THE CULTIVATION and USE of the ONION FAMILY in the COLONIAL CHESAPEAKE REGION

by
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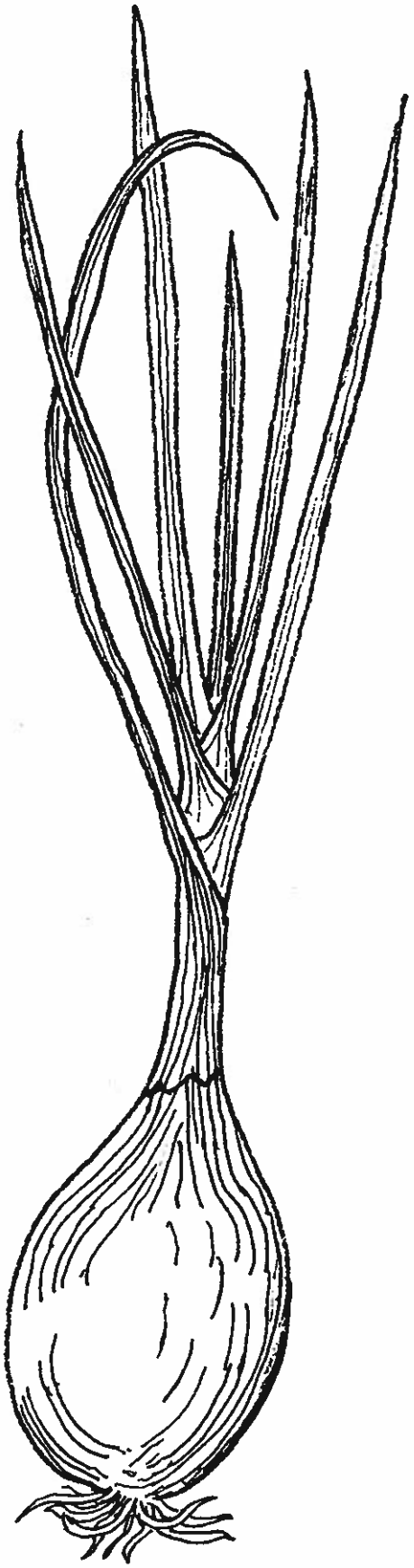

Longish Spanish Onion

THE NATIONAL COLONIAL FARM

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INTRODUCTION

In 1635, Lord Baltimore sent instructions on transportation and necessary equipment to prospective settlers for his new colony of Maryland. Included in the instructions was the admonition to bring "the stones and seedes of all those fruits...and rootes, and herbes, which he desireth to have." Concerned that his colonists would starve - as many early Virginians had - through the simple neglect of growing their own food, he further advised them:

> That they cause all the planters to employ their servants in planting of sufficient quantity of corne and other provisions of victual and that they do not suffer them to plant any other commodity whatsoever before that be done in a sufficient proportion which they are to observe yearly. (1)

Onions were among those "rootes and herbes" that the colonists were to grow. There are no records which indicate that the Indians cultivated any of the Alliums or that wild onions were native to the New World. They were, however, an important part of the culinary and medicinal traditions of the early settlers from Northern Europe. It was through such settlers that the members of the onion family were introduced to North America. So extensively were they planted that by the late eighteenth century the onion had naturalized to

the point that it was an annoyance in the fields and pastures. James Tilton of Delaware complained that:

> the most noxious and infurous plant is wild garlick or Allium. When this gets possession of the ground, no effectual method has hithertofore been discovered for rooting it out; it seeds about the same time with the wheat, it gives the flour a disagreeable taste of garlick, and injures the sale of such wheat and other grain as abound with it. This plant is most injurous in poor land; and the best guard to be taken against it is to force the land with manure by which means the grain rises thick and high above it, and stifling the garlick prevents it from seeding. It is also found by experience, that sowing oats in the spring, or by fallowing the ground without sowing it, has a like tending to prevent the garlick from seeding. (2)

The Virginia Almanack also voiced the frustration of farmers who continually battled the wild onion. It was a "weed very pernicious to grain and with which the country is in many places infested...," wrote the editor. He also advised his readers to plant oats in order to choke it out.[3]

Despite this naturalization, there are curiously few references to onions in the descriptions of colonial Chesapeake farms and gardens. George Alsop, an early observer, wrote that plants, trees, and roots all flourished, and that vegetables thrived, but made no specific reference to onions.[4] Andrew White, who visited Maryland during the first decade of its coloni-

zation, also praised the "excellent beans, roots, and other things of this kind," without noting onions in particular.[5] A visitor to Virginia in 1649 did notice that "they have Roots of several kindes, Potatoes, Sparagus, Carrets, Turnips, Parsnips, Onions, and Hartichokes."[6] Robert Beverely, however, omitted the Alliums from his description of the natural and cultivated plants of Virginia.[7] Although again omitting a specific reference to onions, Hugh Jones, an early eighteenth century resident of Virginia, claimed that "As for...fruits, herbs, plants, flowers, and roots, I know of none in England either for pleasure or use, but what are very common there..,"[8] John Lawson's extensive treatise on the colony of North Carolina, written in 1700, contains references to leeks, onions, shallots, garlic, chives, and wild onions; a few years later another visitor recorded that that colony grew onions in "great quantities" as well as garlic and chives.[9] The absence of many specific notes on onions in Maryland and Virginia might be construed as proof that they were not prevalent in that area. The general references to root vegetables, however, negates this, as does the widespread appearance of onions in seventeenth and eighteenth century recipes. Indeed, it appears that, far from being scarce, the onion was so

common that it was largely taken for granted by those describing the New World. It simply did not have the exotic appeal of native vegetables, such as sweet potatoes or corn, or the startling productivity of introduced plants, such as the peach, and therefore held little interest for those travelling in the Chesapeake region.

