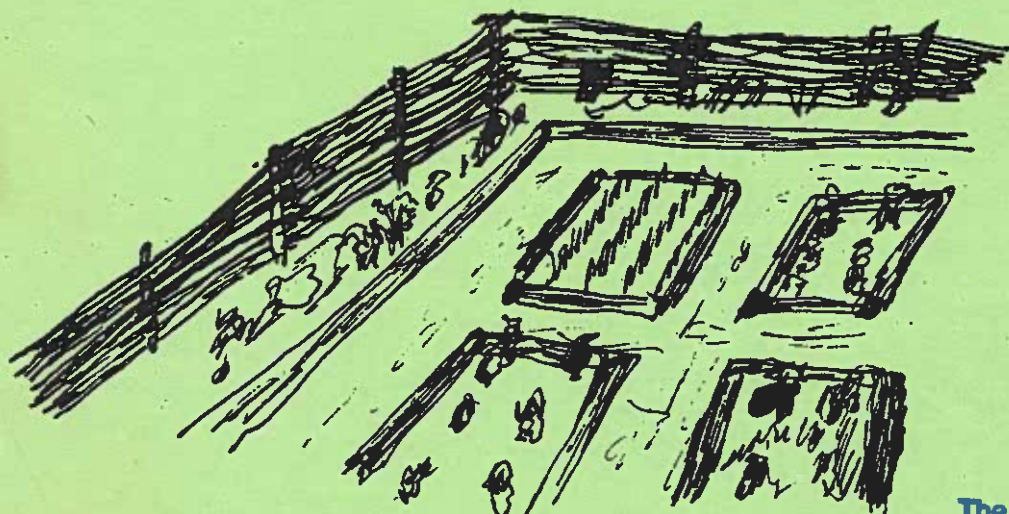


**EXOTIC VEGETABLES
IN THE
COLONIAL CHESAPEAKE**
by
ELIZABETH B. PRYOR



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**THE NATIONAL COLONIAL FARM
RESEARCH REPORT NO. 18**

The Accokeek Foundation, Inc.



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THE ACCOKEEK FOUNDATION, INC

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INTRODUCTION

The colonists who settled around the Chesapeake Bay were, for the most part, reluctant gardeners. Initially they arrived on the shores of Maryland and Virginia in search of gold and other minerals; finding little, they turned their energies to the less easily obtained riches of tobacco. Tobacco became virtually their only agricultural interest for the first two hundred years, an obsession which pre-empted concern, not only for gardens, but animal husbandry, and soil conservation.¹ Gardens were so neglected that early Virginians constantly faced starvation. In 1639 the Virginia Company passed a law that required colonists who owned at least one hundred acres to establish a garden, well protected with a fence.² A similar situation existed in Maryland, where a visitor found that there were "not many that doe apply themselves to plant Gardens and Orchards...."³ Like the Virginia Company, Lord Baltimore had to issue a directive requiring immigrants to plant corn and other provisions before they launched into full-scale tobacco production.⁴ In general these "required" gardens showed only a rudimentary attempt at providing a few staples of the colonial diet. Root crops, which took

little cultivation and were easily stored for use in the winter, and leafy vegetables, such as cabbage and spinach, which could grow year-round in the mild Chesapeake climate, were commonly all that was grown. Throughout the colonial period, Europeans and American comments about the settlers' attempts at horticulture ranged from disappointment to scorn. "We are very deficient in gardens," conceded St. Jean de Crevecoeur (whose own garden contained only potatoes, turnips, cabbages, and pumpkins), "for we have neither the taste nor time, and besides the labour is too dear."⁶ Robert Beverley, an enthusiastic promoter of all things Virginian, had to admit that despite great natural advantages "they han't many gardens in that Country, fit to bear the Name of Gardens."⁷ The author of American Husbandry thought farmers from New England to the Carolinas were so backward in gardening, that they⁸ often neglected to grow even subsistence vegetables. On a trip to Maryland in 1679, Jasper Danckaerts noted that a "few vegetables are planted, but they are of the coarsest kinds and are cultivated in the coarsest manner, without knowledge or care, and they are therefore not properly raised, and do not amount to much as regards the productivity and still less as to their

use...."⁹ Nearly one hundred years later a scornful visitor to North Carolina echoes his words. "I have seen but few vegetables and those very poor of their kinds," wrote Janet Schaw.

This too is of their own fault, for the fine light soil is intirely [sic] fitted for them, and roots of all kinds would be excellent here, but their indolence makes them prefer what herbs they find growing wild to those that require the least attention to propagate, and one is really grieved to see so many rare advantages bestowed on a people every way so unworthy of them. I do assure you that every gift of nature is here.(10)

As Janet Schaw noted, it was not the climate or soil which produced vegetables poor in productivity and variety, but the carelessness of the gardeners. Promoters of the colonies, in fact, hailed the virtues of the New World for all agricultural purposes, and sent glowing reports of flourishing gardens back to Europe. At first glance these accounts seem at odds with the disdainful reports written by the most first-hand observers. They were, however, generally meant as a compilation of the possibilities offered in America, rather than precisely written reports. Thus a man advertising Lord Baltimore's colony, who admitted that few gardens existed, would nonetheless write of lush muskmellons, parsnips, cabbages, etc., available only a year after the founding of Maryland. These

promotional tracts contain the first evidence of vegetables more sophisticated than the scruffy cabbages and carrots reluctantly grown for survival. From Pennsylvania, William Penn extolled the virtues of his colony (which he viewed as one large garden), in a letter which boasted that "Colliflowers" and asparagus grew abundantly, along with turnips, beans, onions, and potatoes.¹² Another enthusiast, describing Virginia in 1649, included artichokes and asparagus in his list of the niceties found in that colony.¹³ Peppers were among the unusual vegetables claimed by the colony of New Sweden, located at the northern end of the Chesapeake Bay.¹⁴ Most believable, however, is the account of William Hugh Grove, who claimed a few sophisticated vegetables for the colonies, but did not exaggerate the degree to which they flourished. During a journey in 1732, he reported that he once tasted asparagus in America, and that kale and cabbage were abundant, but saw "Few Colliflowers or Hartichoak, tho the Gentry sometimes rayse a few and have very lately tried the Brochili."¹⁵

