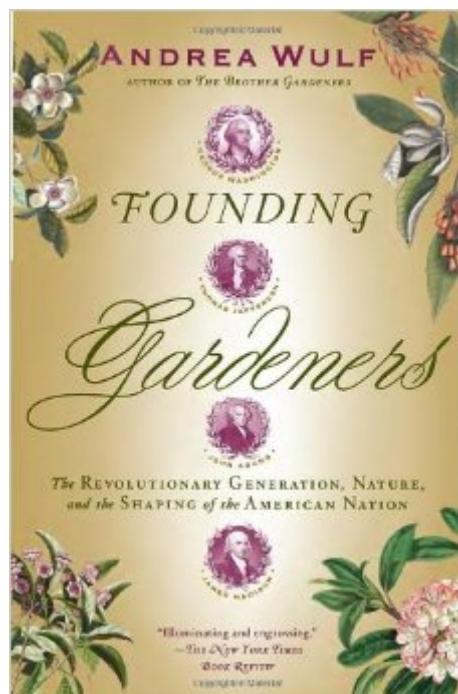


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Founding Gardeners: The Revolutionary Generation, Nature, And The Shaping Of The American Nation



Synopsis

For the Founding Fathers, gardening, agriculture, and botany were elemental passions: a conjoined interest as deeply ingrained in their characters as the battle for liberty and a belief in the greatness of their new nation. *Founding Gardeners* is an exploration of that obsession, telling the story of the revolutionary generation from the unique perspective of their lives as gardeners, plant hobbyists, and farmers. Acclaimed historian Andrea Wulf describes how George Washington wrote letters to his estate manager even as British warships gathered off Staten Island; how a tour of English gardens renewed Thomas Jefferson's and John Adams's faith in their fledgling nation; and why James Madison is the forgotten father of environmentalism. Through these and other stories, Wulf reveals a fresh, nuanced portrait of the men who created our nation.

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Customer Reviews

It is a pleasure to report that this is one of those unique and rare books that is both a delight to read as well as being chock full of important information and significant insights. The author, a Brit, argues that "it's impossible to understand the making of America without looking at the founding fathers as farmers and gardeners" (p. 4). To support her thesis, the author looks at principally Washington, Adams, Jefferson and Madison, although Franklin, George Mason, and George Wythe (among others) also make appearances. All of these four were deeply involved in agriculture and gardening, in addition to their political lives. I was surprised to learn how grumpy old John Adams turned into a happy camper when working on his farm or in his Philadelphia greenhouse (a gift of Abigail). While I knew that Jefferson was passionate about plants, so it was true of the other three

as well, especially Washington who was quite the student of agriculture. The author focuses upon some key events to develop her argument. Washington's American garden of native plants and shrubs is discussed. The 1786 garden tour that TJ and Adams made in England where they visited many of the famous English gardens and discovered them to be largely populated with American plants. This was the work of the little-known John Bartram (1699-1777), who shipped American plants and seeds to England from his Philadelphia nursery, as well as supplying the framers. The author's "The Brother Gardeners" looks at these splendid English gardens and the role Bartram played in supplying American plants for them. One chapter deals with the deadlocked Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, which the author suggests might have been able to reach compromise due to a visit of some key delegates to Bartram's nursery for a refreshing break. While some have criticized this suggestion, I found it interesting, and whether one agrees with it or not does not affect the great value and enjoyment of the book. Next we follow the 1791 New England purported garden tour of Jefferson and Madison, which was probably more political than botanical. A chapter discusses the selection and creation of Washington, D.C. The final chapters focus on Jefferson and Madison. Of course who better than Jefferson to organize and direct the Lewis and Clark expedition which resulted in a treasure trove of new trees and plants. TJ's retirement at Monticello is for me one of the most interesting stages of his life, and he was extensively involved in agricultural research during this period--as an "experimental gardener" to use the author's description. And the more shadowy Madison emerges as the father of the American environmental movement with his 1817 address to the Agricultural Society of Albemarle (Virginia). The author explains how plants were more than just a hobby; these patriots saw American plants and shrubs as one basis for continued independence since they supplied our needs domestically. These framers shared the view that a nation of independent small farmers would foreclose the inherent corruption of laborers forced to survive in "putrid" cities. How slavery fitted into all this is also touched upon by the author. The author's research (reflected in 81 pages of notes, including important references to electronic data sources) is awesome. The book has 16 color plates and 19 B&W illustrations. I knew nothing of plants, but the author's skillful narrative is rich in descriptive power. The book itself is beautifully produced, from the colorful dust jacket to the fine paper--yet another example of the superb work done by Berryville Graphics in Virginia. Accept the author's argument or not, this book stands as a unique and insightful study of the sometimes mythical "founders".

