Lost Lettuce?
Monticello gardeners preserve historic crops
By Peggy Cornett, Curator of Plants

Forty years ago, Monticello embarked on a quest to return Jefferson-documented varieties to the recently restored 1,000-foot-long vegetable garden terrace. Our first crop of Tennis Ball lettuce, one of Thomas Jefferson’s favorites, came from a USDA-run national seed bank that safeguards genetic horticultural diversity. Today, this nearly lost historic lettuce variety is now readily available. That early success led to the acquisition of dozens of significant historic crops, from Brown Dutch lettuce and Blue Prussian peas to Yellow Arikara and Hidatsa Red beans, and Arikara sunflowers and Mandan Red Clay corn associated with the three Native American tribes Lewis and Clark encountered.

Monticello’s most recent reintroduction of a Jefferson-documented variety came with the 2020 planting of Silesia lettuce in the vegetable garden. Jefferson, who only ate meat as a condiment to his vegetables, consistently sought to extend the harvest throughout the year. His quest for a hardier lettuce might have been achieved in 1819 when he first listed Silesia lettuce in his “Garden Kalendar.” The flavor of this exceptionally delicious lettuce only improves with freezing temperatures. Monticello’s cool-season crops thrived during the recent spring, resulting in an extraordinary harvest and bumper seed production of Silesia lettuce, which is available for purchase from The Shop at Monticello or online at the link below.

To learn more about Monticello’s collection of heirloom seeds, visit monticelloshop.org/garden/heirloom-seeds.

In Memoriam Michelle Smith

It is with heavy hearts that we share news of the passing of Michelle Smith, a member of our Board of Trustees and a dear friend to Monticello. Smith served with uncommon distinction since her election in 2014, showing great enthusiasm and support as an invaluable member of our Museum and Restoration Committee.

Smith was an unwavering advocate of the Foundation’s efforts to expand and enhance our digital initiatives and a generous contributor to the mission and programs of the Foundation. She will be remembered widely for her enthusiasm for the arts and support of education and public health.

We offer our sincerest condolences to her family, friends, and all who mourn her loss.