Thus some sophisticated vegetables (for the purpose of this paper, the list includes artichokes, asparagus, cauliflower, celery, celeriac, eggplant, okra, peppers, rhubarb, and tomatoes) were known, and

occasionally cultivated, in the early years of the Chesapeake settlement. Towards the end of the eighteenth century several of these vegetables were standard items in the gardens of wealthy planters, or those interested in agriculture. Thomas Jefferson, for example, looked forward to the epicurian delights from his garden; he planted artichokes, asparagus, cauliflower, celery, eggplant, okra, cayenne and bell peppers, and rhubarb at Monticello.¹⁶ George Washington had beds of artichokes, asparagus, cauliflower, celery, cayenne pepper, and rhubarb in his kitchen garden.¹⁷ Even a man of modest property, but high horticultural ambitions, like silversmith William Faris of Annapolis, grew a few unusual vegetables in his backyard garden. In 1792 he cultivated asparagus, eggplant, cauliflower, and rhubarb.¹⁸

For the most part, however, these vegetables were far less common in American gardens, than in their European counterparts. Besides the general disinterest in gardening, there were several reasons for this. A number of these plants were virtually unknown to the settlers. Peppers, tomatoes, and eggplant were all native to the New World, but they were grown in South America and had to be reintroduced to America by the

Spaniards, who took them to Europe and brought them back to the eastern seaboard. Furthermore, all of these plants were related botanically to the nightshade family, the berries of which were poisonous. Consequently, many were loath to try their harmless cousins.¹⁹ Rhubarb was another plant which was new even to Europeans. It was not accepted in England until 1640, and even then was known only as an obscure medicinal plant. None of these vegetables would have been the obvious choice of an immigrant planning a garden in the wilderness, nor were they as easily accessible as the plants (corn, beans, squash) grown by the local Indians. Artichokes, asparagus, cauliflower, and celery were more familiar, but each of these took a good deal of patient care or they would not thrive. Farmers who only reluctantly planted potatoes and cabbages were scarcely about to undertake the cultivation of vegetables which took years to establish, required special soil preparation, or long periods of covering by dirt or leaves to achieve the proper degree of whiteness. Moreover, all of these vegetables were seasonal; they produced for only a short period of time and did not keep well. A farmer with a minimal amount of interest and time to give to

his garden was therefore far more disposed to grow root crops, which would nourish his family through the winter, or leafy vegetables which he could harvest throughout the year, than asparagus which took year round care but could be cut only a few weeks in the spring. Yet another reason for the scarcity of these vegetables was the difficulty of obtaining seed. Until late in the colonial period all seeds and roots were brought from Europe; they were expensive and liable to rot or be lost during the long sea voyage. No wonder William Hugh Grove found the more unusual vegetables reserved for gardens of the gentry. It was only the wealthy planter, with the command of labor and money, who could afford to indulge his taste buds in the luxury of a dish of spring asparagus, or a crisp stalk of blanched celery.

As mentioned above, one of the greatest difficulties of growing unusual vegetables was the acquisition of seed. Like all plants introduced from Europe (and this includes peppers, tomatoes, and eggplant) which, though native to America were brought to the Chesapeake area via Europe, their seeds had to be imported until the plants were well enough established that American nurserymen or neighbors could provide reliable seeds or slips. Until late in the

eighteenth century men such as George Washington and Edmund Lloyd were still ordering seeds from abroad, with very mixed results. Charles Carroll ordered broccoli and celery seed through his British tobacco factor in 1765. Attached to his request was a complaint that most of the seed was damaged or lost from the last shipment, and an admonition to the factor to ask his seedsman "whether it would not be more safe from Damage by Damp if the seed should be send in the Pod or Husk and Direct him to seed it in Accordingly they must be the Freshest of this year's seed."²⁰ Destruction by mice, rats, or other vermin was also a hazard, and to avoid this, careful farmers sometimes asked that the seed be keep in the captain's cabin and hand delivered.²¹ Added to these difficulties was a simple scarcity of seed for the more sophisticated vegetables which required a certain ingenuity to even locate some to buy. George Washington could acquire the seeds of "kian" pepper only by asking a friend who was travelling in Barbados to buy some if he could; Mrs. Washington enthusiastically seized on some cauliflower seed she found in Philadelphia in 1794, and had it sent to Mount Vernon.²²

Once the vegetables were started, saving seed was obviously the most inexpensive and reliable way for the

farmer to continue the plants. This, however, required foresight and initiative, traits many colonial horticulturalists lacked. Even professional gardeners often were reluctant to set aside plants for seed, to gather it, husk and dry it, and then carefully store it over the winter. George Washington had to continually admonish his gardeners to save garden seed, but though he cited the high price and low productivity of imported seed, he was only partially successful in²³ convincing them. Probably his experience was typical.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century some enterprising Americans began to sell vegetable seeds. A few were private gardeners who simply sold the surplus of what they saved. Thomas Jefferson bought seeds worth seventeen shillings, six pence from such a man in 1772. He also ordered the seeds of celery, asparagus, artichokes, peas, and spinach from a local nurseryman named Campbell.²⁴ Minton Collins, who ran a nursery in Richmond, supplied the Peyton Skipwith family with starts of artichokes, cauliflower, celery, and celeriac as well as the more common vegetables.²⁵ Several different seedsmen advertised in local newspapers. One, Maximilian Hinsler, boasted that he could supply:

A variety of Kitchen-Garden and such as can be depended on, viz: Cauliflower Seeds; Roman Brocoli; Cabbage of different Sorts; savoys

ditto; Dutch Kale of various Colours; Scotch ditto; German Greens; Hanover Turnips; double Parsley; round Spinach; red English Carrot; the large French carrot; the early Horn Carrot; Parsnips; white Mustard; early Windsor Beans, early Bunch Beans, large Dutch Caseknife Beans, The Lima Beans, the French speckled Beans, the white French Kidney Beans, the small white French running ditto; early Peas; Bunch Peas, Marrowfat Peas, the French Sugar Pea; the early white and red Radish, fit for Hotbeds, the Turnip Radish, Scarlet Radish, Salmon ditto, Common Radish, Summer Radish, the large white and black Winter Radish; Cabbage Lettuce of various sorts, long Roman Lettuce Seed; curled Endive, broad-leaved ditto; Succory variegated; Tongue Grass; Pepper Grass; Leek Seed, red-top Turnips, French celery, Dutch Headed Celery; the French small Soup Turnip; the Dutch white and yellow Turnip; the Roman Thistle; Artichoke; broad-leaved Basilic, common ditto; small leaf ditto; an Assortment of Musk Melons, and Cantaloupe ditto, of the best kind; green Cucumber, large Spanish white Cucumber; Asparagus Plants of the best Sort; an Assortment of Flower Seeds, too tedious to mention; double Tuberose Roots; finer and larger than any imported; a large Quantity of different Sorts of Vines, viz: Rhenish, Tokey, Maderia, Muscat, Claret, the Provence or Coast Vine.

He has just received from Europe, A large and general assortment of Bulbous Roots; and expects a Quantity of choice Fruit-Trees, which when arrived, shall be publicly advertised.(26)

Trading seeds or roots was another alternative. Both Landon Carter and Washington sent artichoke slips to a number of their friends in the late 1700s, and Washington acquired rhubarb in the same manner.²⁷ By 1788, an agriculturalist in Delaware could write that swapping seed was a nearly universal habit, and that

most farmers no longer had to rely on imported seed.

Once seeds were acquired, the farmer had to prepare his garden beds. Most of the descriptions of colonial vegetable gardens indicated that each vegetable was planted in an individual bed rather than in rows in one large patch. This made sense to the dedicated gardener, because different vegetables often required vastly different soil composition, and exposure. If the practice of keeping separate beds was wide spread, however, it was probably due more to fashion than pragmatic considerations.²⁹ The size of these beds varied according to the farmer's whim and his needs. John Gardiner, who had worked as a gardener for Virginia's Mercer family, encouraged farmers to plant large gardens filled with a variety of vegetables. Never, he wrote in 1804, "was it known that the possession of a large garden did not occasion an increased fondness, and an consequent augmented consumption of vegetables in a family." In conclusion, he remarked that an acre should be more than enough space to supply the needs of a family of twelve, but that "prudence will dictate the expediency of giving the garden ample space."³⁰ Several newspaper advertisements for Maryland farms of moderate size

indicate that gardens were smaller than this - about
130 to 150 feet square.³¹ How much of this space was
devoted to specialty vegetables is hard to judge. The
wealthy Lloyd family of Maryland ordered two ounces of
each of three varieties of cauliflower, and two ounces
of celery seed. Each of these was enough to cover
nearly one hundred square yards. Charles Carroll
appears to have been equally fond of celery, for he
also ordered two ounces of the seed in 1765. The seed
was imported, however, and extra may have been bought
to compensate for inevitable damage or loss.³²

TOOLS

The tools required to cultivate such a garden plot
were not extensive. Even horticultural experts advised
little beyond a spade, rake, dibble, and hoe.
Occasionally a specialized implement was recommended.
An example of this was the asparagus fork, a flat,
three-pronged tool, used to stir and lift the soil
around the plant roots. An asparagus knife (thought
essential for proper cutting of the stalks) was also
sometimes suggested. This was a narrow knife, very
long in the blade, with a slightly curved end, which
was filed with teeth like a saw.³³ American planters,

no matter how interested in tools, generally made do with a good deal less than what was considered "essential" equipment by English writers. No specialized gardening tools appeared in a survey made of equipment on middle-class farms in Prince George's County, Maryland between 1740 and 1760.³⁴ Even as industrious a gardener as William Faris mentions no tools in his diary, save a trowel, spade, and scythe.³⁵ Hoes, the chief cultivating instrument in the region, were probably the dominant tool in most gardens as well.

VARIETIES AND CULTIVATION

The exotic vegetables grown in colonial gardens came from a variety of botanical families; methods of cultivation therefore differed considerably. In many cases the vegetables were so rare that virtually no directions were available to farmers who wished to raise them. Serious gardeners, such as Thomas Jefferson, were left to experiment as best they could during the growing season. The following represents a composite of techniques used to raise and propagate these vegetables.

Artichokes (Cynara colymus): Globe artichokes had been cultivated for centuries in Europe by the time English

settlers arrived on the shore of the Chesapeake Bay. They were considered a luxury food, hardly the staple vegetable needed to sustain life in the wilderness. Nonetheless, a few colonists tried cultivating them, and by 1730 they were found frequently enough to be included in a list of successful garden plants grown in Virginia.³⁶

In his Treatise on Gardening, John Randolph mentions two varieties of globe artichokes which were grown in Virginia. The first had prickly leaves and round green fruit; the second, smooth leaves and a red-tinged fruit. The latter was the preferred variety, but there is evidence that neither did particularly well in the climate of Maryland or Virginia.³⁷ "The worst thing in their gardens that I know," wrote Hugh Jones,³⁸ "is the artichoak...." Despite his skill as a gardener, Jefferson also had trouble with artichokes. After planting a new crop in 1794 he wrote in disgust that "most of them are so indifferent a kind that as soon as we can distinguish them, we mean to dig them up and throw them away...."³⁹ Partly to blame were the cold winters and extremely hot summers of the area; to survive these artichokes had to be pampered year round by the gardener. This required not only rare dedication, but a certain amount of skill. As Philip

Miller noted, it was "a plant which few
Gardeners...understand to manage well...."⁴⁰ Hugh
Jones also attributed the artichoke's poor growth to
"want of skill and good management."⁴¹

Artichokes could be propagated by either seeds or
slips. The seed was gathered from the choke, or flower,
in late summer, and dried in the sun, ready for use the
next year. Landon Carter soaked his seeds in a weak
solution of saltpeter before planting them and kept the
bed well dunged and watered. Jefferson experimented
with planting the seeds in the fall for transplanting
the following spring, apparently with indifferent
results.⁴³

Slipping was the more common method of
propagation. The new shoots were separated from the
main stalk by hand or a knife. The process served the
dual purpose of providing slips to plant and removing
competing growth from the established stalk. The job
was done in late February or early March, depending on
the mildness of the weather. The shoots were to be off-
white in color, with a few roots established on the
bottom. Woody shoots were to be avoided, and dry ones
required soaking in water before planting. The slips
were planted in a hole filled with rotted dung, several

to a hole, then the dirt was piled around the base, to make a hill. The hills were made in a row, four to five feet apart, with several feet between each hill. During the growing season they were to be well watered and weeded, while not disturbing the roots.⁴⁴ They were ready for harvesting in July. Several experts suggested early cutting, before the flower head matured too much.⁴⁵ Even a small patch had the potential to bear abundantly. "Colonel Mason tells me a hill of artichokes generally bears 8 of a year, and they⁴⁶ continue in season about 6 weeks," Jefferson wrote.

