

John Adams, Farmer and Gardener

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The "Old House," the Adamses' home in Quincy, Massachusetts, painted by E. Malcom, ca 1798.

The role that gardens played in the private lives of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson is well documented, but less is known about the gardening interests and activities of our second president, John Adams. Like most Americans of his time, John Adams began life with the heart of a farmer rather than a gardener, but in the course of traveling in the United States and in Europe he developed an appreciation of ornamental gardens that inspired efforts to imitate many of their features

at his own home. Adams had no influence on the White House garden, however; he spent only four months there, as its first occupant, from November to March of 1800–1801, and had time only to ask that a vegetable garden be planted before his failure to win reelection forced him to return to Massachusetts.

John Adams' childhood was spent hunting, fishing, and exploring the wilds of what is now called Quincy, south of Boston. He loved his family farm, and the influence of his early expe-



The unfinished Signing of the Treaty of Paris, 1783, by Benjamin West. The artist began with portraits (left to right) of John Jay, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Henry Laurens, and William Temple Franklin. However, the British commissioners refused to pose.

riences in the outdoors stayed with him throughout his life. Early in his working life he wrote for the *Boston Gazette* and *Boston Evening Post* as “Humphrey Ploughjogger,” extolling the virtues of the farming life and urging the cultivation of hemp, *Cannabis sativa* (marijuana), for the manufacture of cordage and cloth; high on the list of actions he wanted Congress to take in 1771 was promoting hemp for use in making duck.¹ He also referred to hemp’s mind-altering capability, writing, as Ploughjogger: “Seems to me if grate Men dont leeve off writing Pollyticks, breaking Heads, boxing Ears, ringing Noses and kicking Breeches, we shall by and by want a world of Hemp more for our own consumshon.”² He described hemp’s culture in great detail, explaining how to propagate it, how to treat the seed, and how to harvest the mature plant.³

As a farmer, Adams was naturally interested in increasing the fertility of his land, and theories about compost pepper his letters. (He shared this interest with George Washington, who recorded his experiments with compost over

more than thirty years.) In 1771 he wrote a recipe for compost that would delight organic gardeners today. Ingredients include “20 loads of sea weed, i.e. Eel Grass, and 20 Loads of Marsh Mud, and what dead ashes I can get from the Potash Works and what Dung I can get from Boston, and What Rock Weed from Nat. Belcher or else where.” This mixture, combined with livestock waste, weeds, and kitchen scraps “in the Course of a Year would make a great Quantity of Choice manure.”⁴ In a letter to his wife Abigail during one of his many absences over the years, he wrote that he was leaving the farm’s management to her good judgment and the advice of those working for the family, but instructed her to “Manure in hills if you think best, but manure your barley ground and harrow it well.”⁵

As the Revolution wore on into the late 1770s, Adams was appointed to a variety of consular posts in Europe. Taking a break from his duties in London in 1786, he took a walk, inspecting on the way a piece of land belonging to a “cow keeper.” “These Plotts are plentifully manured,” he wrote in his diary. “There are on the side of the Way, several heaps of Manure, an hundred Loads perhaps in each heap. I have carefully examined them. This may be good manure, but is not equal to mine.” In France he went twice to see the gardens of the writer Boileau, which he estimated to be five or six acres in size. “It is full of Flowers and of Roots and Vegetables of all Kinds, and of Fruits. Grapes of several sorts and of excellent Quality. Pears, Peaches, etc. but every Thing suffers for want of Manure.”⁶

Separations were many and long in the lives of Abigail and John Adams, and we’ve profited from those separations in their diaries and letters. Nonetheless, John could not always find time to write as often as he—and Abigail—would have liked, and she often complained about it. His answer to one such complaint bespoke his sense of priorities: “Suppose I should undertake to write the Description of every Castle and Garden I see as Richardson



COURTESY OF MOUNT VERNON LAUREL ASSOCIATION

The East Front of Mount Vernon painted by Edward Savage, ca 1792 The ha-ha built by George Washington is marked by the brick wall that cuts across the lawn in the foreground Adams may have learned about this garden feature from Washington

did in his Tour through Great Britain, would not yoo blush at such a Waste of my time."⁷ But Adams did enjoy his garden visits and wrote approvingly of the ornamental "pleasure grounds" of England and France.

