

*Jefferson's Gardens: A Landscape of Opportunities*  
*Instructions for the Unit*



Photo: Darla Gerlach, EdD



*Overview of the Project*

*“No occupation is so delightful to me as the culture of the earth, and no culture comparable to that of the garden.” Thomas Jefferson to Charles Wilson Peale, Poplar Forest, August 20, 1811*

Thomas Jefferson’s passion for gardening transcended through various languages, cultural beliefs and political concepts. Gardening was a common thread that was interwoven in many facets of his life: dinner conversations at his home in Monticello, his travels abroad, written correspondence, his acquaintances in his home state of Virginia, family members and neighbors. Jefferson incorporated many different varieties of plants from various places in the world as well as many diverse locations within the United States into his Monticello estate. Jefferson was a cultivator not only of the land but a cultivator of knowledge through his botanical experiments.

In this unit, we explore Jefferson’s appreciation for nature and the opportunities he envisioned for learning about and using plants in our daily lives. We also listen to the voices of those individuals working at Monticello today, the “keepers of Jefferson’s vision”; those who carry on the legacy of Jefferson’s passion for gardening, its relevancy in our lives today and in the future,

and his ideals of exploring and preserving our environment to sustain mankind. This project, *Jefferson's Gardens: A Landscape of Opportunities* involves the development of a project-based learning lesson in which detailed information is given to educators to replicate the gardening concepts at Monticello and Thomas Jefferson's work ethic in the gardens' completion. By researching the architecture and function of Monticello's gardens as well as the origin and placement of indigenous plants, trees and shrubs in the area including growth pattern of species; how species of plants and trees were a part of individuals' lives throughout history; experimentation involved in plant growth; and the habitat required for local wildlife, students will gain a sense of the importance of preserving our environment and creating an aesthetic reflection of Jefferson's love of nature and its function in our daily lives today.

Students will be completing the project-based learning activities in a fashion similar to Thomas Jefferson's inquiry-based methods reflective of the Age of Enlightenment. Students are afforded the opportunity to explore self-constructed questions toward the development of a culminating project at the end of the unit comparable to Jefferson's application of creative and practical concepts in his landscape designs and various inventions.

Jefferson noted, "*An hour of conversation would be worth a volume of letters.*" (letter to John Adams, Monticello, April 8, 1816). Through my personal observations and interviews with the gardeners and staff at Monticello, it is evident that these folks maintain and preserve the historical gardens inspired by Jefferson's vision for aestheticism and functionality. They serve as mentors who cultivate the land, care for the plants, and share their expertise of gardening with others. Along with the author's experience in gardening, these individuals helped to develop the lesson plans for this unit and provide valuable insight into enriching projects for students.

This unit will be divided into four sections:

- ☞ Section 1: A Perpetuating Flower Garden
- ☞ Section 2: An Experimental Vegetable Garden
- ☞ Section 3: Jefferson: Creating Personal Space for Self-Reflection
- ☞ Section 4: The Art of Calligraphy

This unit is intended to be a long-term, project-based learning assignment with each section completed in coordination with the other sections. The instructor should present the entire unit to the students and in discussion with the students, determine a due date for the unit as a whole. The overall, multi-dimensional concept of the unit is for students to develop a sense of Thomas Jefferson's method of constructing time management, his organizational skills, his insatiable pursuit of knowledge, his passion for experimentation in the field of botany, his aesthetic and utilitarian tastes incorporated into landscape design known as *ferme ornee* (reference <http://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/attending-to-my-farmgardening>) and how he utilizes personal space within his homes for self-reflection and development of his own identity.

In project-based learning, students will be in charge of setting proximal and long-term goals for themselves in order to complete each portion (sections noted above) of the project (the unit). Students will be responsible for seeking and synthesizing information from resources to support the completion of each section and unit as a whole. The author of this project has developed a Photo Gallery of her experiences while visiting Monticello and Poplar Forest. The Photo Gallery serves as a photographic resource in combination with other resources for students to complete various products (i.e. a seed packet, an experiment, a petit-format book) outlined in the project and serve as a database of plant/tree species for future reference.

Instructors are encouraged to invite guest speakers to their classrooms to act as mentors to students as they complete their projects. The speakers could be botanists, members of garden clubs, living historians, gardeners at local nurseries and garden centers. The community library may also have information on individuals who are knowledgeable in plants and trees that can share their expertise and gardening skills with students. The guest speakers should work closely with instructors in planning the content of their presentations. This collaboration will ensure that the speakers' content enhances the students' social studies curriculum and knowledge they share about their field to reinforce concepts presented in class. They can also facilitate students' research and historical interpretation of pertinent information in their projects. Also, they serve as a "bridge" or link from events that happened in the past to the information that students are researching for their projects.

In addition, the author of this lesson has also shared her observations of plants in the form of *Notes and Sketches* (see Hand-out, "Notes and Sketches"). Students are encouraged to keep a journal containing similar notes and sketches and perhaps photos of plants, trees and landscapes which serve as a resource for students' projects and class discussions. It is also hoped that students will pose questions "along the way of their journey" similar to Jefferson's curiosity for learning about new things. In addition, throughout the project, they will be using Jefferson as a mentor – a constant thinker; self-reflecting his work and self-regulatory skills (time management skills, learning strategies, and goal-setting strategies).