CULTIVATION

Certainly the colonists who grew onions paid them little heed. Like so many other fruits and vegetables, onions flourished in the rich virgin soil and balmy climate around the Chesapeake Bay . "A Kitchen-Garden don't thrive better or faster in any part of the Universe than there...," wrote Robert Beverely. "I don't know any English Plant, Grain, or Fruit, that miscarries in Virginia, but most of them better their kinds very much, being sowed or planted there."[10] The author of American Husbandry agreed: "No part of America or indeed the world, boasts more plentiful or more general production of all sorts of garden vegetables; and in a state of excellence that is in proportion to the heat of the climate."[11] The Alliums were especially well suited to the region, for they required the very soil type--rich sandy loam--and warm climate which characterized the Chesapeake watershed.

Yet instead of harnessing these natural advantages to improve the strains or yields of transplanted vegetables, the colonists chose to make only the satisfactory crop which they could produce by simply planting their seeds and ignoring them. To a certain extent the natural advantages were thus, in the long-run, disadvantageous. The colonial farmer took little trouble to plow or harrow, weed, manure, or otherwise improve his fields and gardens. Many a European traveler wrote in disgust that Americans were "the Slovenliest husbandmen imaginable," or noted that they planted only "cabbage and turnips in an enclosed space which goes by the name of a garden, and sticking among them a few uncomely flowers."[12] Johann Schoepf, a man particularly interested in agriculture, was disappointed on his travels in 1783 to find that there were not "many orderly and interesting gardens...." Furthermore, Schoepf observed:

> The fruitful warmth of the climate obviates indeed very many difficulties which we have to contend with in securing garden growths--and makes careless gardeners. So long as people are content merely with the customary products of northern Europe, they may be had at small pains; but with this management the advantages are lost which would be afforded by a better....13

Jacob Danckaerts, founder of a Labadist colony, put the matter more bluntly. "A few vegetables are raised," he noted, "but they are of the coarsest kinds and are cultivated in the coarsest manner, without any knowledge or care, and they are therefore not properly raised, and do not amount to much as regards the production, and still less as to their use."[14]

Danckaerts blamed the overwhelming interest in tobacco production for the neglect of gardens, and this early preoccupation does indeed seem to have been an important factor. "The Virginians are content if they can but live from day to day;" wrote a visitor in 1759, "they confine themselves almost entirely to the cultivation of tobacco...."[15] Stated another: "...all their Care is for Tobacco and Little Else Minded Except Corn."[16] As the planter became more and more immersed in the production of this cash crop, and dependent upon it for necessities as well as luxuries, he had increasingly little time to devote to soil improvement or extensive cultivation of other crops. Thomas Jones, who owned plantations in Baltimore and Ann Arundel Counties, spent only an average of three days out of the busy gardening month of March working with vegetables. The rest of his time went into the production of tobacco and wheat, his important cash crops.[17]

When special pains were taken over vegetables it was generally by ambitious housewives who tried, as one Englishman critically noted, "to place before their guests fruits and vegetables which are not in season."[18]

The onions that were grown were planted in gardens rather than separate fields. Kitchen gardens of the colonial period were frequently quite large, and sometimes covered an acre or more. William Fitzhugh, who owned extensive lands in Northern Virginia, described his garden as "a hundred foote square, well-pailed in," a description that probably fitted many gardens of the period.[19] A few dedicated farmers, such as Landon Carter or John Bartram, made arrangements to drain, nourish, or protect their vegetable patches, but this was unusual.[20] Most kitchen gardens were rather ramshackle affairs, speedily and carelessly laid out, and neglected for long periods of time. Water, protection against animals and advantageous exposure to the sun were ignored. Soil preparation was equally lax. Initially the onions did well in the rich sandy loam, but after the first year they required intensive manuring to produce abundantly. Early commercial onion growers in New England used fish wastes or sea wrack from the tidal marshes to nourish their land, but there is no

evidence that these methods were employed around the Chesapeake Bay.[21] Manure was another possibility for fertilization, and one which was advocated by several garden manuals. John Abercrombie and Thomas Mawe's Every Man His Own Gardner, for example, advised onion growers that "if you dig some good rotten dung in, it will be of great advantage to the plants."[22] The practice in Maryland and Virginia of allowing livestock to roam freely rather than stay in a pen or barnyard, worked against the collection of manure, however. Peter Kalm was just one of many who observed that virtually no fertilization of any type took place.[23] Soil preparation probably consisted of little beyond spading and raking to produce the friable bed needed by onion seed.

By the 1860s it was known that onion "sets"(small partially grown onions, which were dug while immature, dried, and then re-planted the following spring) produced large onions, and a more stable crop, especially in warmer climates.[24] But there is no indication that onions, or related root vegetables, were grown in this manner during the colonial period. Seed onions had a number of disadvantages: they matured too quickly in warm climates, were heterozygeous and therefore produced onions which were not true to type, and would not

germinate if more than a season old. Nonetheless, this was the preferred method of propagation until well into the nineteenth century.

The seed was obtained from several different sources. During the early period most were brought from England, for transportation and communications between colonies were generally more difficult than across the Atlantic.[25] By the eighteenth century there were a number of alternatives to importation from England. George Washington received some Madeira onions--a highly prized variety--to start for seed from a friend who traveled to the island in 1785.[26] Peter Bellet, an enterprising seedsman and florist from Philadelphia, came to Baltimore for several weeks in 1786, set up shop in an inn, and offered many kinds of flower seeds for sale as well as "all sorts of Fresh garden seeds-- and colliflower."[27] Another nurseryman near Baltimore named Maximillan Hinsler also advertised seeds for sale in the late eighteenth century; included in his long list were leek seeds.[28] In Virginia, Minton Collins ran a nursery near Richmond, from which planters could obtain at least three types of onion seed, as well as leeks and shallots.[29] Many farmers raised their own seeds, of course. This was doubtless the most economical method, but was time consuming and unrelenting, for onion could not be used after it was a

year old. Other farmers preferred to trade for seed with their colleagues. From Delaware James Tilton noted that this was an ever-popular method. "All the seed used for sowing is of the growth of the country," he wrote. "The farmers sometimes swap with design to get clean seed or of another kind; but have no occasion to send out of the state to renew their seed."[30]

How many onions each farmer planted is not known. They were one of a handful of vegetables which would keep well through the winter, and were a staple in stews, fricassees, sauces, pickles, and medicines. Consequently, large patches may have been the rule. George Washington had generous plantings of onions in both his lower and upper gardens, and Thomas Jefferson grew a wide variety of Alliums in a number of spots throughout his estate. In 1807 he noted that his largest onion patch contained 1/27 of an acre.[31] Peyton Skipwith ordered four ounces of onion seed in 1793. Since it was thought that six pounds of seed covered an acre, that was enough to sow 1/24 of an acre, or over 200 square yards. But Skipwith owned vast amounts of land and many slaves, moreover, he was an avid gardener, and, therefore, the average farmer probably planted considerably less.[32]

ONIONS

Onions (*Allium cepa*) were planted in late February or early March. John Randolph, in his *Treatise on Gardening*, recommended early planting in "open weather." Landon Carter was among those who followed this advice; he put onions in the ground as early as February 14th, in 1776.[34] Others, probably adapting their timing to differences in climate and terrain, waited for milder weather. Thomas Jefferson, for example, planted them in the third week in March, and William Faris once even waited until May to sow onions.[35] Special beds for each vegetable were the general rule in Southern gardens of the colonial period, rather than the long rows of vegetables in one bed found commonly in New England. Onions, however, were occasionally " strewn promiscuously" throughout the garden, among the flowers and other vegetables. George Washington's garden at Mount Vernon was one which contained mixtures of flowers and onions in its borders.[36] The planting was to be done on a dry day--for onion seed was especially susceptible to molds and rot--and in relatively dry earth, if at all possible. The seed was scattered thickly over the bed, or laid out in more uniform rows by hand or with a drill. If planted in rows, they were to be twelve to eighteen

inches apart. John Randolph thought that this was the method which produced the most successful plants.[37]

If the seed was good, the onions were up and well-established in six weeks. Both Philip Miller and John Randolph (who borrowed extensively from Miller's Gardner's Dictionary) recommended hoeing and weeding the onions after six or seven weeks. Randolph thought they should be thinned to about five to six inches apart; Miller believed they could still be left standing two inches from each other at this point. Miller, however, strongly advocated a thorough weeding, and stirring of the ground with a narrow hoe.[38] The author of American Husbandry heartily agreed. In April, he advised that the farmer:

> Continue to hoe your crops of...Onions, Leeks, etc., thining them out to proper distances; and cut down all of the weeds among them; this should always be done in dry weather, that the weeds may be destroyed. This stirring of the ground between your plants will be of great service to promote their growth, and the ground will be hereby preserved clear from weeds, till the Crops are fit for use.[39]

Miller suggested two more thinnings, each four to six weeks apart, before the onions were left alone to mature. Each time the ground was to be stirred, and the least healthy plants culled out for use in salads or sauces. After the final thinning the healthiest shoots were left about six inches apart. While the

onions were bulbing they were not to be disturbed.[40]

Evidently, there was little to onion culture beyond sowing, weeding, and proper harvesting. Though modern Alliums are susceptible to a number of diseases, problems with pests or diseases were rarely mentioned in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. Wet weather was considered the greatest danger, for it would quickly rot the bulb, or cause the seed to fail. Landon Carter was one farmer who dug trenches around the garden plot to drain excess moisture.[41] Dry weather seems to have affected the Alliums less frequently. When a serious drought hit the Chesapeake area in 1772, nearly all of Carter's crops were destroyed. "I don't know anything that has turned out but Onions," he wrote.[42] Beyond wet weather, weeds were the other great enemy of the Alliums. "The may-weed doth burne, and the thistle doth fret" wrote poet Thomas Tusser, "the sitches pull Downward, like Rie and the Wheat...Slack never thy weeding, for Dearth nor for cheape."[43] In spring the weeds choked the young onion shoots; later they robbed the soil of nutrients needed for bulb formation. Weeding was difficult work, especially in the hot July sun, but it seems to have been the most important part of onion cultivation.

In most locations, the onion bulbs were generally completely formed by late July. When ripe the long

green tops withered and dropped to the ground. Onions were to be pulled soon after this, again in dry weather. The green tops were immediately cut off and the onion bulbs laid on the ground to dry. "They should be turned at least every other day," cautioned John Randolph, "otherwise they will strike fresh root, especially in the moist weather." This advice reflected that of Miller, Tusser, and Mawe and Abercrombie.[44] The onions were sufficiently dried after about two weeks. The dirt was to be rubbed off, any decayed bulbs discarded, and the onions stored in shallow layers in a dry room or attic. The Spanish or Portuguese method of braiding onions together by their dry tops, later adopted in New England, does not seem to have been the custom in the Chesapeake area.[45]

English garden manuals suggested that in late July or August onion seeds again be planted to produce a winter crop. However, the colder winters in Maryland and Virginia appear to have worked against a double crop of Alliums in that region. John Randolph does not recommend a second seeding of onions, though he reiterated nearly everything else Philip Miller proposed. The diaries, letters, and garden books of enthusiastic agriculturalists such as George Washington, Charles Carroll, Thomas Jefferson, Landon Carter, or William

Faris, give no evidence of planting any of the Alliums in late summer. In the upper South, onions appear to have been solely a spring through summer crop.

