

Geddy Garden News

I'm looking at a bright red Christmas amaryllis boldly blooming on my desk. A favorite Victorian hybrid from the Hippeastrum family, this baroque flower is kept indoors in cold winters and blooms easily with a minimum of care. Once it begins to grow, it shoots up rapidly and blossoms. It will be ready to bloom again in six to eight weeks after the bulb lies dormant in a cool, dark place. This bold reminder of spring adds color and warmth to our cold winter days.

My garden plans have been taking form. I have been reading and preparing for planting my kitchen garden. I am anxious to try some new plants and plan to increase the size of the patch. "Work to be done in February" was an important chapter to be read in a garden calendar in the past. Today we often read magazine articles or "how to" books to learn the correct methods of gardening. In James Geddy's time, English garden books would have informed the colonists of what, when, and how to plant in their kitchen garden.

The Compleat Gardener, by Jean-Baptist de la Quintinge, was an excellent resource book. He was a lawyer, botanist, garden writer, and head gardener, who designed the royal kitchen garden for Louis XIV at Versailles. Since the Versailles gardens influenced the gardens of the world, the book was read and respected by men of the soil. The author was an authority on fruit and vegetable gardening and in his book he shared his knowledge, combining practicality with pleasure.

For February de la Quintyne suggests working the soil and manuring, pruning trees, and preparing for the warmer month of March. A description of seeds might have influenced the colonists to try planting something new and foreign to them. Experimentation in gardening was going on throughout Virginia and it was of great importance to know the proper methods.

Thomas Jefferson's Garden Kalendar related how in February he spent his days doing much of his planning. He mentions ordering fruit trees and strawberries in February; sowing marrow fat and Hotsphur Peas; planting carrots and salsify; transplanting cucumber and lettuce; dressing and replanting his asparagus; and doing maintenance work such as making paths and top dressing dung for spring planting.

On this Presidents' Day weekend it seems appropriate to recall the father of our country. George Washington was a Virginia farmer. His birthplace was at the tidal creek known as Popes Creek. The small brick house, which was later renamed "Wakefield," probably after Oliver Goldsmith's book, The Vicar of Wakefield, was accidentally destroyed by fire. The fire was believed to have taken place on Christmas Day in 1779, long after George and his family had moved from there.

Washington was born on February 11 (Old Style), 1732. In 1752 Great Britain adopted the Gregorian calendar in place of the old style Julian calendar, and his birthdate changed to February 22 under the "New Style."

George and his parents lived on the Wakefield farm until November 1735 when George was 3½ years old. After that, there were several moves for the Washington family, all on farmlands owned by the family. It was probably this rural background of his childhood that contributed to his fervent love of farming. The environment led him to love the outdoors; the farming of wheat, tobacco, and corn was instilled in him at an early age. As a child he probably wandered in the nearby forest and hunted and fished. Near the old ruins of his birthplace there still remain some old apple trees which were probably part of the original orchard that George knew in his boyhood. George's elder half brother, Augustine Jr., later built a house on that property, where George made frequent and extended visits.

The happy experience of farming the land must have left a permanent impression on the forming of George's character. Like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, who also became presidents of our country, George Washington was an outstanding farmer who recognized the value of the soil and realized that crops should be rotated. He experimented with new growing techniques, new crops and fertilizers, and was involved with sharing new information through correspondence with other planters like himself, including Mr. Jefferson.

Though remembered most for his great roles in military and political life, he said at age 57, "All I desire now is to settle down at Mt. Vernon and live and die an honest man on my own farm." An appropriate epitaph is inscribed on the sundial in the herb garden at Wakefield, the site of his birth. It reads

*" A place of rose and thyme
and scented earth,
A place the world forgot,
But here a matchless
flower came to birth,
Time paused and blessed
the spot."*

Janet Guthrie