

Committing Seed to Earth

COMPARING VEGETABLE GARDENING IN THE 1700S TO TODAY REVEALS A LOT OF SIMILARITIES AND A FEW CRUCIAL DIFFERENCES.

By Gregory LeFever



(Courtesy Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

If you grow your own vegetables, there's much about American vegetable gardening in the 1700s that you already understand. You know how it feels to dig in spring's clammy soil and to bury little seeds with the hope they'll germinate. You've watched your plants grow lush as they ripen in summer's heat. You know the satisfaction of a bountiful harvest, as well as the disappointment of plants stricken by thirst or an early frost.

Then there are the differences between how you and your colonial counterpart tend your gardens. You've battled some tough pests no one had heard of a couple of centuries ago, and your colonial counterpart has grown some vegetables you've likely never heard of today. But the biggest difference between then and now is your water hose—your surest bet that your garden will survive summer's heat—an assurance the colonial gardener never had.

Few people know more about the similarities and differences of gardening today compared to the 18th century than Wesley Greene. He's spent 30 years studying historic gardening and is a recognized expert on 18th-century gardens, not just intellectually but also manually, as founder in 1996 of the Colonial Garden and Plant Nursery in the Historic Area of Colonial Williamsburg, in Williamsburg, Virginia.

Greene also compiled the recently published Vegetable Gardening the Colonial Williamsburg Way: 18th-Century Methods for Today's Organic Gardeners. The book—co-published by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and Rodale, Inc.—is a visual and informational delight for any gardener who enjoys insights into earlier gardening techniques, histories of dozens of crops, and proven tips to foster good harvests.



Most of the basic vegetable-gardening tools remain fundamentally unchanged from the 1700s to today. Shovels, rakes, hoes and wheelbarrows still cultivate the soil in the hands of gardeners then and now.

(Courtesy Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

“The modern gardener would recognize most of our hand tools, and many gardening tasks have spanned the centuries relatively unchanged,” Greene writes in the book. “Often the difference is in the materials rather than the method. For example, we provide bottom heat to our seedbed by using fermenting manure, while the modern gardener uses electric mats. We cover our hoops with oiled paper, while the modern gardener uses plastic. The materials may be different, but the method and results are the same.”

Speedily Prospering Seeds

The first English men and women who landed in Tidewater Virginia in 1607 confronted a life-and-death struggle to establish a colony at Jamestown. By 1609, nearly 500 colonists were living there, but when the Powhatan Indians blockaded the settlement and withheld all provisions, the horrible “starving time” spared only 60 people.

Within a matter of months, however, Jamestown officials sent a message back to the London Company of Virginia—the English business that had bankrolled the colony—about the phenomenal gardening prospects: “We have made trial of our owne English seedes, kitchen hearbes, and rootes, and find them no sooner putt into the ground then to prosper as speedily and after the same quallitie as in England.”

For the rest of the century, Virginians would carve an economically viable colony from the wilderness, feeding themselves with subsistence farming. “Corn was by far the most important crop, followed by field peas and beans,” Greene explains. “A vegetable garden provided luxuries rather than staples, and though its produce was a much appreciated diversion from a monotonous diet of meat and grain, it was not always dependable.”

The Virginia population continued to grow, and in 1699 the English founded Williamsburg as the colony’s capital city. It attracted merchants, lawyers, doctors and other professionals who, with their wives, had enough leisure time to cultivate dooryards and kitchen gardens of vegetables and herbs for their households. They consulted a number of English manuals on gardening, adjusting the planting times to accommodate Virginia’s seasons and climate.

Around 1760, a governmental attorney in Williamsburg named John Randolph wrote the first American gardening book, *A Treatise on Gardening*, before he fled back to England in 1775 at the outbreak of the American Revolution. “Randolph was clearly writing from his own experience in the New World,” Greene states. “Most notably, he changed the planting dates to suit the Virginia climate. He also observed, for example, that the multiple spring sowings of spinach recommended for England resulted, in Virginia, in plants bolting and going to seed.”

While Randolph adapted dates to suit Virginia’s climate, Greene and other historical gardeners have likewise adapted Randolph’s dates to suit today’s climate: “Like Randolph, we have adapted this information to suit the Virginia climate; we also have altered his advice to suit the 21st-century climate. It was much colder in 1765 Virginia than it is here today.”

Challenges of Water and Dung

Vegetable gardening was more conducive to the climate in America’s northern colonies, which experienced cooler summers with more rainfall. In much of the South, including Virginia, summers could be blisteringly hot with very little rain, putting gardens very much at risk.

“The ability or inability to water the garden has been the single most important limiting factor to gardening throughout history, particularly in southern climates,” Greene says.

Gardeners in 18th-century Williamsburg, for example, depended on wells for water during spells when no rain fell. Greene has determined that two people with watering cans hauling water from a well can carry 200 gallons a day—the equivalent of 4,000 pounds of water—to fill a cistern, “and still not keep up with our needs when summer stays dry.”