Remarking on a French garden, he wrote: "The Shade, the Walks, the Trees, are the most charming that I have seen." In another garden, seeing a collection of rocks that "[had been drawn] together at vast Expense," Adams offered to sell the owner "1000 times as many for half a Guinea" from his fields in New England. (This humorous comment was no mere jest, since the hills of Quincy were at that time a major source of granite for construction in Massachusetts.) Visiting an ornate castle garden, complete with grottoes and water spouts, Adams took delighted interest in the fish ponds, where carp and swans swam over to be fed. "Whistle or throw a Bit of Bread into the water, and hundreds of Carps, large and fat as butter, will be seen swimming near the top of the water towards you . . . Some of them then will thrust up their Mouths to the Surface, and gape at you like young birds in a Nest to their Parents for Food."⁸

From time to time, however, these European gardens aroused the moralist in Adams. While on an excursion outside London with Thomas Jefferson, he was charmed by the greenness and the bird songs of Osterley, the Middlesex country house of Robert Child, but he remarked that these country homes were "not enjoyed by the owners . . . They are mere Ostentations of Vanity." He felt that the English "temples to Bacchus and Venus are quite unnecessary as mankind have no need of artificial Incitements," and hoped that English-style gardens would never become fashionable in America because "Nature has done greater Things."⁹

Nevertheless, back home in 1796 he succumbed to his own desire for "ostentation of vanity" by installing in Quincy a feature popular in England at the time, the ha-ha.¹⁰ Used to create the effect of a long vista uninterrupted by fencing, with livestock grazing peacefully in the distance, the ha-ha is a banked ditch, five or six feet wide and five to seven feet deep. The higher bank of the ditch, closest to the house, is supported by a wall of planking or masonry and conceals a fence that keeps the cattle and sheep away while giving the impression that they can

wander freely onto the house lawn. Perhaps Adams learned about the ha-ha from George Washington, who had one built at Mount Vernon. Ha-ha's can still be seen today in Virginia horse country.

Adams seems to have overcome his moral objections to English garden fashion during the years he spent in Philadelphia serving as vice president (1789–1797). There, he and Mrs. Adams leased a small house from William Hamilton, a wealthy man of property whose large estate, The Woodlands, was laid out in the “natural” English manner and planted with unusual native and exotic trees and shrubs. Yet even during this period, Adams remained a farmer at heart. He shared his interest in soil improvement with John Rutherford, the U.S. senator from New Jersey, who told him all about lime, which “dissolves all vegetable Substances, such as Leaves, Straws, Stalks, Weeds, and converts them into an immediate food for vegetables. It kills the Eggs of Worms and Seeds of Weeds. The best method is to spread it in your Barn Yard among the Straw and Dun,” and added a warning: “The German farmers say that Lime makes the father rich, but the Grandson poor i.e. exhausts the Land.”¹¹

John Adams did not have the passionate interest in large trees that was to provide the focus of garden-building for his son John Quincy. On the Quincy farm, Adams’ practice was to trim or remove trees to keep the land open for crops and livestock, and he appreciated trees mainly for their economic value. Writing in his diary about a grove of red cedars, he noted that the “prunings would be good browse for Cattle in Winter and good fuel when the Cattle have picked off all they will eat.”¹²

Adams nevertheless was very observant of trees during his travels and often commented on them in his letters and diaries. When he stayed at The Hide in Middlesex while in England in 1786, Adams noted that the grounds “are full of rare Shrubbs and trees, to which Collection America has furnished her full Share, [including] Larches, Cypruses, Laurells.”¹³ Abigail, who had joined him on this visit, wrote in a letter that their host “called his tall cypress General Washington and another by its side Colonel Smith as his aide-de-camp.”¹⁴

