

Our Patriot Gardeners

As we trace our fingers over the borders of the thirteen colonies on old maps, we may find it surprising how small this nation was in the beginning, compared to the extensive present. Realizing that a haphazard coalition of 13 dissimilar states was not an adequate base for a nation, delegates from 11 of the 13 states met in Philadelphia on May 13, 1787. Rhode Island refused to send a delegate and New Hampshire could not afford the travel expenses.

Exuberant crowds lined the streets to welcome George Washington who became the presiding president: it had been a rocky five-day carriage ride from Mount Vernon. Even the certainty that their Articles of Confederation were inadequate did not make replacing them with a Constitution a bit easier. Each of the states clung to their own version of tariffs and duties with the union having no real power in regard to taxes or foreign affairs.

The delegates did not take their responsibilities lightly. James Madison, for example, had studied the trunkloads of books that had been sent to him from Thomas Jefferson in Paris, and John Adams in London. The latter statesmen could not attend, but they maintained a vital interest and input!

Differing priorities made the four months a tenuous undertaking: the 55 delegates varied in age from 26 to Ben Franklin's 81, more than half were farmers, some were highly educated, others had no formal education but they were united in their belief that they had to hang together or fail and that agriculture was essential to a virtuous, independent, and hard-working nation.

There was an abundance of advice, a paucity of agreement. One breakthrough finally came after a daylong excursion to the Bartram garden near Philadelphia. Starting at daybreak July 14 a group of delegates from Virginia, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina and Massachusetts descended on the nursery George Washington had often visited (and ordered hundreds of trees from). The nursery contained the nation's most comprehensive collection of native trees and shrubs. Spending the day together in a beautiful place is accredited with the agreement that followed their return to the convention, the 'Great Compromise' that set up the bicameral legislature.

It could be said that these early patriots forged friendships over plants that were strong enough to survive differences over policy. In 1786 Thomas Jefferson was the American Minister to France and the American Minister to England, John Adams, had asked him to come to London to assist with trade negotiations. The two friends were not immediately successful and as the problems dragged on Jefferson left London on a spring garden tour. So enchanted by what he saw, he returned with Adams after their efforts on trade broke down. Adams's modest 40 acres in Braintree, Ma. and his work as a lawyer did not provide for more than an orchard and kitchen garden. However, as a farmer at heart he had a passion for the beauty of his garden. In his words, his life in politics was the result of "zeal at my Heart, for my country".

Today's gardeners will be encouraged to know that these patriot gardeners were often failures as gardeners. Jefferson failed in his efforts to produce maple sugar after planting sugar maples at Monticello. He had been enthusiastic about what he had seen in his tour of New York and Vermont with Madison and thought the United States should not be dependent upon the British West Indies for sugar.

A huge proportion of George Washington's trees died which launched him into a study of manure and seaweed as amendments. Although Washington, Jefferson, and Madison had expansive acres and robust plans and Adams was on familiar terms with every tree in his orchard, it is not their skill as gardeners that is the reason we emulate them. They have won our

regard because of the study and effort they made to see that agriculture became an essential component of the nation they nurtured. In our era we need to protect farms and promote farming for our country's continued security: we need to borrow their vision, their ability to think long range, to look past the distractions of the problems underfoot.

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