Artichokes required continual nourishing, good drainage, and protection against the winter cold in order to succeed. Randolph advised fertilizing each spring; for this he thought sheep dung and ashes "not only the best for that purpose, but also for preparing the ground for them."⁴⁷ He also believed that dung helped protect the hills from the cold, though Miller⁴⁸ advised against this practice. Winter treatment consisted of cutting back the plant to ground level, covering it with a ridge of earth and dung, or laying straw around the roots.⁴⁹ Landon Carter chose November⁵⁰ for this treatment; in this he was probably typical. The plants were left this way until spring, when once

again, the earth or straw was cleared away, and the suckers cut back to make way for spring growth.

Asparagus (Asparagus officinalis): Of the unusual vegetables mentioned in this paper, asparagus was probably the most beloved. For generations it had been esteemed in Europe as a vegetable fit for nobility, and its appetizing green shoots were always a welcome sign of spring. As one traveler in the colonies noted, vegetables were not "over-abundant...at any time...there being a great deficiency of them in the Spring of the year..." and the early appearance of asparagus made it, like peas, an especial luxury.⁵¹ No wonder it was favored in the gardens of Nomini Hall (where the plantation mistress kept a personal eye on its cultivation), given an large berth in William Faris' city garden, and solicitously tended by Thomas Jefferson. During its short season William Byrd dined on it several times a week. Even Landon Carter, who took little interest in his vegetable patch, watched anxiously over the asparagus.⁵²

Two varieties of asparagus, distinguished only as "red-topped" or "green-topped" flourished in the sandy loam of the Chesapeake watershed. Occasionally, the green variety was grown under hills to blanche it--

William Byrd spoke of "very large and long asparagus of splendid flavor, white as well as red." Indeed, in some parts of the East Coast, notably New Jersey and Long Island, asparagus grew so well that it was considered a weed to be kept out of the corn fields.⁵³

(The extreme heat of the summers kept Maryland and Virginia farmers from growing such bumper crops.) Like artichokes, asparagus roots had to be kept protected from extremes of temperature, and continually nourished and watered.

Asparagus, was a perennial vegetable, was started either from seed or roots. Careful acquisition of the starts was of supreme importance, for a farmer putting in asparagus had to make a two or three year commitment of cultivation before he ever harvested a crop; the time was wasted if seed or roots proved bad. As Philip Miller warned: "you should be particularly careful, since the goodness of your future Crop, in a great measure, depends thereon: you should therefore get it from some Person of Integrity, or if you have an Opportunity save it yourself; or in some other neighboring garden."⁵⁴ Randolph recommended starting asparagus from seeds, by planting them directly into nursery beds between late February and early March. Landon Carter planted his asparagus about this time,

but treated it with saltpeter before putting it in the ground. Jefferson planted his crops a bit later, generally between March 15 and April 1.⁵⁵

Rich ground was required for asparagus. The seed was trod in, then raked. Throughout the year the plants were to be thinned, kept free of weeds, watered, and, in October, when the foliage had died back, covered with dung. This last measure both nourished the plants and protected the buds from frost.⁵⁶ The following spring the plants were ready to be transplanted from the nursery to their permanent beds.

Whether the established root "crowns" were grown in this manner, or acquired from a nurseryman or neighbor, the next steps of propagation were the same. Beds in the kitchen garden were to be levelled, made free from stones and large lumps, and enriched with dung. In March the crowns were planted about four to six inches deep, so that the top of the buds were two inches below the surface of the ground, and two inches from each other. Trenches were a helpful way to insure that the roots were left standing erect, for they could be leaned against one side while the dirt was piled up against them. Randolph recommended covering them with up to two feet of dung and mould.⁵⁷ The size of the

beds varied with the needs of the farmer. Miller thought that a small family required one at least eight rods long, "for if you cannot cut one hundred at a time, it will be scarcely worth while; for you must be obliged to keep it, after it is cut, two or three Days, to furnish enough for one Mess."⁵⁸ Jefferson planted several beds, four feet wide, each containing four rows of asparagus. He later spoke of having "three terrasses"⁵⁹ of asparagus in his garden. In his plantings Jefferson appears to have followed Miller's advice and planted the rows one foot apart, with a small alleyway left to facilitate weeding and cutting. For the next several years the farmer had to keep the beds free from weeds, fertilize the plants, and constantly water them. In the fall the foliage was cut back and the gardener instructed to build up a protective covering for the winter. October or November were considered the best times for this chore. Though dung, straw, leaves, and dirt were all recommended as appropriate blankets, Jefferson used tobacco suckers for this purpose.⁶⁰ In the spring the soil around the roots was stirred, preferably with the above mentioned flat, three-prong fork. William Faris called this "opening" his beds, and generally performed

the task in the first few weeks of March. ⁶¹ More dung
(Randolph specifically recommended "butcher's dung")
was added to the roots at this time. ⁶²

John Randolph advised against the practice of sowing other crops with the developing asparagus, but his recommendations seem to have been ignored. Philip Miller gave elaborate instructions for cultivating onions and asparagus together, contending that the leafy asparagus foliage helped keep down the weeds in the rows of onions. William Faris annually sowed spinach or cabbage between his rows of asparagus. And Landon Carter was so pleased with the results of planting seedling tobacco with his developing asparagus roots, that he declared: "I will follow this method and ⁶³ sow my rich garden beds with plants every year."