Instructors are encouraged to use their own community environments to complete this project (i.e. their neighborhood, hometown or state).

As students complete their projects, it is hoped that they will seek assistance from the instructor, family members, individuals in the community and others who are involved with gardening to gather information for this project. As students are completing their research, it is hoped that they will assume the role of historians and utilize inquiry-based thinking to formulate questions about their newfound knowledge.

In this project-based learning experience, it is hoped that students become independent and creative thinkers to achieve their final products for the project:

☞ Section 1: Develop a seed package which contains seeds that the student collected. The package illustrates the student's understanding of the plant species and specific planting instructions.

☞ Section 2: Complete an experiment to observe the growth of radishes; engage in a class discussion to compare growing methods for a vegetable; engage in a Socratic Circle to discuss Jefferson's thoughts on climate change.

☞ Section 3: Construct a [petit-format book](#) that conveys the student's choice of topics—perhaps memorable gardening experiences; travel; a sport; a hobby; a particular character trait (i.e. leadership, courage); a poem reflecting nature; questions that they are asking themselves about their scientific observations similar to Jefferson's "Queries" he posed in his book, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787); or a story about Jefferson's pet bird, [a mockingbird](#). Through research, students will develop an understanding of Jefferson's dwellings at Monticello and Poplar Forest. Within these dwellings, the author observed various personal spaces that Jefferson could have intended as quiet, private places within his home and grounds where he could sit and reflect on matters that interested him.

☞ Section 4: Students will gain an appreciation of the beautiful art of handwriting that individuals completed during Jefferson's and other countrymen's eras. Through practice, students can apply their calligraphy skills to the finished products that they complete in Sections 1-3.

All of the sections within the project are inter-related; however, if the instructor desires to complete each section individually, that is suitable as well. The sections collectively provide students the opportunity to balance many facets of knowledge that Jefferson successfully attempted to fulfill in his lifetime. He continually sought to understand the "balance of nature" and looked forward to his retirement years when he could devote time to what he termed gardening as the "7<sup>th</sup> Fine Art—the art of embellishing grounds by fancy."

Completing a finished product in project-based learning involves students' effective use of time management, learning strategies and goal setting strategies. Please refer to suggested hand-outs to provide students as they complete this unit. Additional hand-outs for students to use to develop self-regulatory skills can be found in *Project-based Learning as a Facilitator of Self-regulation in a Middle School Curriculum* (Gerlach, 2008). At the completion of the unit, students can share their strategies that they developed to complete this project and reflect on how they can use this learning experience to complete goals for future short-term and/or long-term project-based learning assignments. Students can develop an awareness that this learning experience is similar to Jefferson's time-consuming experimentations with seeds and plants,

architectural concepts and many other interests he developed in his lifetime. Students can compare/contrast their experiences with Jefferson's and note the influence of the Age of Enlightenment during his lifetime.

As students are completing this project, it's important for them to understand Jefferson's ideas not only in the context of his era but how his thoughts expand into the future. In Jefferson's communication with others, he shared information; exchanged ideas and formulated botanical experiments and designs based on his conversations with others. Sociability particularly Southern hospitality was an integral component in his life. This tradition continues at Monticello today—inviting folks to share their ideas through their love of gardening and nature especially in the form of workshops. One particular holiday workshop conducted in December, wreath making, invites people to utilize natural resources to construct homemade wreaths. Lou Hatch, Instructor at Monticello, conducts the workshop and expresses that these gatherings foster fellowship and are a catalyst for discussion about gardening. She conveys her appreciation for our natural environment and the importance of exploration of plants and flower arranging by expressing to others that they should pursue an interest in nature by, “finding something that brings joy to you.”

Jefferson exemplifies his fondness of the holidays on his trip home from Paris in 1789; he expressed to his neighbors and others about the “spirit prevailing at Monticello on Christmas Day and on all other days” (Boyd, 1964):

“The testimony of esteem with which you are pleased to honour my return to my Native country fills me with gratitude and pleasure. While it shews that my absence has not lost me your friendly recollection, it holds out the comfortable hope that when the hour of retirement shall come, I shall again find myself amidst those with whom I have long lived, with whom I wish to live, and whose affection is the door thro' which I was ushered on the stage of public life; and while I have been led on thro' its' varying scenes, I could not be unmindful of those who assigned me my first part...”. (Thomas Jefferson, II. The Response, 12 February 1790).

The camaraderie that gardening creates is further expressed by Peter Hatch, Director of Monticello Gardens and Grounds:

“The gardens at Monticello hardly existed in a horticultural vacuum, but were

nourished generously by a society of gardeners, ‘brothers of the spade’ as Peter Collinson referred to his Williamsburg correspondent, John Custis, in 1735. We hope this spirit of the union of gardening and sociability continues to this day. At Monticello we aspire to share our gardens with the community: some of our programs include the popular Saturdays in the Garden series of natural history walks, lectures, and horticultural workshops, the Thomas Jefferson Parkway, the most visited park in central Virginia, and, of course, the Center for Historic Plants, our means of exchanging the plants of the past, and of Thomas Jefferson, with our ‘rational society’ of fellow gardeners.” (2007).

#### Bibliography

Boyd, Julian P, (1964). *The Spirit of Christmas*. New York, Oxford University Press.

Hatch, Peter J. (2007). *Twinleaf*. Monticello: Thomas Jefferson Center for Historic Plants, Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc.