building Knives Pruning do.
<b>CALE.</b> Scotch Brown Calmaroke Siberian	<b>CUCUMBER.</b> Early Long Prickley Green Turkey	<b>NASTURTION.</b> Dwarf Tail	<b>BULBOUS AND OTHER FLOWER ROOTS.</b> Hyacinths, Double sorts Polyanthus Narciss do. Anemones Ranunculus Tulips Double Jonquils Roman Narciss Persian Iris Crown Imperial Crocus in sorts with various other.
<b>CAULIFLOWER.</b> Early Late	<b>TURNIP.</b> Early Dutch Stone Yellow Sweedish or Ruta Baga Hanover Large White Field	<b>MELONS.</b> Netmeg Water Sorts Winter	<b>SUPERFINE FLOUR AND MUSTARD.</b>
	<b>BET.</b> Red White Green	<b>MUSTARD.</b> White Brown	
	<b>ENDIVE.</b> Green Curled White do. Batavian	<b>MISCELLANEOUS.</b> Asparagus Large Parsnip Leek Charbonon Sea Cale Cherville Canaway Corriander Corn Salad Carduus Skirit	

A variety of Fruit Trees, Flowering Shrubs, and Annual, Biennial and Perennial Flower Roots and Seeds—Asparagus Roots, Cabbage, Cauliflower, Celery, Artichoke, &c. Plants in their seasons.

Eastern Branch, January 1, 1808.

*Jefferson recorded purchasing garden seeds from Theophilus Holt on February 1, 1809, anticipating returning home to his Retirement Garden at Monticello.*





*Jefferson's Revolutionary American garden provided continued harvests for the Monticello Kitchen.*

and General Sumpter of Georgia sent the unusual asparagus bean. Jefferson wrote his former President's House maitre d', Etienne Le Maire, on April 25, the flush of Spring, that "I am constantly in my garden or farms, as exclusively employed out of doors as I was within doors when at Washington, and I find myself infinitely happier in my new mode of life."

The 1809 Kalendar also illuminates one of the most organized years of Jefferson's record keeping. Garden squares were generally relegated to specific crops, many such as peas and beans took a significant amount of space, but Square IX was ordered into 13 numbered rows, filled with diverse crops that were replanted as many

as two more times later in the season.

Jefferson also observed how cabbage and broccoli were transplanted from other

*"what nature has done for us is sublime, beautiful and unique."*

THOMAS JEFFERSON 1809

garden niches, perhaps the Northwest Border. Peas, lettuce, endive, beans, spinach, radishes, cucumbers, and corn salad were planted successfully, providing "continued harvests throughout the year."

The 1809 Kalendar, with the coolly recorded word "failed" noted twenty times under the column titled "tranplandt,"

also reveals another theme of the Jefferson horticultural experience: “the failure of one thing is repaired by the success of another.” Few gardeners have failed as often as Thomas Jefferson, and his unrelenting persistence to overcome one calamity after another is a reflection of his experimental, scientific, and Enlightenment aesthetic. Crop failures were undoubtedly caused by a dry spring—virtually no rain fell during a chilly April and May, the dryness continued from “July till autumn,”—and Jefferson said Monticello had experienced “the most calamitous drought which had been known for 55 years.” Certainly bad luck ruled Jefferson’s climactic retirement to the garden and reinforced his lament to James Madison that agriculture was but “gambling.” As well, after moving thousands of tons of wet sticky soil mostly during the saturated winter months, it seems doubtful that even the sixty wagon loads of soil-conditioning manure would significantly improve its damaged tilth and structure. Margaret Bayard Smith visited in July and was hardly impressed. She wrote, “Little is yet done,” and that “The view it commands, is at present its greatest

beauty.” Nevertheless, Jefferson’s sunny outlook was typically indefatigable, as he would write to Benjamin Latrobe at the end of the growing season, “what nature has done for us is sublime, beautiful and unique.”

Peter J. Hatch, Director  
Monticello Gardens and Grounds



*'Early Jersey Wakefield' Cabbage*

## *Jefferson's Retirement Vegetable Garden*

### **Jefferson's 1809 Garden Seed Sampler**

In March 1809, Thomas Jefferson made his final departure from public life and returned to Monticello. That year would become the most active and prolific vegetable gardening year in Jefferson's lifetime, with his “Kalendar” including nearly 100 distinct plantings. This seed sampler celebrates the 200th anniversary of this momentous gardening season.

- Alpine Strawberry
- 'Brown Dutch' Lettuce
- Windsor or Fava Bean
- Carolina Lima Bean
- 'Early Blood Turnip-rooted' Beet
- 'Early Jersey Wakefield' Cabbage
- Large Red Tomato

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