Andrea Wulf is a graceful and stylish wordsmith. Her subject is the fact that farming and gardening and garden design were central concerns of all the founding fathers. The focus is on Washington,

Adams, Jefferson and Madison. Lots of detail here about their own gardens and estates: the design of the space, the plants they favored for both food and beauty, and the time and energy they spent on these matters. Good chapter on the Lewis and Clark expedition and its impact on gardeners. Lots of detail, but never dull even to this non-gardener.

As a Master Gardener and a Certified Landscape Design Consultant, I found this book absolutely fascinating. In a time when our founding fathers were striving to build a nation, gardening helped to give them the peace of mind to escape the rigors of their day to day trials and tribulations. I was amazed at the level of knowledge and enthusiasm that each possessed. This a must read for history lovers and especially for all gardeners. Mike Brown

If you've read much about the founding fathers you hear a lot of little 'mentions' about their gardens. George Washington took time even while fighting the British to send instructions to his plantation manager regarding Mount Vernon. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson spent weeks touring gardens while in England, and Jefferson and James Madison later did the same in America. And the gardens at Jefferson's Monticello and Madison's Montpelier are still famous and visited by many today. But all you get in most histories are the little 'mentions,' and it's always left the subject tantalizingly vague for me. Washington was perhaps the most efficient gardener or farmer, abandoning tobacco early in favor of crops that weren't so destructive to the soil. He also experimented extensively with manures in an effort to replenish the soil. Adams returned home after the presidency and was happiest working on his humble farm. Jefferson was always on the lookout for seeds and plants that might be beneficial in America and traded continually with a large network of friends (as did Benjamin Franklin). Jefferson was especially interested in the new species brought back by Lewis & Clark when they explored the Louisiana Territory and spent much of his time experimenting and trying to grow new and better plants. Andrea Wulf explores this aspect of the founders that we seldom see except in glimpses. All were extremely interested in the land almost to the point of obsession, and saw nature as a symbol of America's strength and potential. Wulf is clear from the beginning that she makes no distinction between "gardening" and "agriculture," and this occasionally makes it sound like she's forcing connections in presenting her thesis. But 200 years ago there wasn't as much of a difference between the two as in our day when we are much more divorced from the soil. She also acknowledges the large role slave labor played in the extravagant gardens built by Washington, Jefferson, and Madison (although Washington wasn't afraid to roll up his sleeves and get his hands dirty), and looks at their different attitudes towards

slavery. But overall, this is a fascinating look at their thoughts toward gardening and farming, and shows very convincingly just how fascinated they were in working with the soil. And it gives an interesting and more full perspective on *who* they were as people - beyond all their other accomplishments.

I ordered the Kindle edition of this book after hearing a recommendation on NPR's Science Friday broadcast a couple of weeks ago. I could not put it down, and I finished it in less than two days. I have an interest in both major subject areas covered here -- Colonial/Revolutionary American History and horticultural history. I learned a great deal about the role agriculture and horticulture played in our early history and in the lives of the founders. What Wulf has done so expertly is to explain the role of land stewardship, plant husbandry, and even environmentalism in the lives of the founders. It is interesting how these values often superseded their political ambitions and dogma.

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