LEEKS

Leeks (Allium porrum) were the second most frequently grown of the Alliums in the colonial Chesapeake. John Beale Bordley, an exceptional agriculturalist from Maryland, offered several recipes which used them; John Randolph included them in his Treastise on Gardening; Jefferson planted them; leek seed was widely available.[46] Their cultivation was similar to that of the onion. They were planted in the cool early spring, from seed either ordered from abroad, obtained locally, or grown the previous year. Like onions, they did best in sandy earth. Some farmers sowed leeks in separate beds, strewing the seed thickly, then later thinning them into rows. Philip Miller advised culling out the best shoots and transplanting them in May when they were three to four inches high. The shoots were set in rows about a foot apart, with the sets six inches apart. Only the strongest plants were to be chosen, and the roots and tops were trimmed before setting. If well watered until they took root, the leeks would grow very large this way.[47]

Another method was to plant the leeks and onions together in the same bed. Since leeks mature later than onions, the two varieties would not vie for space. As the onion bulbs were removed the leeks could mature without competition. This method could not be used in cases in which the leeks were to be transplanted and grown in separate beds, and it produced only a modest crop of both onions and leeks, but it saved space and required little work.[48]

Leeks matured at the end of the summer. They were pulled, cleaned, and left in a cool dry place, sometimes in boxes of sand, to prolong their freshness. In temperate climates they could be kept in the ground throughout the winter. More perishable than onions, they would not last for long periods of time, and had to be used fresh.

CHIVES

Chives (Allium cepa sectilis junctiflora perennis) a perennial onion with edible blades, were known in Virginia and Maryland, though they appear only infrequently in colonial recipes. Their early appearance in the spring, and ease of cultivation, as well as their mild taste, made them popular in salads. As John Randolph noted: "They do not affect the breath so much as the other sorts (of onions)."[49] Chives were

easily propagated by dividing the roots, and planting the divisions in small clumps. Thomas Mawe and John Abercrombie, whose instructions George Washington followed, suggested the following method for planting chives.

> the method is to part or take off some slips from the old roots, and plant them in buds, where they are to remain, at about eight inches distance.
>
> In slipping, or parting the above roots observe to preserve eight or ten of the small bulbs together in a cluster, and in that manner to plant them.
>
> They are to be planted with a dibble, making holes for them...putting one cluster of roots above in each hole, and closing the earth well about them. They will soon take root, and increase very fast into large bunches, of many year's duration.[50]

Planting was to take place in late February or early March. Chives seem to have been part of the kitchen garden, rather than a herb garden, and were frequently planted along the borders.[51]

GARLIC

Of the garden lists available for the colonial Chesapeake, most contain garlic (Allium sativum) so it is safe to assume that it was a commonplace item in the kitchen garden. William Faris of Annapolis, for example, had a line of garlic on the front edge of his vegetable patch, and Thomas Jefferson planted several different varieties.[52] Although it was possible to

raise garlic from seed, most experts advised planting sections of the bulb, called cloves. They were to be planted in the spring, in rows spaced six to nine inches apart. Each clove was placed two to three inches deep, and about four or five inches apart.[53] John Randolph recommended that the earth be well trodden at planting, and trodden upon again later if the leaves became leggy, "in order to throw their substance into the bulb...." Randolph also advised covering the newly planted cloves with mould.[54] The garlic would grow rapidly throughout the spring and early summer, if kept well weeded and watered. About the beginning of June the leaves are gathered up and tied in knots to prevent straggling or running to seed.[55] In July the leaves died back, a signal that the bulb had matured and could be dug. Like onions, the bulbs were dug, dried in the sun, then tied in bunches by their dry tops. They were then hung in a dry room to prevent rotting.[56]

SHALLOTS

Shallots (Allium ascalonicum) were cultivated in much the same manner as garlic. Garden books

recommended February for planting, though William Faris put his in the ground in late March.[57] They were propagated by the planting of small roots, or offshoots of the main root, two to three inches deep, and generally along the borders. "They want no culture but to keep them clean from weeds," wrote Phillip Miller.[58] Shallots matured in late July or August; like the other Alliums this was determined by the leaves withering back. They were to be pulled and gathered on a dry day. "Spread them in the sun," directed Miller, "and tie them in bunches for use."[59]

SCALLIONS

Though English horticulturists lamented the scarcity of scallions in the gardens of their country, the scallion (Allium cepa ascalonica matthioli) seems to have been raised frequently in Virginia. Sir Peyton Skipwith and Thomas Jefferson both raised scallions, and John Randolph extolled their virtues in salads.[60] They were easily propagated by dividing roots in spring, planting three or four in a hole about six inches apart each way. They grew in nearly any soil or situation. Wrote Miller: "in a short time (they) will multiply exceedingly."[61] Scallions were harvested in the spring and early summer, and were eaten fresh

instead of being dried and stored. Other Alliums which resembled scallions, such as the Cibule or Welsh onion, were grown for similar purposes, and propagated in the same manner.

ALLIUMS GROWN FOR SEED

It was of utmost importance that farmers use fresh seed when planting any members of the onion family, and those who could not readily trade or order seeds had to grow their own. Seed onions were sometimes grown from sets, or transplanted from those planted in the main garden. The largest and healthiest plants were to be chosen. They were set out in a trench about six inches deep, and six inches apart, and the dirt raked smoothly over them. Like all onions they required watering until they took root, and consistent weeding. Only when the flowers appeared-- usually in early summer-- were they treated differently. In his Treatise on Gardening, John Randolph gives a detailed description of the care of seed onion:

> ...when your plants begin to head, they should be supported by stakes and pack thread or yarn, otherwise they will be very liable to be injured by the winds. These will produce your seed about August, which may be known by the seeds changing brown, and the bells where the seed is contained opening. The heads should be critically

> cut, otherwise the seed will be dropped, and when cut the heads should be exposed to the sun, and sheltered in the night and wet weather, and when sufficiently dry, they should be rubbed out, and after being exposed one day or more to the sun, may be put into bags and preserved for the following year.[63]

Philip Miller thought running string along either side of the heavy seed heads would help support them, and advised spreading the seeds, after harvesting, "on coarse cloths in the sun."[64] The author of American Husbandry recommended driving large stakes into the ground at intervals of eight feet, and attaching lines to them along each side of the ripe onion heads.[65] All cautioned against exposing the seed to wet, or even damp, weather.

