

Thomas Jefferson, et al., Gardener

On my shelves I have at least a foot of books about Thomas Jefferson in all his phases but the only item pertaining to his zeal as a gardener is a magnet on the refrigerator that reads, "But tho' an old man I am but a young Gardener". A friend and fine gardener gave me "Founding Gardeners, The Revolutionary Generation, Nature, and the Shaping of the American Nation." The author, British historian Andrea Wulf, has connected four of our founding fathers, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and James Madison, not only to the events that shaped the founding of our country but to their mutual friendships and their passion for growing plants.

There is a lot of history within the pages, lighting up familiar events through use of their diaries and correspondence. Surely it is in the use of details that dance on the page that brings these men to life. It does make you wonder why school textbooks tend to be so dull?

It is Wulf's contention that it is "impossible to understand the making of America without looking at the founding fathers as farmers and gardeners". The four statesmen whose gardens are analyzed were following the lead of that master of all trades, Ben Franklin. In 1769 Franklin listed the three ways a fledgling nation could acquire wealth: "The first is by war... This is Robbery. The second by commerce which is generally Cheating. The third by Agriculture the only honest way." When he was assigned to London, Franklin sent home seeds of a new kind of oat and barley to distribute to plantsmen in Philadelphia.

Can you believe one of his interests was tofu, sending chickpea seeds to a friend, not realizing that the recipe for tofu required soybeans. He also sent seeds of rice, kohlrabi and Scottish kale. In those years before the revolution, England shipped paper, nails, glass and luxury items to the colonies. The colonists shipped grain, corn and tobacco to England. It was Franklin's belief that the colonists could develop their own goods and become self-sufficient.

John Adams trumpeted Franklin's call for self-sufficiency writing in Boston newspapers as Humphrey Ploughjogger, suggesting colonists should wear coats of hide from their oxen rather than those of imported wool.

In writing of our founding gardeners Wulf provides an argument for shifting the beginning of the environmental movement from mid 19th Century men such as John Muir and Henry David Thoreau to James Madison. In his 1818 speech Madison said the protection of the environment was essential to the survival of the United States. Madison also spoke against the exploitation of soil and forest.

George Washington was such a devoted gardener that while facing the massing of British forces in Staten Island he wrote to his cousin and estate manager, Lund Washington at Mount Vernon about white pines, tulip poplars, dogwood, and red cedar. Is it noticeable that British trees were excluded?

As the weak young nation sought strength, those men so involved in its creation sought personal strength in plans for an agricultural nation, plans first reflected in their own gardens. In eight years of war, Washington's only visit to his beloved Mt. Vernon's 8000 acres, was during the final drive toward the battle at Yorktown. After the Treaty of Paris in 1783, he longed to sit 'under my own vine and my own fig tree.' He was unlike his fellow colonists in Williamsburg, who preferred English yew and hollies, in his desire for native American species. It was a revolutionary idea at a time when a 'proper' garden was an English garden. Such fun to think that a prime source for native American species was London's Physic Garden where Philip Miller raised seeds and cuttings from plants descended from the seeds and cuttings sent to the

Physic Garden in the 1730s by Pennsylvania farmer John Bartram. And, in a story for another day, the difficult snags of the Constitutional Convention in the summer of 1787 were eased by a visit to Bertram's garden near Philadelphia, maintained by his sons.

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