

BEN FRANKLIN SOCIETY  
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# Peggy McGhee's Colonial Kitchen Garden

Progress Report: 2012-2014  
339 Long Mill Road  
Franklinton, North Carolina

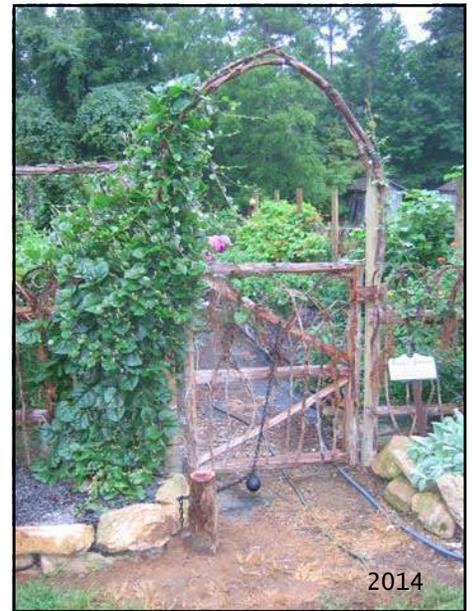


## “Sowing Seeds, Growing History”

BY MARION BLACKBURN

### BEN FRANKLIN SOCIETY Project Perspective

A SUSTAINABLE COLONIAL-ERA KITCHEN GARDEN GROWS IN FRANKLIN COUNTY WHERE IT PROVIDES HERBS, FOODS, FLOWERS AND A GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST. NOW, AS THEN, THE GARDEN BRINGS FLAVOR, FOOD, HEALING, AND BEAUTY TO DOMESTIC LIFE.



The delightful smells - of thyme, lavender, and mint, blooming marigolds and pea vines - drift upward from the garden just outside the kitchen. With its tangy bite, thyme will be used to temper meats; sweet lavender refreshes the house; and for healing, fresh mint. Nearby marigolds provide tender leaves, while beans, eaten fresh in summer, dry into leathery pods that can be cooked, with fat, in winter. These herbs and vegetables were staples for Colonists, who grew them for cooking, for medicine, and for sustenance. A thriving kitchen garden was a welcome sight, but those tastes and smells were a necessary part of the household. Life in the New World included great hardship and loss, and the flavors and beauty reminded Colonists of their homes far away. In a Colonial kitchen garden, Old World plants grew beside native ones creating complex beds of color and purpose.

Whether it was European Colonists who carried seeds, roots, and cuttings, or the African American slaves who brought food preparation and cooking methods that were adopted by others, these



memories and plants recreated the smells, tastes, and customs of home. Most settlers brought these reminders with them.

In Franklin County, you'll find such a garden, sitting - where else - behind a Colonial kitchen. The garden is taking shape just outside Peggy McGhee's back door, and will provide ingredients for the period recipes and dishes she creates at her stone hearth. The garden was planted by volunteers from the Ben Franklin Society and is tended by members who don't mind a little dirty work in the name of history.

"The pioneer kitchen garden was designed to have everything nearby and convenient," says Kerry Carter, a master gardener and professional preservation architect, who helped bring the Franklin County Colonial Garden to life. Traditionally these gardens functioned as grocery store and pharmacy "just outside the kitchen door. Anything that could not be gleaned from the woods had to be grown in the garden. On the plantation, and on farms, it had everything they needed to make a meal that day."

This garden is based on historical sources to serve as a demonstration project while providing fresh, period-appropriate, ingredients for cooking. Because it preserves and displays Colonial culture, it is supported by the Ben



Franklin Society with volunteers and grant funding. This nonprofit in Franklin County spreads the values of its namesake - independence, determination, and

resourcefulness - with projects like the annual Colonial Hearth Educational Day at Peggy McGhee's farm, site of the Colonial garden and stone hearth. The organization conducts dining and music events through its BreadWorks program, as well as local-interest tours.

Not only does the garden capture an historic period, but it incorporates typical Franklin County life as well. Planners took steps to assure the garden's authenticity by reviewing documentation kept by Woodleaf Plantation owner Nicholas Bryar Massenburg from 1834 to 1851. Located two miles north of Louisburg, this plantation grew tobacco and cotton, and operated within a strong local network. About 20 slaves were held on the plantation as well. Massenburg's letters, journals, and other documents are housed in the Wilson Library at

the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. These documents provided information about Colonial living in the area, crops grown for sale, and farm life.