Seed leeks were propagated in much the same way. The best leeks were kept, if possible, over the winter, then set out in the spring. Several authors advised planting them against a hedge or fence for support; if this was not possible, they, like onions, required lines and stakes once the seed heads grew heavy.[66] When the heads turned brown, sometime in August, they were cut off, leaving about a foot of stalk attached, and tied in bundles of three or four. They were then hung in a cool airy place, free from damp, until Christmas, when they were perfectly dry. The husks

surrounding leek seeds were very tough, and the seed had then to be beaten out of them. Miller advised crushing them against a rough tile as the most expedient method.[67] Like all seeds, they were then to be stored in bags, in a place in which vermin or dampness could not destroy them.[68]

TOOLS

As in all of seventeenth and eighteenth century agriculture, simple tools were the rule. Only in the initial formation of a very large garden did farmers probably ever used a plow--and it is doubtful if many modest farmers took this much trouble with their vegetable patch.[69] Mawe and Abercrombie advised using dibbles and drills for planting, and specified a smooth friable soil for onion culture, which implied use of a rake or, in rare cases, a harrow.[70] Thomas Tusser mentioned garden tools in his Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandry: "Through cunning with dibble, rake, matlocke, and spade,/ by line and by levell, trim garden is made."[61] Shears or a sharp knife were required to cut off the tops of onions, or the ripe seed pods; Charles Calvert ordered such garden shears from England in 1664.[62] A spade was used to dig, shovel manure, or loosen the earth around onions or garlic

before they were pulled. Generally, these were wooden shovels, tipped or perhaps covered with iron. It should be stressed, however, that equipment used on colonial farms was very simple at best.[73] As late as 1824, a visitor to the lower Chesapeake wrote: "Examine the tools of the greater number of our planters, and we need search for no other reason why our fields are only half-cultivated."[74]

VARIETIES

In colonial America, chives, garlic, scallions, and shallots were not typed by distinct varieties. Though Miller lists thirty varieties of garlic in his Gardener's Dictionary, no references to varietal names in the Chesapeake colonies have been found. All of the Alliums hybridize freely, and even those planted from well-marked seeds were not apt to grow true to type. At one point it was thought that there were two distinct types of leeks; after some study, Miller denounced this, stating that he believed that the only difference was in size.

Several different types of onions, however, were known by the late eighteenth century. The most prized of these was the Madeira. It was available in both white and red varieties, and was much esteemed for its

large size and mild, sugary flavor. Thomas Jefferson grew the Madeira onion at Monticello, and Washington had a friend ship him some directly from the island.[75] Amelia Simmons, a late eighteenth century cookbook author, remarked that, "The Madeira white is best in market, esteemed softer flavored, and not so fiery...the high red, round hard onions are the best."[76] In flavor and appearance this onion was closest to the modern Bermuda onion. The Portugal onion was another popular variety. It required more space to grow, for it was exceptionally large. Miller referred to it as the "great oval onion."[77] The Strasburgh "or common oval" was also known in Virginia. It had yellow skin and was the ancestor of a number of modern onions. Two varieties of Spanish onionsone silver and one red-skinned--were common. The latter appellation can be somewhat confusing, however, for in many cases "Spanish" came to mean any type of imported onion. All of these varieties were available from Minton Collins' Richmond nursery, and were described by John Randolph in the Treatise on Gardening. Thomas Jefferson grew Spanish, Portugal, Madeira, and "hanging" onions at Monticello, evidence that at least some farmers planted more than one kind.[78]

Dedicated farmers started their onions from seed carefully cultivated or purchased to produce a specific

type of onion. It is probable, however, that most of the onions harvested were of a mixed variety. Onions hybridized so easily that it was nearly impossible to keep them true to type. "All revert to a common type after a few years," acknowledged Miller. Onion sets produced a purer strain, of course, but this method was not employed very frequently. The onion that was familiar to the average farmer was probably a round, yellowish variety, the size and flavor of which differed from crop to crop.[79]

USES

By the time the first colonists brought onions to America, they were a well-established household item throughout Europe. Known since ancient times, the Alliums had become a staple flavoring in nearly every national cuisine. They not only added variety and zest to the often monotonous diet, but as an important source of vitamins C and niacin were vital in the prevention of scurvy and pellagra.

In the Chesapeake colonies, English cooking traditions predominated. Thus, onions were found in recipes for stuffing and stewing pigeons, in fish gravy, and in sauces for roast mutton and duck.[80] Onions were pickled, fried, boiled, and served in cream sauce. A recipe for "onion pye" called for a mixture of onions,

potatoes and apples, baked in a crust.[81] Everything from stewed oysters to "Indian pickle" benefited from their flavor. Small whole onions were put in chicken fricassee. Garlic and shallots were an important part of walnut pickle.[82] Leeks were used to flavor soups. Susannah Carter, another early cookbook author, featured shallots in a "Sauce for Roasted Fowls," and onions in "To Boil a Rabbit with Onions." (See Appendix for sample recipes).

Onions were often used to stretch a stew or fricassee, or provide a flavorful meal when there was little meat available. Thomas Tusser believed a pottage of leeks and peas to be both thrifty and healthful.

> Now leekes are in season, for potage full good,
> and spareth the milchcow, and purgeth the blood.
> These having with peason, for pottage in Lent,
> though spareth both oatmeale, and bread to be spent.[84]

Two hundred years later Maryland planter John Beale Bordley also advocated a simple diet of vegetable and grain soups and stews. He described his "Barley Broth" as a "mixture of almost every kind of garden vegetable and is never out of season. Onions or leeks and parsley are always a part of the ingredients...."[85] He

also advocated several gruel-like mixtures which were flavored with onions. One he called "A vegetable stew including onions or leekes and thickened with oatmeal or barley meal."[86]

In all of their cooking the colonists seemed to have prized mildly flavored onions over the more pungent varieties. John Randolph praised chives because they did not "effect the breath so much as the other sorts."[87] Philip Miller thought that Welch onions were not highly favored because of their strong taste.[88] The Madeira onion was most popular precisely because it was "esteemed softer flavored, and not so fiery...."[89] Garlic was used sparingly, and some thought it too pungent for most recipes. As Amelia Simmons wrote, "Garlicks tho' used by the French are better adapted to the uses of medicine than cookery."[90]

In fact, all of the Alliums were widely used in medicines. Frequently onions were saved because a slice or two was thought to cure measles.[91] The Virginia Almanack thought garlic useful in curing rheumatism and kidney stones.[92] A colonial recipe for treating the bite of a mad dog consisted of rue, treacle, filed pewter, and four ounces of garlic.[93] Mandram, a popular concoction which was used "to provoke an appetite in the most languid stomacks," was

made of cucumbers, shallots or onions, lime juice, Madeira wine, and pepper.[94] Martha Washington, who believed that worms were the cause of nearly every failing in a child, swore by the following remedy:

For Worms. Mrs. G. Wn.

