

Jefferson Plants in the White House Kitchen

by Peter Hatch - March 24, 2011



(<http://www.monticello.org/sites/default/files/uploaded-content-images/peterhatchOI.jpg>).

Michelle Obama declared in 2010 that the White House kitchen garden “has been one of the greatest things I’ve done in my life so far.” The garden is a central feature of the first lady’s “Let’s Move (<http://www.letsmove.gov/>),” initiative to create healthier American children by combating childhood obesity, improving school lunch programs, and introducing children to the joys of gardening and fresh vegetable cuisine. Her campaign to support Wal-Mart’s move to healthier food selections, rally behind local farmer’s markets, and send the White House chefs to elementary schools are also part of this far-reaching initiative.

The first lady began planning the garden during her husband’s campaign for the Presidency, and in 2009, Sam Kass, Coordinator of the White House Food Initiative, was placed in charge of it. Kass, the Obama family chef when they lived in Chicago, called me one day and pronounced the Monticello garden “the most beautiful garden I’ve ever seen.” He visited Monticello on April 4, 2009 and returned to Washington with plants of Jefferson’s favorite vegetables and plans to reserve a discrete section of the White House garden in honor of Thomas Jefferson. The seeds and plants included Tennis-ball and Brown Dutch lettuce, Prickly-seeded spinach, Choux de Milan cabbage, Green Globe Artichoke, and Marseilles fig.



White House executive pastry chef William Yosses, described by President Obama as the “crust master,” began overseeing the Washington garden along with Kass and also visited Monticello before the fall planting season. He returned with Monticello seeds and plants of cool weather vegetables to plant a fall garden. Interviewed by a Charlottesville television news station, Yosses said “Monticello and Thomas Jefferson were an inspiration for us from the very beginning.” He added, “It’s really the soul of our garden here.” In 2010 Michelle Obama, after visiting Monticello with her children, echoed these sentiments, saying Monticello “is just incredibly beautiful, and that beautiful garden that he planted there is three times the size of anything that you’d ever do. It brings it to life, not just for my kids but for me.”



Sam and Bill invited me to participate in planting the White House garden in April, 2010, and then again last week, on March, 16. I joined schoolchildren, the White House chefs and gardeners, and Mrs. Obama – all witnessed by a crowd of journalists who cover the White House—on a cool spring afternoon. The garden had been reorganized over the winter, and it was tidily organized with some thirty raised beds, most reserved for a specific crop. The garden was much improved over last year with its raised beds,

improved soil, and new design. The soil was remarkable – it smelled good, the earthworms were everywhere, and it was humus rich and friable. If you judge a civilization by its soil, then, by the standards of the White House kitchen garden, we're making real progress.

The gardeners and chefs organized the ceremonial planting by carefully setting out potted seedlings of cool weather vegetables – lettuce, spinach, Swiss chard, cauliflower – for the schoolkids, fourth and fifth graders from Bancroft Elementary and Tubman Elementary – to do the actual planting.

Michelle Obama arrived after all the plants had been set out, and she talked to the kids about her Let's Move initiative and the goodness of gardening and fresh produce. She'd say, "Let's hear it for spinach," and the kids, sitting at picnic tables covered with baskets of apples and red checkered tablecloths, would all cheer. The kids then moved into the garden and, with the help of Mrs. Obama, the chefs and gardeners, planted the various beds over the next hour. The two schoolchildren assigned to me and Lisa Stites, Monticello's marketing and communications specialist, Shiva and Téah, were great kids, knowledgeable about both planting vegetables and eating them too. I told them many times they could work for me at Monticello.

<https://monticello-www.s3.amazonaws.com/files/old/uploaded-content-images/peterhatch04.jpg>
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I loved the kids. In the Jefferson section we talked about his spring contests with friends to see who harvested the first pea – the winner then hosting a dinner for the losers. We talked about Jefferson's neighbors at Poplar Forest bringing him peas when he visited from Monticello – peas were to Jefferson like jelly beans were to Ronald Reagan. We talked about Jefferson's advice to sow a thimble full of lettuce every Monday morning from Feb 1 to Sept 1 as a life lesson. I challenged Bill Yosses to a pea contest, but when I told him that the winner had to host the dinner he may have had second thoughts.

We planted two beds devoted to Thomas Jefferson with about 50 Tennis-ball lettuce plants, 50 Brown Dutch lettuce plants, two rows of peas, 10 Brussels sprouts, 7 French artichokes, 40 plants of kale, and 40 beet plants. Mrs. Obama had told the kids how beets were a touchy subject at the family table because her husband does not like them, so planting them, of course, satisfied the "subversive" side of my character.

With all the tumult in the world today – revolution and strife in Africa, nuclear meltdown in Japan, political polarization at home – what an experience to go to the White House, the center of the western world, and plant vegetables with school children. What an affirmation of faith in the human condition to do something so elemental and so hopeful. In so many ways, Thomas Jefferson was first in food, first in wine, and first in gardening, and to bring his gardens and plants to the White House kitchen garden was a profound and moving experience.

More Links:

Read the First Lady's remarks (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/16/remarks-first-lady-white-house-kitchen-garden-planting>), from the White House Kitchen Garden Planting Watch the ceremony (<http://blogs.abcnews.com/thenote/2011/03/planting-season-michelle-obama-gets-the-white-house-garden-ready-for-spring.html>), on ABCnews.com Michelle Obama to write a book (<http://finance.yahoo.com/news/First-lady-to-write-book-apf-4267644666.html?x=o&.v=1>), about White House Kitchen Garden

[BRINGING HISTORY FORWARD \(HTTPS://WWW.MONTICELLO.ORG/EXHIBITS-EVENTS/BLOG/?CATEGORY=BRINGING-HISTORY-FORWARD\)](https://www.monticello.org/exhibits-events/blog/?category=bringing-history-forward)

[GARDENS, GROUNDS, AND AGRICULTURE \(HTTPS://WWW.MONTICELLO.ORG/EXHIBITS-EVENTS/BLOG/?CATEGORY=GARDENS-GROUNDS-AND-AGRICULTURE\)](https://www.monticello.org/exhibits-events/blog/?category=gardens-grounds-and-agriculture)

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