

Garden Review
Thomas Jefferson's Monticello
Debbie Moore Clark

My last visit to Monticello was July 29, 1999 during a trip back “home” to Virginia. Despite the summer heat, a leisurely tour of one of America's most architecturally significant buildings was a delightful experience. Monticello sits atop a hillside of concentrically laid roundabouts, gardens and orchards. Mulberry Row, the 18th century center of light industry on the plantation, lies south of the great house, separating the magnificent structure, its surrounding oval flower beds, and flower borders defining the West Lawn from the kitchen garden of vegetables, fruits and herbs below.

The flower gardens at Monticello functioned in a number of ways for Mr. Jefferson. The progression of flowers through the year acted as a barometer to the passing of the seasons and as a scientific study collection of native plants. The diversity of flower species represents the scope of Jefferson's interests. For instance, many of the flowers had been grown for centuries in Europe and were commonly cultivated in early American gardens such as sweet William and the double white-flowering poppy. Others were curiosities, such as the winter cherry with its lantern-like fruits and the blackberry lily. The Flower Gardens also include bulb plants and antique roses.

No occupation is so delightful to me as the culture of the earth . . . And no culture comparable to that of the garden.

Thomas Jefferson

When Thomas Jefferson referred to his “garden” he, like most early Americans, was referring to his vegetable or kitchen garden. In the early 19th century, this type garden functioned as both a source of food for the family table and as a kind of laboratory where Jefferson experimented with 250 varieties of more than seventy different species of

vegetables.

Jefferson's vegetable garden lies on a terraced site south of the main house. Evolving over many years, the garden began in 1770 when crops were first cultivated along the contours of the slope. Terracing was introduced in 1806, and by 1812, gardening activity on the plantation was at its peak. The 1000-foot-long terrace, or garden plateau, was hewn from the side of the mountain with slave labor and is supported by a massive stone wall, standing over twelve feet in its highest section. The vegetable garden overlooks the Piedmont countryside of Virginia in the distance and an eight-acre orchard of 300 trees, a vineyard, Monticello's berry squares filled with plots of figs, currants, gooseberries and raspberries directly below.



Salads were an important part of Jefferson's diet. He noted the planting of lettuce and radishes every two weeks through the growing season, planting such interesting greens as orach, corn salad, endive and nasturtiums, among others.

No early American gardener wrote about his garden as extensively as Jefferson. This wealth of documentary material unveils much about the character of early American gardens as well as the scientific and creative sensibility of Jefferson himself. An avid journal keeper, Jefferson left behind excellent garden records and sketches in his diaries. Jefferson's *Garden Book* is a remarkable journal detailing a lifetime of horticulture at Monticello. The notes from his diary of 1807—when anticipating retirement from public life—incorporate Jefferson's most extensive garden notations.

A quick glance through Jefferson's *Garden Book* reveals numerous herbs grown in his kitchen garden. Among them, Calendula, *Calendula officinalis*; Saffron Crocus, *Crocus sativus*; Heartsease, *Viola tricolor*; Lemon Balm, *Melissa officinalis*; Peppermint, *Mentha piperita*; Curly Parsley, *Petroselinum hortense* var. *crispum*; Rue, *Ruta graveolens*; Sage, *Salvia officinalis*; Horseradish, *Armoracia rusticana*; Thyme, *Thymus vulgaris*; Rosemary, *Rosemarinus officinalis*; and many others.

Visitors to Monticello are encouraged to visit the Thomas Jefferson Center for Historic Plants. The Center is a tribute to Jefferson's lifelong quest for useful and ornamental plants for American gardens. Featuring interpretive gardens and exhibits, the Center also maintains a Garden Shop where visitors can purchase books on the history of American gardening, as well as historic varieties of herb plants, perennial vegetables and heirloom seeds. The Center is devoted to the preservation and distribution of plants known in early American gardens.

If a visit to Virginia and Jefferson's Monticello is not imminent, you may visit the historic site online at www.monticello.org. Monticello, owned and operated by the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, Inc., is a private, nonprofit organization. For more information, write Monticello, Department of Public Affairs at P.O. Box 217, Charlottesville, Virginia 22902 or call 804.984.9822.

It's been too long since I've visited; I'm eager to return!



Debbie Moore Clark is an Extension Master Gardener with Mecklenburg County, NC. A native Texan, she grew up in Virginia and loves the historic homes and gardens of the Commonwealth. She and her husband Mack enjoy traveling and always take in one or more gardens when away from their home in Charlotte, NC.