> 1 oz seeds of wormseed
> half an oz rhubarb
> 1 Tablespoon small cloves of garlic
> put the ingredients into a pint bottle fill it with best wine or whiskey, let it stand a few days, shaking it will, then strain it, for a child of 5 years a small teaspoonful less for younger children.[95]

Landon Carter was another who turned to onions when he was in pain. On April 1, 1772 he wrote in his diary:

> I went to bed very well...last night, and slept well; but waked this morning with a grumbling pain (in) my left Ear; the cause of which I don't know unless my Cap might have left that barre last night in my sleep. I am trying to remove it by warm oil, the core of a roasted onion and a warm Chamomile pultice.[96]

On another occasion, when he suffered from "colic", Carter tried to cure it by taking a daily dose of "Balsam Peruvian and...4 to 6 Stewed onions..."[97] Carter believed that, if eaten raw, onions were apt to bring on indigestion, but that stewed onions worked effectively as a carminative. Philip Miller agreed. In the Gardener's Dictionary he elaborated on the curative powers of the Allium family.

> Common Onion has been considered as of an alexipharmic quality, and has been proscribed in malignant and epistemical distempers. They are likewise very efficacious in all infractions of the lungs, greatly promoting expectoration, and relieving Asthmas and difficulty of breathing. Externally they are employed in cataplasms for supperating hard tumors.
>
> A. sativum or Garlic, is still more powerful than onions. As it is very heating and penetrating, it should not be used too freely, being apt to cause head-ach and other inconveniences. A clove or two of garlic pounded with honey and taken two or three nights together, is good in rheumatic cases. A Quart of water, poured boiling hot upon a pound of the fresh root, cut into slices, and suffered to stand upon it in a close vesel, for twelve hours, becomes strongly impregnated with the smell and taste of garlick. This infusion, with the proper quantity of sugar, makes the syrup of garlick of the shops. Vinegar and honey excellently coincide with and improve this medicine, as a detergent and deobstruent, in disorders of the breast: a composition of this kind is prepared by infusing an ounce and a half of the fresh root in half a pint of vinegar, and dissolving in the strained liquor, by the heat of a water bath, ten ounces of clarified honey; to cover in some degree the ill smell of the garlick, a little carraway and sweet fennell seed, bruised, two drachms of each, are boiled for a short time in the vinegar, before the garlick is put in. The garlick itself is never to be boiled; its essential oil (in which its virtue consists) exhaling during that process.99

In addition to culinary and medicinal uses, Alliums were used in a variety of household activities. Chopped leeks were thought to be an important part of the diet of peachicks, and presumably other fowl as

well.[100] Philip Fithian, a tutor in Virginia, watched a printer make ink: "...the Materials are Lint Seed Oil, Wheat Bread, Onions and Turpentine, a rank compound truely...,"[101] Poor Richard Improved advised those with broken crockery that "Garlick stamped in a stone mortar, the juice whereof, when applied to the Pieces to be joined together, is the finest and strongest cement for that purpose, and will leave little or no mark if done with care."[102] Onion skins were also the traditional source of yellow dye for fabric. "The dry outside skins of onions steeped in scalding water and strained, color a yellow very much like 'Bird of Paradise' color," wrote one Maryland colonist in her housekeeping book.[103]

In all of these uses, onions were generally consumed by the household which grew them. In a few New England localities (notably Wethersfield, Connecticut and Barnstable, Massachusetts) onions became an important cash crop, with large annual shipments to the West Indies, and some ports in the southern colonies, such as Charleston.[104] In eastern Pennsylvania, onions were the third most important cash crop (after cabbage and turnips), and were frequently sold in the Philadelphia markets.[105] In the Chesapeake region, and further

south, however, this was not the case. Few commercial vegetable markets existed in these colonies until very late in the eighteenth century, and farmers were too preoccupied with tobacco culture to concentrate on truck farming. A few sold onions and other storable vegetables to the Continental army during the American Revolution; General Washington set the price for onions at two shillings, six pence, per half peck.[106] Other than this there was virtually no development of commercial onion growing. Even in 1792, after tobacco had ceased to completely control the Chesapeake economy, the five southern states combined exported less than 2,500 bushels of onions per year.[107]

Footnotes

[1] Instructions to prospective colonists given by Lord Baltimore, 1633, in Clayton Colman Hall, ed., Narratives of Early Maryland (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), pp. 23, 98.

[2] R.O. Bausman and J.A. Munroe, eds., "James Tilton's Notes on the Agriculture of Delaware in 1788, "Agricultural History (hereafter cited AgH), Volume XX, number 2, p.182.

[3] Virginia Almanack (Williamsburg, 1770).

[4] George Alsop, "A Character of the Province of Maryland," in Hall, ed., Narratives, p.345.

[5] Andrew White, "A Relation of the Colony of the Lord Baron of Baltimore in Maryland, near Virginia; A Narrative of the Voyage to Maryland," in Peter Force, ed., Tracts and other Papers Relating Principally to the Origin, Settlement, and Progress of the Colonies in North America...(Washington, D.C.: Peter Force, 1838) Volume IV, p.7.

[6] "A Perfect Description of Virginia, Being a full and true Relation of the present State of the Plantation, their Health, Peace, etc....1649," in ibid., Volume II, p.4.

[7] Robert Beverely, The History and Present State of Virginia, edited by Louis B. Wright (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1947).