For four or five years, in order to give the roots a chance to develop, the asparagus was not cut. When it was finally harvested, care had to be taken to keep the tender roots from being damaged. Amelia Simmons, an early student of American cuisine, gave this method for cutting asparagus:

cut just above the ground; many cut below the surface, under an idea of getting tender shoots, and preserving the bed; but it enfeebles the root: dig round it and it will be set with the juices--but if cut above the ground, and just as the dew is going off, the sun will either reduce the juice, or send it back to nourish the root....(64)

Only large buds were to be cut--the others were allowed to "run up to strengthen the roots." Randolph recommended a blunt pointed, serrated knife, or even a saw for the purpose.
65

Treated in this manner, ritually dunged and stirred, and carefully weeded, asparagus beds would flourish for between ten and twenty years. Furthermore, growing plants for seed was an easy matter once the roots were established. Each spring the best stalks were to be chosen, and allowed to bloom and run to seed. As the plants began to develop the red berries which contained the seeds, they were propped up with stakes or branches so that the seeds could fully mature. At the end of September, when the vegetation began to die back, the berries were to be stripped from the branches and left to lie in a tub of water for about three weeks. When the husks began to rot, they were broken up by hand. The seeds were then repeatedly washed with running water, allowing the lighter husks to wash away. After several rinsings they were laid on a mat in the sun to dry, then carefully stored in bags for spring planting.
66

Cauliflower (Brassica oleracea): A member of the cabbage family, cauliflower was grown in Europe since

the sixth century BC, and was a common garden plant in England from the 1600s on. Though John Lawson wrote from North Carolina in 1700 that "The Colly-Flower we have not yet had an opportunity to make Tryal of....." it was at least occasionally found in Virginia by this time.⁶⁷ William Byrd included it in his list of "Pot Herbs" grown in Virginia in the 1730s.⁶⁸ Maryland's Lloyd family grew three kinds of cauliflower at Wye plantation: "Best Earley wt," "Colliflower Bronole",⁶⁹ and "Dwarf Purple." Cauliflower was also one of the few vegetables Faris planted year after year in his beloved flower garden.⁷⁰

There seems to have been a certain prestige to this vegetable, perhaps because of its pure white color, which was difficult to obtain. Like the other vegetables discussed in this paper, cauliflower took a fair amount of attention to grow properly. "Cauliflower must be planted critically to a day," John Randolph wrote from Virginia, "or else there is no dependence on the success of them." He offered no explanation for this but maintained that it always proved true. Cauliflower could be sown either in the fall (the 12th of September being the correct day in Virginia) or on April 12 for a summer crop. William Faris apparently

had not heard of this and at least one year boldly put his cauliflower in the ground on April 8. Whether or not his crop suffered, he does not say.⁷¹ If the seed was sown in the fall, the plants had to be protected with bell glasses or light wooden boxes which could be removed on mild days. Randolph preferred the latter, for he believed glasses made the plants spindly. In February the plants were transferred to beds of rich light soil, then watered, and fertilized.⁷² Landon Carter used chicken manure for this purpose, with excellent results.⁷³ Randolph recommended transplanting spring-seeded plants in July, though Faris performed this task in early June.⁷⁴ As the plants grew they were to be hilled up to prevent wind damage. Randolph suggested planting spinach between the rows to help protect them from the ravages of a certain type of fly. Throughout the growing season careful watering and weeding were essential.

The critical part of raising cauliflower was in keeping the heads pure white, and free from insect attack or fungus. Miller recommended bending the plants' outer leaves over the heads as they began to form in order to protect them from the sun, continuing the process until the heads were large enough to cut.⁷⁵

Others thought mounding dirt around the plants would help develop the head and discourage pests. Depending on the time of planting, the heads were ready to cut in July or September.

Randolph's Treatise on Gardening mentions another method of planting this vegetable, developed by a Colonel Turner of King George County, Virginia, who was, according to Randolph; "imminent for Cauliflower." Turner's method involved the use of trenches dug one and one half feet wide, down to the clay. Dung was mixed in the bottom of the trenches then the cauliflower plants were placed in them, five feet apart and dirt was hilled up about them. The trenches evidently protected the plants from both sun and wind, and the dung nourished them. "I have found myself,"⁷⁶ Randolph noted, "this method succeed(s) best."

For reasons that are not altogether clear, cauliflower seed was considered difficult to grow in the Chesapeake region. Those who wished to try to grow it followed much the same rule as for other vegetables. The best heads were reserved, allowed to flower and stand for seed; as they became heavy they were staked well so that the heads did not drop on the ground. When, in late summer, the seed ripened, the pods were⁷⁷ cut off, dried, and the seeds rubbed out and stored.

Celery (Apium graveolens): Celery cultivation, long established in Europe, did not begin in America until the second half of the eighteenth century. Like other luxury vegetables, the seed was difficult to obtain, and the result uncertain. Byrd does not list it among favored garden plants in 1730; Jefferson did not try it until 1767; the Lloyds first ordered celery in 1784.⁷⁸

Nevertheless, John Randolph indicates that celery flourished so well in the Chesapeake that it could be harvested during six months of the year. Several kinds were evidently available, including a solid white variety, a hollow-stemmed red, and a green celery. He suggested sowing the first crop in early March, and seeding the ground every two weeks thereafter. Jefferson planted his seeds in late March, in rows nine inches apart. Sometimes he mixed the rows with other herbs such as nasturtiums and cresses.⁷⁹ Both Miller and Randolph agreed that celery seedlings, which appeared about three weeks after planting, needed abundant water and careful weeding to thrive. Between late May and mid-July they were ready for transplanting into trenches, where they could continue to grow, and, if the farmer was very ambitious, be blanched for table use. Miller suggested digging a trench ten inches deep (Randolph thought eight to ten inches deep was

preferable) and setting the celery, the tops and roots of which had been trimmed, at intervals of four inches. The trenches were to lay three feet apart, with the dirt piled up between the rows. As the celery grew, the piles of earth were to be transferred around the plants. Miller warned the gardener to take care never to pile dirt above the crown of the plant, or it would rot. Watering was essential to the early growth of celery but Randolph cautioned against too much moisture for the mature plants; again the hazard was rot. "The sun," wrote one gardening expert, "is a great enemy to Celery, when it is very hot, wherefore I would recommend the covering of your plants with brush, at all seasons of their growth, whilst the weather is hot, from nine in the morning until six o'clock in the evening."⁸⁰ When the celery had reached a height of ten to twenty inches it was ready for harvesting. In Virginia this meant that the first crop could be harvested in July.⁸¹

Celery root, or celeriac, a variation of this plant, with a large edible tuber, was also sometimes cultivated in Virginia and Maryland. It was grown much like celery, except that it was planted in level land rather than in trenches. It required nearly constant watering for the first few months, and covering with

brush in the winter to protect it from frosts. In the fall, when the foliage had died back, the fleshy roots were ready to be dug.

