

When plants made the nation

MARK G. SPENCER

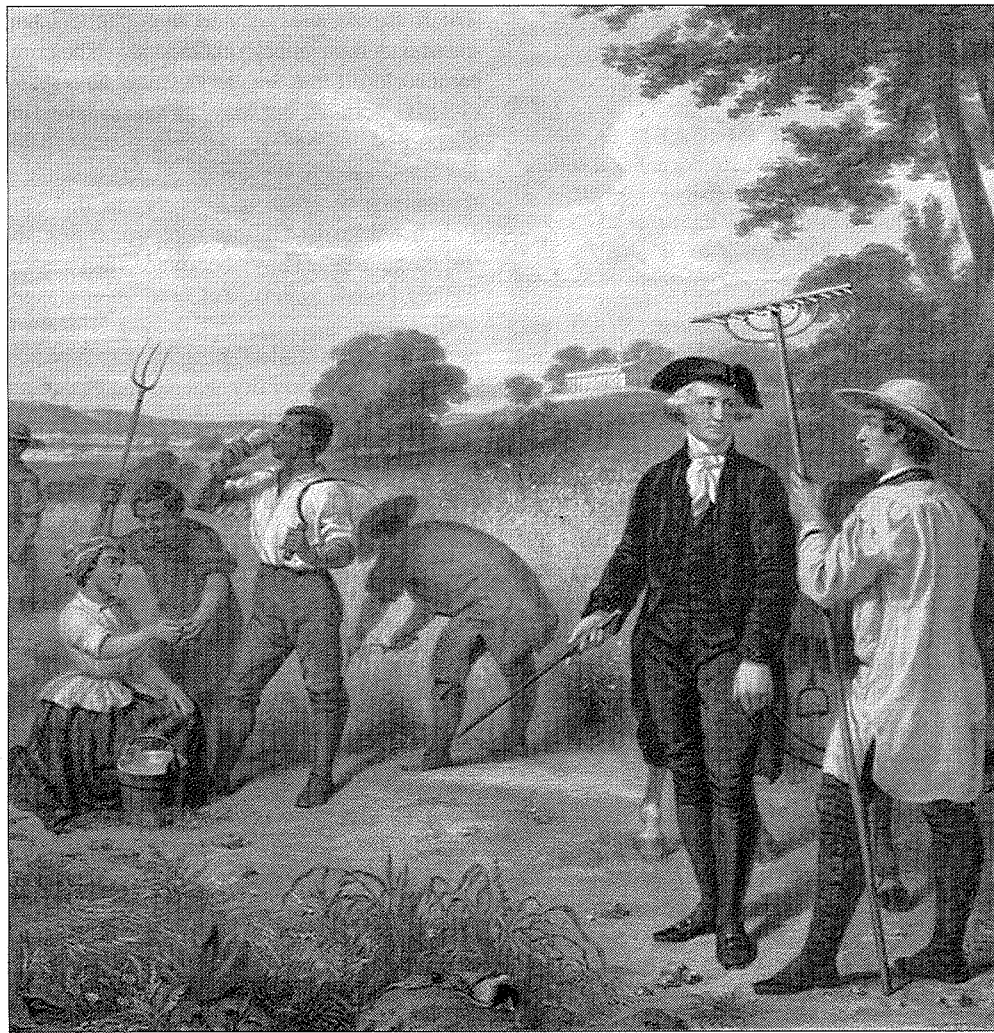
Andrea Wulf

THE FOUNDING GARDENERS
How the revolutionary generation created
an American Eden
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America's founding fathers have been viewed from countless perspectives, but never in a book-length study of their shared passion for gardening. That is what Andrea Wulf provides in her wonderfully engaging account *The Founding Gardeners*. "The founding fathers have often been cast as the haloed demigods of the American Revolution – some cerebral and literary, others brave and heroic – but what has long been missing from this picture is their lives as farmers and gardeners." Wulf aims to link the founding fathers' gardens with the planting of their nation. "The founding fathers' passion for nature, plants, gardens and agriculture is woven deeply into the fabric of America and aligned with their political thought, both reflecting and influencing it." "In fact", she writes, "I believe, it's impossible to understand the making of America without looking at the founding fathers as farmers and gardeners."

Focusing on four eighteenth-century Americans – George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and James Madison – this volume is a companion to Wulf's *The Brother Gardeners* (2008), her critically acclaimed history of the English passion for all things garden-related. That English story and the American one told here intersect at many points, including the European travels of Jefferson and Adams, John Bartram's vast American seed-distribution network which "provided the English gardener with a new palette of hues and shapes that brought variety and colours even to the winter garden", and the writings of important British agriculturalists that circulated in America. Philip Miller's *Gardeners Dictionary* (1731), for instance, had a permanent place on Washington's desk, never more than an arm's length away. Jefferson's favourite was Thomas Whately's *Observations on Modern Gardening* (1770), a book which John and Abigail Adams also consulted, and recommended to others. By the end of the eighteenth century, Americans could increasingly turn to their own agricultural books – John Beale Bordley's *Sketches on Rotations of Crops, and Other Rural Matters* (1796) was shared reading of the founding generation, as was Bernard McMahon's *The American Gardener's Calendar* (1806) – but British publications continued to have influence in America, as Wulf convincingly argues with reference to *Communications of the Board of Agriculture* (1797) and its impact on Madison's retirement designs for Montpelier.