[8] Hugh Jones, The Present State of Virginia, edited by Richard L. Morton (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), p.92.

[9] John Lawson, A New Voyage to Carolina, Hugh Talmadge Lefler, ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), pp.82-83; and W. Neil Franklin, "Agricultural Use in Colonial North Carolina," North Carolina Historical Review, Volume III, number 4, p.562.

[10] Beverely, History and Present State, p.292.

[11] American Husbandry (London: J. Bew, 1775), Volume I, p.220.

12 William Hugh Grove, "Virginia in 1732: The Travel Journal of William Hugh Grove," The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, Volume LXXXV, number 1, p.44; and Johann David Schoepf quoted in Lewis Cecil Gray, History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860 (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith 1958), Volume I, pp.192-193.

13 Johann David Schoepf, Travels in the Confederation 1783-1784, translated and edited by Alfred J. Morrison (New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), Volume I, pp.192-193.

14 Danckaerts quoted in Richard Osborn Cummings, The American and His Food (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1940), pp.134-135.

15 Andrew Burnaby quoted in N.F. Cabell, Early History of Agriculture in Virginia (Washington, D.C.: N.F. Cabell, n.d.), p.35.

16 Grove, "Virginia in 1732", p.35.

17 See Avery O. Craven, Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1620-1860 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1926), and Thomas Jones Farm Journal, March 1780, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland (hereafter cited MHS)

18 Philip Mazzei, "Memoirs of the Life and Voyages of Doctor Philip Mazzei," translated by E.C. Branchi, William and Mary Quarterly, 2nd Series, Volume IX, number 2, p.168.

19 William Fitzhugh to Dr. Ralph Smith, April 11, 1686, in Richard Beale Davis, ed., William Fitzhugh and His Chesapeake World, 1676-1701 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), p.175; see also Edith Rostter Beven, "Gardens and Gardening in Early Maryland," Maryland Historical Magazine, Volume XLV, number 2, p.244.

20 See for example, Landon Carter's description of terracing his garden and providing irrigation in dry weather. Jack P. Greene, ed., The Diary of Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752-1778 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1965), p.722.

[21] Howard S. Russell, "Allium Capa: Onions Through Three Hundred Years," New England Galaxy, Volume XVIII, p.20.

[22] Thomas Mawe and John Abercrombie, Every Man His Own Gardener (London: 1794), p.63.

[23] See Peter Kalm, Travels into North America, translated by John Reinhold Forster (Barre, Massachusetts: The Imprint Society, 1972), p.99.

[24] See James J.H. Gregory, Onion Raising: What Kind to Raise and the Way to Raise Them (Boston: A. Williams and Company, 1865).

[25] Beven, "Gardens and Gardening," p.250.

[26] George Washington to John Marston Pintard, November 18, 1785, in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., The Writings of George Washington (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Ofice, 1938), Volume XXVII, p.315.

[27] Advertisement in the Maryland Journal and Baltimore Advertiser, January 24, 1786.

[28] Advertisement in ibid., March 8, 1793.

[29] Ann Leighton, American Gardens in the Eighteenth Century: "For Use or For Delight" (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1976).

[30] Bausman and Munroe, eds., "James Tilton's Notes," p.181.

[31] Conversation with Ellen McCallister, Librarian, Mount Vernon, September 7, 1982; and Leighton, American Gardens, pp.206, 210.

[32] Philip Miller, The Gardener's Dictionary, Volume I.; also Leighton, American Gardens, p.205.

[33] (John Randolph), Treatise on Gardening by a Citizen of Virginia, in John Gardener and David Hepburn, The American Gardener (Washington D.C.: William Cooper, 1826), pp.270-272.

[34] Greene, ed., Diary of Landon Carter, p.980.

35 Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book, edited by Edwin Morris Betts (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1944), p.4; and William Faris Diary, May 4, 1792, MHS.

36 Leighton, American Gardens, p.192: and Conversation with McCallister, September 7, 1982.

37 Randolph, Treatise, p.271; Philip Miller, The Gardener's Kalendar (London: 1755), p.76; and Mawe and Abercrombie, Every Man, p.63.

38 American Husbandry, p.76; Randolph, Treatise, p.271; Miller, Gardener's Dictionary, I.

39 American Husbandry, p.106.

40 Miller, Gardener's Dictionary, I.

41 Greene, ed., Diary of Landon Carter, April 30, 1766.

42 Ibid, p.733.

43 Thomas Tusser, Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry (London: Company of Stationers, 1630), p.86.

44 Randolph, Treatise, p.271; also Miller, Gardener's Dictionary, I; and Mawe and Abercrombie, Every Man, p.340.

45 Ibid.

46 See Jefferson, Garden Book, p.208; Randolph, Treatise, pp.270-272; Advertisement in Maryland Journal, January 24, 1786; and John Beale Bordley, Essays and Notes on Husbandry (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1799), pp.405-406.

47 Miller, Gardener's Dictionary, I.; and Mawe and Abercrombie, Every Man, p.345.

48 Ibid.

49 Randolph, Treatise, p.272.

50 Mawe and Abercrombie, Every Man, p.133.

[51] American Husbandry, p.41; and Jefferson, Garden Book, p.498.

[52] Faris Diary, April 6, 1796, MHS; and Jefferson, Garden Book, pp.47, 208, 224. Miller lists thirty-two distinct varieties of garlic, of which five were grown in gardens. These were common (Allium sativum), rocambole (Allium sativum alternum), round headed (Allium holmense), Virginia (Allium bulbigerum virgignianum), and Spanish (Allium latiflorium hispanieum)

[53] Mawe and Abercrombie, Every Man, p.71; and Miller, Gardener's Dictionary, I.

[54] Randolph, Treatise, p.273.

[55] Miller, Gardener's Dictionary, I.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., and Farris Diary, M.H.S.

[58] Miller, Gardener's Dictionary, I.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Leighton, American Gardens, p.205; Jefferson, Garden Book, p.457; and Randolph, Treatise, p.272.

[61] Miller, Gardener's Dictionary, I.