Though neither Jefferson, Lloyd, nor Washington grew celery seed, it was deemed possible if the farmer took care. John Randolph gave the following instructions: "draw one or more of your flourishing plants, and plant it out in the spring, let it be supported against the winds; and in August the seed will be ripe, which should be then cut up, dried, beat out, and preserved in bags."⁸³

Eggplant (Solanum melongena): Eggplants, first brought to North America by Spaniards, were uncommon in the Chesapeake region before 1800. This was partially due to their unfamiliarity in Northern Europe, and partially due to a mistrust of their edible qualities, since the plant was closely related to nightshade. Indeed, much of their pre-nineteenth century garden use was decorative. William Faris was among those who prized the glossy purple "berries" of this plant, which he included among the flowers in his garden.⁸⁴ No instructions for growing eggplants were written in America before 1804.

Purple and white fruited plants were both grown. The former was considered superior. In 1806 a gardening

enthusiast named Bernard M'Mahon wrote the first praise of the eggplant's culinary uses: "when sliced and nicely fried [it] approaches, both in taste and flavour, nearer to that of a very nice fried oyster, than, perhaps, any other plant."⁸⁵ M'Mahon recommended sowing the seed in a hot bed, in February, or a nursery bed in March. The plants were thinned, and transplanted in May. Each eggplant was set two and a half feet apart each way. Seed could also be sown in April, and the plants transplanted in June. Eggplant thrived in the sandy soil and hot summers of Maryland and Virginia; "if kept clean, and a little earth drawn up to their stems when about a foot high," M'Mahon wrote, "they will produce plenty of fruit."⁸⁶ Frost was their only great enemy, and if care was taken in seeding and transplanting they flourished without much attention. For decorative purposes they were generally grown in pots--this was the method Faris used, planting them each year in March or April.⁸⁷ Those who wished to grow them for seed waited until the fruit was yellow and ripe, then cut it open and dried the seeds in the sun.⁸⁸

Okra (Hibiscus esculentus): It is difficult to determine just how prevalent okra was in Chesapeake gardens. A native African plant, it was brought to the

West Indies by slaves, and from there transported to the southern American colonies. Lawson did not mention it in North Carolina, nor did Byrd include it in his list of Virginia garden plants in 1730. Peter Kalm, however, travelling in Pennsylvania in 1748, observed that it was widely grown.⁸⁹ Jefferson had it in his garden before 1781. The first directions for its cultivation were written by Bernard M'Mahon in 1806. He directed that the seeds be sown directly in the garden in mid to late April in drills one inch deep and four feet apart. Two or three seeds were to be planted in spaces eight inches apart, and covered with one inch of dirt. During the spring they were to be thinned and weeded, and resown where the seeds had not sprouted. As the plants grew hardy they were to be hilled up. Like peas, the hills were built higher as the plants matured. By mid-summer the pods were ready for harvesting. M'Mahon cautioned that they should be cut frequently and used while young.

Peppers (Capsicum): Several varieties of capsicum were cultivated in the gardens of the Chesapeake Bay. Miller listed eighteen varieties which were grown for either culinary or decorative purposes; most, he noted, were esteemed because they made "a very pretty Diversity" in

the border garden. The two most popular edible varieties were "bird" pepper (also called Guinea or cayenne pepper) and bell peppers. The former, with its pungent odor, was a curiosity in Europe (for peppers were a native American plant), and much esteemed by Southern cooks.⁹¹ In 1748, Peter Kalm wrote this description of plant:

Capsicum annum or Guinea pepper is likewise planted in gardens. When the fruit is ripe it is almost red; it is added to a roasted or boiled piece of meat, a little of it being strewed upon or mixed with the broth. Besides this cucumbers are pickled with it, or the pods are pounded while they are yet tender, and being mixed with salt are preserved in a bottle. This spice is served on roasted or boiled meat or fried fish and gives them a fine taste. But the fruit itself is as sharp as common pepper.⁹²

Thomas Jefferson had both bell and "bird" peppers at Monticello, and Washington went out of his way to acquire them.

Nevertheless, few descriptions of their cultivation exist before 1800. Philip Miller advised planting the seeds early in the year, in hot beds, if necessary. When six inches high, in April or May, they were to be transplanted to pots or borders. Washington sowed his peppers later--in June or July, so that the crop ripened in early fall. In 1806 M'Mahon advised planting the seedlings one foot apart in rich light

earth. The rows were to be two feet apart. During the summer months peppers needed strict attention to weeding and watering in order to produce bountifully. They liked the hot Tidewater climate, however (in England they had to be put in hot houses to ripen), and thus needed little protection from the weather. By late summer they were ready to be picked; Randolph recommended that they "be gathered before the pods grow hard, for pickles." Those saved for seed were allowed to become very ripe. The pods were then opened, and the seeds spread out to dry in the sun.⁹⁴

Rhubarb (Rheum rhaponticum): Rhubarb, a native of the Far East, was new to Europe in the seventeenth century and unknown in America until around 1730. It was considered a medicinal plant, valued chiefly for its root, which could be ground and mixed with other herbs in tonics and powders. Though Benjamin Franklin is sometimes credited with introducing the plant to America, there is evidence that it was known in the Chesapeake colonies a half century before Franklin sent rhubarb seeds to John Bartram. Rhubarb starts were also sent to Bartram by Peter Collinson of London. Collinson, a bold adventurer in botanical matters, recommended using Siberian rhubarb in pies, a very

early reference to its use as a foodstuff. "Both this and the Rhapontic make excellent tarts;" he told Bartram,

before most other fruits fit for that purpose are ripe. All you have to do, is to take the stalks from the root, and from the leaves, peel off the rind, and cut them into two or three pieces, and put them in a crust with sugar and little cinnamon: then bake the pie, or tart: eats best cold. It is much admired here, and has none of the effects the roots have. It eats more like gooseberry pie. (95)

Despite this praise, rhubarb pie did not catch on in America. Washington was brave enough to try the plant as a foodstuff, but it was not without hesitation. In March 1788 a political acquaintance sent him rhubarb seeds, and in thanking him Washington assured his friend that he would tend the plants and "if food, a fair trial shall be given."⁹⁶ Even as late as 1806 Bernard M'Mahon promoted rhubarb almost entirely as a medicinal plant.