"We want to give the most authentic picture of how the pioneer family cooked and served their meals," says Carter, who is also a Ben Franklin Society board member. "They incorporated what was already here, and took lessons from the Native Americans." This garden represents a glimpse of a local, Franklin County garden, she adds, which would have been more basic than in wealthier towns such as Williamsburg or New Bern. "We have tried to focus on what might have been planted in this Piedmont area."

### CLOSE AT HAND

Kitchen gardens were often raised, rectangular beds narrow enough to be cultivated from either side. Larger food crops like corn grew farther away, and such gardens primarily contained items picked on the spot for a meal or to treat a wound. Although we know them as ornamentals today, lamb's ear (or bunny's ear) was used by Colonials as bandages because they helped to staunch bleeding and cover wounds, while marigolds and their greens, when young, were eaten and if dried were also used to treat wounds.



The gardener planted seeds or small plants into these raised beds, which often had stone or tree-trunk borders. Sometimes planted with fruit trees, these gardens were a family's primary resource for medicinal and food seasoning herbs, vegetables, and flowers, as well as the occasional plant source for fabric dyes.

Typically designed by, planted by, and tended by the pioneer wife and children, the early Colonial garden was adjacent to the house just outside the kitchen door. It was enclosed by simple fencing such as living hedges; wattle structures using small sticks woven horizontally between larger upright ones; or with tree branches and limbs lashed together along the perimeters. Whatever the form, the



goal was protecting plants from wind, flooding, or wildlife intrusion. Water was hauled to the garden from creeks, while soil cultivation, planting, tending, and harvesting was done by hand. In earliest Colonial times the soil was undisturbed and rich, but later required nourishment from animal waste such as rabbit pellets.

For early European settlers, successful farming meant life or death. Without the assistance of the Native Americans and their early, if troubled, alliances, it's unlikely settlers would have survived. Indeed, determining the right combination of native and European practices and plants made the difference between surviving or perishing. Although tobacco was the first major commercial crop, most homes had a kitchen garden, with herbs, greens, and root vegetables. Gardening and botany were considered part of a classical education, and with a diet heavy in meats, roots, and grains, these gardens provided culinary variety.

The pioneer wife, in addition to growing and preparing meals, also served as the family doctor. She grew, harvested, and preserved plants and herbs that were known to have medicinal uses, either cultivating them in the kitchen garden or culling them from the surrounding fields and woods. As a result, the Colonial garden evolved around these everyday domestic needs. Although many were beautiful, aesthetics were far less important than practicality.

### TRUE TO THE TIME

As summer drew to an end, the garden's second year looked promising, with moles and their smaller counterparts, voles, kept at bay, along with other predators. Volunteers used a slate soil amendment called PermaTill to discourage the critters and while it was not available to colonists, Carter reasons, in those days animal raiders may not have been such a problem. Since there were no paved roads, homes, or shopping malls, the creatures had more hunting territory. Nevertheless, volunteers strive for a largely historical project, which means simple implements and lots of digging. They purchased topsoil, but spread it a shovel at the time, Colonial style.

Horticultural consultant William Lord, a long-time panelist on North Carolina Public Television's "Almanac Gardener," helped shepherd the plantings. "I've been giving them advice on what to plant and when to plant," Lord says. Basing his recommendations on historic patterns, he also suggested items that would engage kids. For instance, Colonial carrots were purple – and that's how they'll grow in this garden, too, along with other colored carrot types.

For Colonists growing their own food, bad decisions or planning could be fatal. "Most people don't realize you have to plant ahead," he says. For instance, winter root crops like carrots, turnips, potatoes, will be ready to eat by late autumn – and will stay alive in the ground all winter – but you have to plant in summer. "The ground stays at 57 degrees, so if you protect the top they'll be OK," he says. Brussels sprouts and cabbage are also hearty through the winter.

These days, more people are growing their own vegetables and fruits – and finding, like Lord, this garden produce is unmatched for taste. "It doesn't take that much time, and the quality of the food is better than anything you can buy."

Another reward for garden volunteer Patricia Washburn is working with plants whose lineage dates beyond the Old World – to the ancient one. A long-time horticulture student and former volunteer at Duke Gardens, and member of the Herb Society of America, she says working with heirloom plants connects her to the past in a meaningful way.

"I love gardening, particularly the herbs," she says. "They are the same as they've always been for hundreds of years. When you talk about plants in the Bible, for instance, these plants are the same." Even roses have been hybridized, she adds, but herbs have stayed the same and their presence in a garden brings stories and lore, she adds. "Herbs have so much legend and folklore."