Adams remarked on the lack of trees everywhere in France but in the parks. To him, a “country of vineyards without trees . . . has always [seemed] to me an appearance of poverty.”¹⁵ American forests impressed him both as signs of the richness of nature and as an economic resource. While riding the circuit in coastal Maine as a young lawyer in 1765, he noted with wonder “all the varieties of the Fir, i.e., Pines, Hemlocks, Spruces, and Firs.” His description of a felled hemlock he found lying across a road evokes the vast forests of the East Coast that are now gone forever: “They had cutt out a logg as long as the road was wide. I measured the Butt at the Road and found it seven feet in Diameter, Twenty one feet in circumference. We measured 90 feet from the Road to the first Limb.” He estimated the tree to have been 130 feet tall.¹⁶

Although absent from Quincy for most of his working life, Adams kept his emotional roots firmly planted there. In 1787 he and Abigail purchased the Old House in Quincy, where, following his defeat in 1801 for a second presidential term, he would spend the remainder of his life. In January 1794 he wrote: “I begin now to think all time lost that is not employed in farming; innocent, healthy, gay, elegant amusement! Enchanting employment! How my imagination roves over my rocky mountains, and through my brushy meadows.”¹⁷ Three years later, miserable with a cold and sounding like quite the gentleman farmer, he wrote: “Oh! My poor meadow and wall, etc. etc., etc. It would do me good like a medicine to see [my gardener] one hour at any sort of work.”¹⁸

Naming a garden has always been a fashionable custom. In 1796, at the end of a gloriously happy summer in Quincy, John Adams proposed to name the land around the Old House “Peacefield,” for the sense of peace he enjoyed there, but also in commemoration of the peace he had helped to win for his country in 1783 and to preserve for the thirteen years following.¹⁹ However, upon his unhappy return in 1801 he instead called the property “Stony Field, Quincy,” an appropriate name given the rocky soil of the area. After he and Thomas Jefferson had mended their broken relationship in 1812, he jokingly began referring to his property as



A modern view of the "Old House" in the Adams National Historical Park maintained by the U.S. National Park Service.

"Montezillo," which he translated as "Little Hill" in contrast to the "Little Mountain," Jefferson's Monticello. (The distinction is purely fanciful, of course. The root in both cases is "monte," meaning either hill or mountain in both Spanish and Italian.) Today the property is called the Old House and is part of the Adams National Historical Park maintained by the U.S. National Park Service.

However much their land may have been a working farm with fields and orchards, John and Abigail Adams enjoyed having ornamental plants near the house. When they purchased the Old House, long triangular beds to the southeast were bordered with low hedges of *Buxus sempervirens* (common boxwood) and planted with fruit trees. These boxwood-lined beds exist today, though their plantings were changed from trees to perennials by succeeding generations of Adamses. After 1800, Adams planted one or two specimens of horse chestnut in front of the house.²⁰ We must assume they were the European horse chestnut, *Aesculus*

hippocastanum, which came to the United States via England in 1741. In 1821 those horse chestnuts shaded the two hundred West Point cadets who rested on the grass after their seven-mile march from Boston, while the 86-year-old former president addressed them from the porch of the Old House.²¹

Some of the ornamentals from the time of John and Abigail Adams still exist today at the Old House. According to family lore, the clump of *Magnolia virginiana* (sweet bay magnolia) next to the front wall was planted by Abigail.²² A black willow, *Salix nigra*, grows at the very edge of the property, close to where the Furnace Brook runs. Because of its age, and because black willows persist from rootstock, it is highly probable that this very tree is the one Abigail mentioned in a letter to her sister on April 7, 1800: "The verdure of the feilds

[sic] and the bursting of the Buds, with the foilage of the weeping willow, which you have heard me admire and which is the first tree to vegetate in the spring, all remind me of Quincy, my building, my Garden."²³ In a later letter she remarked on the "gracefulness of its slender branches which float and wave to every breeze."²⁴

The white York rose, *Rosa x alba*, which Abigail Adams brought back from England in 1788, still grows at the Old House from cuttings propagated over the years. A European rose known from at least the sixteenth century, it is seldom seen in gardens today, but in 1917, the Arnold Arboretum's first director, Charles Sprague Sargent, wrote of his plans to propagate it for Mount Vernon. He considered it "a very appropriate plant for the Mount Vernon garden both historically and because Washington might very well have had it in his garden."²⁵