Some aspects of this story have been told by others – Washington's planning of the gardens at Mount Vernon, Jefferson's discussions of flora in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, and Adams's lifelong infatuation



George Washington at Mount Vernon during a hay harvest, by Claude Regnier (c.1853), after a painting by Junius Brutus Stearns from his five-part "Washington Series", 1847–56

with manures. Wulf does not always weave those vignettes together seamlessly; the narrative is at times disjointed, and the effort to incorporate a basic survey of early American political history occasionally takes one rather far from the gardener's world. On other occasions, the evidence demonstrating the influence of gardens on political decisions is tenuous, as Wulf herself admits. For instance, she recounts how several delegates to the Constitutional Convention in 1787 had crossed the Schuylkill River to spend part of a day strolling together in William Bartram's splendid gardens, seeking relief from the heated debates in the Pennsylvania State House. Two days later, now back in Philadelphia, the delegates were ready to vote on the Connecticut plan. Wulf asks: "But the question remains – why did North Carolina's delegates and Caleb Strong change sides?" Her answer:

It can only be speculation that a three-hour walk on a cool summer morning among the

United States of America's most glorious trees and shrubs influenced these men. But what we do know is that the three men who changed sides and made the Great Compromise possible that day had all been there and marveled at what they saw. What we also know is that Massachusetts's and North Carolina's switch of vote turned the thirteen states into one nation.

With more certainty one may say that *The Founding Gardeners* serves as an artful reminder that America began as an agricultural nation and it remained so through to the deaths of all the founding fathers (Washington died in 1799; Jefferson and Adams, in 1826, on the same day, July 4; and Madison in 1836), and with lasting consequences. "The American landscape, forests, soil and plants made the nation. Nature was the backbone to her economy, feeding, clothing and sheltering the people."

America's founding gardeners were men of the Enlightenment – they were constantly

"observing, experimenting and recording". In their gardens, on their farms, and at their writing tables they were always "testing new agricultural implements, sowing new crops and comparing the yields of their fields". Their interest was such that it could even transcend political factionalism. Indeed, even "when the political party lines had hardened, agriculture and its importance for the future of the United States of America remained the one topic all four [Washington, Jefferson, Adams and Madison] agreed upon and continued to correspond about". But the pleasures of the garden were more than a patriotic preoccupation – they were "a refuge from the wrangling of politics".

Wulf may be at her best when she invites us to enter the founding fathers' gardens themselves. Her knack for description is marvellous. She writes of Monticello:

The sheer scale of the vegetable terrace made Jefferson the most extraordinary gardener in the United States. None of his peers collected so many different species and varieties, bringing together vegetables from across the world, uniting horticultural and culinary, European and colonial, Native American and slave traditions in the kitchen plots. The geographical labels of the vegetables that Jefferson grew in his first summer of retirement alone proclaimed these merging worlds: "African early pea," "Windsor beans," "solid pumpkin from S. America," "long pumpkin from Malta," "Lettuces Marsailles," "Chinese melon," "Spanish melon," "Broccoli Roman," "Kale. Malta," "Kale. Delaware," "Salsafia. Columbian," "Eerie corn," "Turnip Swedish," "Peas Prussian blue" and "Lettuce Dutch Brown."

This book also breaks new ground. Wulf argues that the founding gardeners were not motivated by improved production at any cost. Eighteenth-century Americans came to appreciate the "symmetry of nature", to use Madison's words. In his address of May 1818 to the Agricultural Society of Albemarle (the group had chosen him as their president), Madison delivered a message of balance and environmental sustainability. "Taken individually, no single argument or proposition of his speech was an entirely original one, but Madison was the first to weave together a myriad of theories", "combining political ideology, soil chemistry, ecology and plant physiology into one comprehensive idea." "Just as he had digested two hundred books on modern and ancient republics into one succinct paper in preparation for the Constitutional Convention three decades previously, he now fused the latest theories into one voice, rallying Americans to safeguard their environment." While the standard account locates the origins of the modern environmental movement in the nineteenth century, Wulf encourages us to look back to the founding generation. Madison and many of his eighteenth-century contemporaries "did not see nature through a romantic lens of transcendent beauty but as a fragile ecological system that could be easily destroyed by mankind". That, sadly, is something our own generation has come to know even more clearly than the eighteenth century could imagine.

Getting Up

At the entrance to my dream I met the author.
I had no time to tell
if he was pleased with his creation.
He ran from it like hell
with his old coat, his battered Leica.
I think he wished me well.

ALISON BRACKENBURY