This link to the past affords this garden a special emphasis from the Ben Franklin Society. It sits outside McGhee's detached kitchen and hearth, crafted on a Colonial design near her cabin home. Inside are period implements, such as a bake kettle, slotted ladles, and tongs, collected over the years. School kids tour the kitchen as part of Colonial Hearth Day each autumn, and other visitors drop by as well. Very few historic sites have this combination, says Ben Franklin Society President Bob Radcliffe.

"Some places have a garden, some



have a hearth. But not many have them both together,” Radcliffe says. “Even fewer sites are doing cooking from a garden nearby. It is a living museum.” Colonial Williamsburg and Old Salem serve as models, he adds, and eventually the area could offer visits by appointment. It could be part of a larger tourist destination with nearby Louisburg, featuring grist mill sites, working farms, and other attractions. “It would tie food to history,” he says.

## THEN AND NOW

Three types of peas have blossomed - Pink Lady, named after Queen Elizabeth, for its vibrant color that evoked her use of rouge and white chalk; Mayflower bean that arrived on that famous ship; and Scarlet Runner (See adjacent photo), another bright bloomer. Malabar spinach is set to cover a new arch entrance and a bent-wood fence surrounds the garden. (See cover photo dated 2014)



“We got cedar right off the farm here,” McGhee says. An organic approach is working, too. “We’re real pleased that we have a good balance. We had some black aphids, but then we also had ladybugs. They say if you leave them alone they’ll get rid of them. They did.”

The foods, herbs, flowers, and fruits harvested will be shared, and since it’s largely a single-kitchen garden, they will mostly become ingredients in the McGhee’s hearth cooking. A collector of Colonial cooking tools, McGhee has also plumbed historic cookbooks for authentic recipes. The garden will allow her to complete demonstration meals from start to finish.

“I like to cook - I even canned some of the green beans last year,” she says. The plantings include lettuce and spinach this year. “This garden is small so there’s not a lot of surplus.” She says a kitchen garden would be near the house for common items used daily, while the larger and bulk food sources were grown farther away. Corn - a mainstay of American life shared with settlers by the Native Americans who depended on it were field planted in rows. Popcorn was among the varieties, with its small ears and kernels that exploded in heat and enjoyed as a treat, cooked in meals, or included with soups.



“Corn is one of the few indigenous crops,” Indeed, she says, “Popcorn was one of the first crops. The ears are much smaller, about the size of a tennis ball, with tiny kernels.” When the ears ripen in the kitchen garden, she’ll be ready. “I can’t wait for them to pop.”

Not only is the garden useful for cooking, for food, and for medicine, but it’s also providing joy, color, and fascination for McGhee and her visitors. Thyme, sage, lavender, borage, chives, planted last year, survived the winter and are producing fragrant cuttings.

“Last year we had lots of butterflies,” McGhee says. “We’re planting some of the old decorative plants they used - yarrow is used or tea - they used it to color thread - it’s a beautiful dark yellow that gives a beautiful color to wool or flax.”

## COLONIAL GARDENING AND COOKBOOK RESOURCES

1747 *The Art of Cookery, Made Plain and Easy*  
by Hannah Glasse

1819 *The Practical American Gardener*  
by F. Lucas, Jr.

1824 *Virginia Housewife Or, Methodical Cook.*  
by Mary Randolph

1828 *The American Frugal Housewife*  
by Lydia M. Child

1834 *Massenburg Plantation Journals*  
by Nicholas B. Massenburg

*Old Salem Museum and Gardens*  
WWW.OLDSALEM.ORG

*Southern Garden History Society*  
WWW.SOUTHERNGARDENHISTORY.ORG

*Tar River Center for History and Culture*  
WWW.LOUISBURG.EDU/TARRIVERCENTER

The **Ben Franklin Society** was incorporated in 2008 as a non-profit agency dedicated to discover and advocate for the overlooked resources of Franklin County. The society serves Benjamin Franklin’s own ideal and strives to find practice solutions to real problems.

Ben Franklin Society dining and entertainment events are hosted by the Franklin BreadWorks - the fundraising arm of the Society. Both are located at Radcliffe’s Lynch Creek Farm where an authentic log cabin serves as the Society’s headquarters and picnic grounds. The Society receives United Way funding and sponsorship from Novozymes, N.A. with corporate offices in nearby Franklinton.

Ben Franklin Society membership starts at \$5, with no charge for students. Members receive quarterly updates and may bring guests to monthly BreadWorks events. For more information about the Society, browse [WWW.BENFRANKLINSOCIETYNC.ORG](http://WWW.BENFRANKLINSOCIETYNC.ORG)

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