Other plants that John and Abigail enjoyed do not survive. Writing to his granddaughter's husband in 1817 regarding a gift the couple had made to him, Adams observed: "You would be

pleased to see the pritty Figure your Peach Trees and Cherry Trees make in my Garden. Their buds are at least a fortnight more forward than any of our native Trees. I hope you will contrive to come and see them next fall. Be sure and bring the Sprightly Elizabeth with you. Tell her never to forget how her great grandfather smoked his Segar."²⁶ The peach and cherry trees are gone, but the "sprightly" Elizabeth is remembered as the wife of Andrew Jackson Downing, the nurseryman and landscape gardening theorist.

Certainly Adams was no landscape gardener on the scale or with the intensity of George Washington or Thomas Jefferson; the ha-ha was his first and last gesture toward "ostentation of vanity." Perhaps with greater means he would have done more, as Abigail suggested in a letter, saying "he cannot indulge himself in those improvements upon his farm, which his inclination leads him to, and which would serve to amuse him, and contribute to his health."²⁷ Still, his farmer's heart and his creative intellect come together in an observation that remains true to this very day. In a letter to Abigail he muses, "Mr. Madison is to retire [from Congress]. It seems the mode of becoming great is to retire. Madison, I suppose, after a retirement of a few years, is to be President or Vice President . . . It is marvellous how political plants grow in the shade. Continual daylight and sunshine show our faults and record them. Our persons, voices, clothes, gait, air, sentiments, etc. all become familiar to every eye and ear and understanding, and they diminish in proportion, upon the same principle that no man is a hero to his wife or valet de chambre."²⁸

Endnotes

- ¹ John Adams, *Diary and Autobiography of Adams*, ed. L. H. Butterfield (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), 2:234
- ² "Humphrey Ploughjogger," in *Boston Evening Post* June 20, 1763, copy in Massachusetts History Society, Boston.
- ³ Adams, *Diary and Autobiography*, 1:249.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:49.
- ⁵ John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 3, 1794, *Letters of John Adams Addressed to His Wife*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Charles Little and James Brown, 1841), 2:151.
- ⁶ Adams, *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:194; 3:146.

- ⁷ John Adams to Abigail Adams February 26, 1779, *The Book of Abigail and John Selected Letters of the Adams Family 1762-1784*, ed. L. H. Butterfield, M. Friedlaender, and Mary-Jo Kline (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 241.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:316; 2:314; 3:35.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 3:189; 3:186.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:231.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 2:88.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 3:197.
- ¹⁴ Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams, September 27, 1786, *Letters of Mrs Adams, The Wife of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Charles C Little and James Brown, 1840), 2:154.
- ¹⁵ Adams, *Diary and Autobiography*, 4:40.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:281.
- ¹⁷ *Letters of John Adams Addressed to His Wife*, ed. Adams, 2:139.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:251.
- ¹⁹ Adams, *Diary and Autobiography*, 3:247.
- ²⁰ Helen Nelson Skeen, "Documentary Narrative of Buildings Shown on Historic Base Map of the Adams National Historic Site," report prepared for the National Park Service (1964), 51
- ²¹ Josiah Quincy, *Figures of the Past* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1926), 77-78.
- ²² Skeen, 58
- ²³ Abigail Adams to her sister Mary Cranch, Philadelphia, April 7, 1800, *New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801*, ed. Stewart Mitchell (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), 244.
- ²⁴ Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, Philadelphia, April 16, 1800, Adams Papers, microfilm edition, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, reel 391
- ²⁵ Charles Sprague Sargent to Miss Comegys, July 9, 1917, Archives of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Mount Vernon, Virginia.
- ²⁶ John Adams to his granddaughter's husband, John P. DeWint, May 1, 1817, Cedar Grove, near Fishkill, N.Y., John Adams Letter Book, Adams Papers, reel 123.
- ²⁷ Abigail Adams to Thomas Boylston Adams, November 13, 1800, *Letters of Mrs Adams*, 2:237.
- ²⁸ John Adams to Abigail Adams, January 14, 1797, *Letters of John Adams Addressed to His Wife*, 2:240.

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