“In 18th-century Williamsburg, the garden was the responsibility of the lady of the house, and she was at the mercy of the weather,” he says. “Only families wealthy enough to afford slave labor to move the water could reliably keep a summer garden.” Sometimes even slave labor could not provide enough water to sustain a garden through a lengthy dry spell, so families relied on markets to provide food for their meals.

In keeping with gardening practices of the 1700s, Greene and Williamsburg’s other historical gardeners use manure for fertilizer, “primarily horse dung, but also poultry, sheep, and cattle dung.”



If the summer turned hot and dry, keeping an 18th-century Williamsburg garden watered was a huge chore, involving hundreds of gallons of water that had to be carried by hand from the home’s well. The possibility of drought made vegetable gardening here highly unpredictable in colonial times.

(Photo by Jill Peterson at Colonial Williamsburg)



“The 18th-century gardener primarily used animal dung, but a few also experimented with vegetable ‘dung’ in the same way that modern gardeners use composted vegetable waste,” Greene says. “While not as nutrient rich as animal dung, vegetable dung provides an excellent way to build a healthy soil and is the safest compost for the modern gardener.”

Of Bugs and Seeds

Due to the lack of chemical herbicides and pesticides, Williamsburg’s gardeners in the 1700s were organic gardeners whether they cared to be or not. “The common philosophy was to kill anything that hopped, wiggled, or flew, but the colonists just weren’t very good at it,” Greene writes. “However, some of their methods work quite well now.”

He cites, for example, the colonial practice of using limewater for controlling aphids. It was effective, but its use must be restricted to mature plants, because it will harm seedlings.

“A simple trap made of boards to capture slugs and snails within the lettuce frames has achieved a tolerable control,” he explains. “Handpicking is an ancient tried-and-true method for controlling caterpillars, but the gardener must be diligent.”

Some of today’s most damaging garden pests were unknown to our colonial counterparts. Neither the Mexican bean beetle nor the Colorado potato beetle had yet discovered Virginia’s gardens, nor had the voracious cabbage caterpillar, which arrived in America from England during the 1800s.



(Courtesy Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)



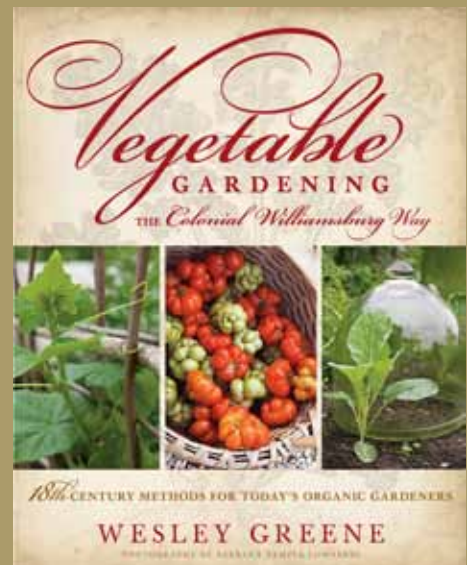
Historic Gardener Wesley Greene tends to bean plants in the Colonial Garden and Plant Nursery at Colonial Williamsburg. Greene, founder of the Nursery, has studied colonial plants and gardening techniques for 30 years. (Courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

While the 18th-century gardener was unaware of some of our common pests, today's gardener may be unaware of some of that gardener's plants and vice versa. "Colonial Virginians had most of the vegetables with which the modern gardener is familiar" with a few exceptions such as sweet corn, Brussels sprouts, and rutabaga. "On the other hand, the 18th century gardener grew some vegetables that are seldom found in the modern garden such as salsify, scorzonera, and cardoon," according to Greene.

Greene says that while many of our gardening tools are the same as used in the 1700s and our gardening techniques bear close resemblance, finding the historic seeds for a replica historic garden poses a problem. "Perhaps the most challenging aspect of re-creating the 18th century garden is finding the appropriate historic varieties of plants," he explains. "Most vegetables are annual or biennial plants in our climate, making them very susceptible to varietal extinction. Once the last seed is planted and not collected, the variety is gone."

"The 18th-century gardener viewed the task of seed saving in a very different way than we do today. We are trying to freeze time and have heirloom varieties in as pure a form as possible. The 18th century gardener was happy to discover any trait that improved a vegetable variety and would start saving seed from the newest improvement. Over time, the older form would disappear or be absorbed into the new form."

Whether we're gardeners in 1712 Williamsburg digging the season's root crops or are in 2012 standing above rows of young plants with garden hose in hand, Greene says: "What connects all generations of vegetable gardeners is the optimism of committing seed to earth."



Published this year by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and Rodale, Inc., Wesley Greene's book provides historical insights into colonial gardening, plus essential planting information for dozens of vegetables. (Courtesy Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)