Neither Miller nor Randolph discusses the cultivation of rhubarb. The only direct clues to the method of growing this plant in the eighteenth century are found in Washington's diaries. In 1787 he sowed rhubarb seed sent to him by John Jay in New York on April 4; it was planted along a walkway in holes three inches apart. He did not record the success or failure

of this experiment.⁹⁷ The next (and most complete) description of rhubarb culture came two decades later in M'Mahon's American Gardener's Calendar:

The following is the mode of its culture: having procured a sufficient quantity of seed of the true kind, select a piece of light rich sandy loam such as answers for asparagus, and after giving it a good coat of manure, trench it two or three spades deep, if the good soil admits; after which, level the top neatly, and lay it out by line, into squares of four feet, at the angles or intersections of which, you are to form little circles with your finger about six or eight inches in diameter, and on each, scatter a few seeds, then cover them with light fine mould three quarters of an inch deep. The seeds should be sown as early in spring as possible, or if this had been done November, they would vegetate in spring with more certainty; when the young plants appear, keep them free from weeds, and in dry weather give them frequently a little water, but not much at a time; and above all things, protect them from the mid-day sun till they get considerably strong, for if exposed fully to this, during their infant state, few of them would escape destruction thereby; were you to place a piece of board on end, about fifteen inches broad, and two feet and half high, at the south side of each hill, leaning a little over the plants, this would answer the end effectually, without depriving them of the benefit of the circulating air. The first season is their critical period, having survived that, they have nothing to fear afterwards. Onions, lettuces or any other low growing crops, may be either sown or planted in the intervals for the first year, so that they are kept at a proper distance from the young plants. The supernumerary plants, one being sufficient to be left in each of these places for ultimated perfection, may be transplanted the spring following into new plantations, similarly prepared and at the same distance.

The November following, all the leaves being then decayed, cover the crowns of the plants two inches deep with earth from the intervals, and if there is danger of any wet lodging, throw up trenches, rounding the beds as is commonly done to asparagus, and for the first winter, lay some dry litter over the plants. In the March following, strip the covering till you just perceive the tops of the plants, give all the ground a slight digging and dress it neatly after you, observing to keep the beds well hoed, and always free from weeds.

Thus proceed every autumn and spring, till the roots have four years growth, when some of them may be taken up for use; but it is generally admitted that their medicinal virtues increase, until they are eight or ten years old.

You must be very circumspect in the choice of ground; particularly, that it is not subject to lodge wet, for this plant, but no means agrees with too much moisture; preferring a rich dry sandy loam, to any other kind of soil.

Rhubarb may also be propagated by offsets from the old roots, or by sowing the seed in seed-beds, and transplanting them when a year old, into such beds and at the same distances as before directed for sowing the seed; but they always produce larger and better roots, when sown where they are to remain.

M'Mahon gives no instructions at all for the use of the edible stalks, but advises the gardener to harvest the roots in autumn. After digging them up, and cleaning them of dirt and small roots they were to be sliced, threaded on a string, and hung before the fire to dry. Presumably small amounts could then be cut off,
98
pounded, and mixed in medicines.

Tomatoes (Lycopersicon esculentum): This plant, native to South America, was slow in being accepted in England and the colonies. Spaniards first took the fruit back to Europe, in the sixteenth century, where it was readily embraced as a foodstuff in Spain and Italy. From there it travelled to England, but the plant was not hardy in the cool climate and the tomatoes were rarely eaten. In 1630 John Parkinson wrote that "we have them only for curiosity in our Gardens, and for the amorous aspect or beauty of the fruit."⁹⁹ Like peppers and eggplant, tomatoes were related to nightshade and the idea persisted that the fruit was harmful, if not actually poisonous. A few seeds found their way to America, but most of the vines were kept in greenhouses "among other Exotic Plants."¹⁰⁰ A Williamsburg doctor named John de Sequeyra is credited with introducing the tomato to Virginia. On the back of his portrait is a note stating that he began "the custom of eating tomatoes, until then considered more of a flower than a vegetable." But the "custom of eating tomatoes" did not become really widespread until the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁰¹

By 1800 both red and yellow varieties of tomato were available, as were large-fruited, cherry, and

pear-shaped strains. ¹⁰² Whether grown as a foodstuff or for decorative purposes the tomato seeds were to be started early, either in a hot bed, or in pots which could be taken in during cold weather, for the plants were easily damaged by frost. Frequent waterings in the early weeks were important. When all danger of frost was past they were transferred outdoors, preferably near a fence, on which they could be trained. Each plant was to have about three feet of room each way, and was to be supported on a stake if no fence was available. "Some lay various old branches in their way, for them to run upon;" wrote an expert on gardening, "however, the better they are supported, the more numerous will their fruit be." ¹⁰³ As the spring progressed, the plants were to be earthed up, kept well supported, and watered and weeded frequently. Nineteenth century authors later suggested that in southern climates the seed could be sown directly in the border, then raked in. After this the plants were thinned and staked; the rest of the cultivation was similar to that for tomatoes transplanted from the nursery. The fruit ripened throughout the late summer. ¹⁰⁴

WEATHER AND PESTS

Few difficulties with cultivation of these unusual vegetables are recorded, perhaps because they were so rarely in the garden at all. U. P. Hedrick believed that colonial gardeners were faced with fewer pests than their modern counterparts; this too may account for the scanty information on pests or destruction by animals.¹⁰⁵ No doubt asparagus and the tender shoots of cauliflower or celery faced the same destruction by deer, cattle, rabbits, and other animals that the more plebian vegetables did. Weather also posed a problem. Drought threatened all crops, especially these, which, for the most part, grew in the hot summer sun. Tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant were particularly susceptible to frost damage. After an unusually severe winter Landon Carter wrote the following description of his garden.