[62] See Jefferson, Garden Book, pp.47, 48; Randolph, Treatise, p.272.

[63] Randolph, Treatise, p.273.

[64] Miller, Gardener's Dictionary, I.

[65] American Husbandry, p.143.

[66] Miller, Gardener's Dictionary I.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Miller, Gardener's Kalendar, p.207.

[69] Clarence H. Danhof, "The Tools and Implements of Agriculture," AgH, Volume XLVI, number 1, p.87.

[70] Mawe and Abercrombie, Every Man, pp.70, 132.

[71] Tusser, Five Hundred Pointes, p.77.

[72] Charles Calvert to Cecilius, Lord Baltimore, April 27, 1664, in The Calvert Papers, Maryland Historical Society Fund Publication, number 28 (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1889), p.250.

[73] Danhof, "Tools and Implements," p.87.

[74] Cornelius O. Cathey, "Agricultural Implements in North Carolina, 1783-1860," AgH, Volume XXV, number 1, p.129.

[75] Jefferson, Garden Book, p.75; and Washington to Pintard, November 18, 1785 in Fitzpatrick, ed., Writings, XXVIII, p.315.

[76] Amelia Simmons, American Cookery, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p.11.

[77] Miller, Gardener's Dictionary, I.

[78] Ibid; Jefferson, Garden Book, pp.4, 47, 48, 75, 224; Leighton, American Gardens, pp.205, 210; and Randolph, Treatise, pp.270-272.

[79] Miller, Gardener's Dictionary, I: and Randolph, Treatise, p.270

[80] See Susannah Carter, The Frugal Colonial Housewife, edited by Jean McKibben (New York: Dolphin Books, 1976), pp.10, 15; and Richard Bradley, The Country Housewife (London: Wordman and Lyon, 1725), p.13, 25.

[81] Hannah Glasse, The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy (London: 1747), p.224.

[82] Bradley, Country Housewife, pp.24, 26, 107.

[83] Carter, Frugal Housewife, pp.26, 54.

[84] Tusser, Five Hundred Pointes, p.73.

[85] Bordley, Essays and Notes, p.405.

[86] Ibid., pp.406-407.

[87] Randolph, Treatise, p.272.

[88] Miller, Gardener's Dictionary, I.

89 Simmons, American Cookery, p.11.

90 Ibid, p.12.

91 Sally Smith Booth, Hung, Strung, and Potted: A History of Eating in Colonial America (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1971), p.140.

92 Virginia Almanack, 1772.

93 Glasse, Art of Cookery, p.329.

94 Benjamin Franklin, Poor Richard Improved (Philadelphia: D. Hall and W. Sellers, 1780).

95 Nelly Custis Lewis, Nelly Custis Lewis's Housekeeping Book, edited by Patricia Brady Schmit (New Orleans: The Historic New Orleans Collection, 1982), p.107.

96 Greene, ed., Diary of Landon Carter, p.665.

97 Ibid., p.886.

98 Ibid., p.1015

99 Miller, Gardener's Dictionary, I.

100 Richard Bradley, The Country Gentleman and Farmer's Monthly Director (London: Woodman and Lyon, 1725), p.75.

101 Hunter Dickinson Farish, ed.,The Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, (Williamsburg, Virginia: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1965), p.190.

102 Franklin, Poor Richard, 1768.

103 Manuscript Recipe Book, n.d. (late eighteenth century), McPherson-Johnson Papers, MHS.

104 See Russell, "Allium Capa", pp.12-21; and Percy W. Bidwell and John J. Falconer, History of Agriculture in the Northern United States, 1620-1860 (Clifton, New Jersey: Augustus M. Kelly, 1973), p.99.

105 U.P. Hedrick, A History of Horticulture in America to 1860 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), p.80.

[106] Advertisement in Maryland Journal and Baltimore Advertiser, February 10, 1778.

[107] Bidwell and Falconer, Agriculture in the Northern United States, p.136.

APPENDIX

Examples of recipes using onions in the colonial period.

To Boil Rabbits with Onions

Truss your rabbits with the head turned over their shoulders; Let them be boiled off very white. Boil some large onions in a good deal of water, till they are very tender; put them in cullinder and when drained pass them through it with a good piece of butter, a little salt, and a gill of cream: Stir them over the fire till they are a good thickness; then dish up your rabbits, and pour the onions over them. Garnish with bacon and raw parsely.

Susannah Carter, The Frugal Colonial Housewife

To Pickle Onions

Take small onions, lay them in salt and water a day, and shift them in that time once; then dry them in a cloth, and take some white wine vinegar, cloves, mace, and a little pepper; boil this pickle and pour over them, and when it is cold, cover them close.

Susannah Carter, The Frugal Colonial Housewife

Barley Broth

It admits a mixture of almost every kind of garden vegetable and is never out of season. Onion or leeks and parsely are always a part of the ingredients; besides which cabbage or greens, turnips, carrots or peas, may be added. A teacup of barley suffices for a large family... Stew all together two hours. Then add the herbs cut small and salt. The whole then boils till tender. Skim off the fat or not as you like it. Onions or leeks must not be ommitted.

John Beale Bordley, Essays and Notes on Husbandry

Onion Pye

Wash and pare some Potatoes, and cut them in Slices, peal some Onions, cut them in Slices, pare some Apples and slice them, make a good Crust, cover your Dish, lay a Quarter of a Pound of Butter all over, take a Quarter of an Ounce of Mace, beat fine, a Nutmeg greated, a Tea Spoonful of beaten Pepper, three Tea Spoonfuls of Salt, mix all together, strew some over the Butter, lay a layer of Potatoes, a Layer of Onion, a Layer of Apple, and a Layer of Eggs, and so on, till you have filled your Pye, Strewing a Little of the seasoning between each Layer, and a Quarter of a Pound of Butter in Bits and six Spoonfuls of Water. Close your Pye, and bake it an Hour and a Half: a Pound of Potatoes, a Pound of Onions, a Pound of Apples, and twelve Eggs will do.

Hannah Glasse, The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy

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