For a curiosity I walked into my garden and it is really a curiosity for I do not believe there is a single thing alive in it except a bunch of spinnage or two. Such has been this winter. Every strawberry vine is infallably dead, the lettuce all rotten, the broccoli near much, the parsely killed down into the roots, and so, I suppose, are the Artichokes.
(106)

Wet weather also caused damage by unearthing plants, and rotting roots. Slugs, (for which large applications of salt were thought to be the best

remedy) ate buds of young plants, and cut through roots. But all of these were widespread dangers, to which the entire garden was susceptible. Only one specific pest, the asparagus beetle, was mentioned in colonial documents. The beetle laid its eggs on the plant and the larva ate the foliage--to the entire destruction of the plant. There was no effective cure for this insect, which had been introduced into Virginia and Maryland from England. One author thought the most effective cure was to place nets under the plants, then shake vigorously to dislodge the pests. ¹⁰⁷

USES

The main use of these vegetables was, of course, culinary. They added color and variety to what was frequently a monotonous diet. Period cookbooks list ways to pickle, dry, and salt exotic vegetables, as well as a number of ways to use them fresh.

Artichokes were favored ingredients in omelets, and in sophisticated stews, as well as being a fresh salad item. ¹⁰⁸ Pickles were another favorite way to eat this vegetable; Richard Bradley recommended that the cook parboil them, then preserve them in brine. The pots were to be covered with butter and brown paper. ¹⁰⁹

Bradley also gives a recipe for drying artichoke hearts:

lay the Hearts or Bottoms upon a Cullender, or some other thing, to drain conveniently; then dry then upon a gentle Oven, by degrees until they are as hard as Wood. They will keep good twelve Months if they are laid by in a dry place. (110)

To use the dried artichoke hearts the cook had to soak them for two days in water.

The glory of asparagus was its fresh greens flavor in the spring. Nevertheless it could also be preserved in water, vinegar, and spices, or served with cream, cheese sauces, or in a "ragoo".¹¹¹ Cauliflower, thought best served with gravy, could also be plainly boiled and dressed with butter.¹¹² Hannah Glasse cautioned against ruining any of these vegetables by over-cooking. "Most People spoil Garden Things by over-boiling them," she said, "all Things that are Green should have a little Crispness for if they are over boiled they neither have any Sweetness or Beauty."¹¹³ Of course all of the vegetables were ingredients in soups. John Beale Bordley, an agriculturalist from Maryland, liked especially to use celery for this purpose.¹¹⁴

Peppers were an unusual condiment, either fresh, or served as a pickle. An eighteenth century recipe

for the latter recommended that they be gathered young, then salted and preserved in a brine of vinegar, salt, and water.¹¹⁵ Occasionally, unusual uses for vegetables were found. One horticulturalist proclaimed that okra, long an ingredient in soups and stews, was used by some middling farmers as coffee. Noted M'Mahon: "the ripe seeds, if burned and ground like coffee, can scarcely be distinguished therefrom. Numbers cultivate it for that purpose, and even say that it is superior to foreign coffee, particularly as it does not affect the nervous system like the latter."¹¹⁶ Another domestic writer offered the advice that artichoke leaves were useful in cleaning pewter.¹¹⁷

All of these vegetables were also believed to have medicinal properties. Artichokes, asparagus, and celery were all recommended for "stones" or "gravel" in the gall bladder. There was, stated the Virginia Almanack, no need to mix them with anything, just eat them raw with water.¹¹⁸ Powdered rhubarb roots were mixed with ivory shavings, sassafras, dandelion roots, and a dozen other ingredients to make an elixer thought to cure scurvey and rheumatism.¹¹⁹ It was also a ingredient in this "Antiscorbutal Electuary."

Take medicinal Antimony six Drams, Aethiops Mineral one Ounce, Rhubarb in Powder one Dram, Concerve of the Yellow Rind of Seville



Oranges and Lentitive Electuary each one Ounce, mix with Syrup of Cloves and take two Drams three times a Day. (120)

Rhubarb was also considered an antidote to diarrhea.¹²² And Landon Carter believed asparagus had sedative properties, for each time he ate it he became drowsy.¹²²

All of these recipes were, of course, geared for home consumption; few attempts at commercial growing of any vegetables were made during the colonial period. The commerce in agricultural products was not brisk. It either consisted of grains, and a few shipments of long-lasting vegetables (such as onions or potatoes) which were sent to the West Indies, or informally sold surpluses of perishable products. Surveys of commodity transactions in the Chesapeake area for the late eighteenth century show exports of cereals, horses, lard, a few dairy products, hay, potatoes and onions--¹²³ but virtually no fresh fruits or vegetables. A few vegetables were sold locally, and one traveller noted that the inhabitants of North Carolina frequently sent their garden truck to Virginia "where they meet with a better market than they could expect in any part of their own province on account of its bad navigation."¹²⁴

As Baltimore and Philadelphia grew they also became

centers for produce marketing, mostly by the energetic Germans in Maryland and Pennsylvania. One European exclaimed at the wonders of the Philadelphia market, which he called "a vast concourse of people with everything to sell." He proclaimed that it contained "everything that can be had for money. This is the best Market I ever saw."¹²⁵ So popular was this way of making extra money that the roads into Baltimore and Philadelphia were sometimes crowded with hundreds of wagons on their way to the markets.¹²⁶

Nonetheless, the use for such rare garden stuffs as celery or asparagus, was overwhelmingly domestic. Few had the money to buy these luxuries, even had they been familiar with their virtues. Artichokes and asparagus, tomatoes, rhubarb, eggplant, celery, cauliflower, and peppers remained, for the entire colonial period, "rare and Extock" plants, fit for the hothouse and botanical garden, or the tables of the very wealthy.

FOOTNOTES

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⁵ Ann Leighton, American Gardens in the Eighteenth Century "For Use or For Delight" (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976), p. 191; and Johann David Schoepf, Travels in the Confederation, 1783-1784, translated and edited by Alfred J. Morrison (New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), Vol. I, p. 93-95.

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⁷ Robert Beverely, The History of Virginia in Four Parts (London: B. and S. Tooke, 1722), p. 254.

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- 58 Miller, Gardener's Dictionary, p. 142.
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