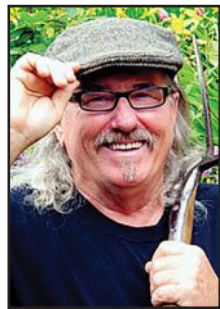


Felder Rushing

Our country's 250th anniversary celebrations got me thinking about how our society has been influenced over the centuries by gardening. Long before I came along, cultivated garden plants helped keep my family and neighbors together during stressful times. If nothing else, it kept them talking to one another.



FELDER RUSHING

Colonial-era blood flows through my veins, but my ancestors didn't always get along really well. In the 1770s my Jersey Settlers line from down around Natchez were Loyalists who clashed with Patriot relatives, notably my namesake Captain John Henry Felder, who was portrayed by actor Mel Gibon in The Patriot movie.

However, beyond holding onto Old World traditions, carving a society in a harsh new environment often boiled down to the power of community. We were mostly poor and dependent on neighbors, learning to work through many tough issues partly by sharing culinary and medicinal plants.

There were no corner stores, chain pharmacies, or local garden centers,

and traveling salesmen in wagons were rare. When it came to fresh vegetables, fruit, and both culinary and medicinal herbs, we had to grow our own, share with others, scavenge from the countryside, or do without.

Our gardens were small, highly productive enclosures fenced to deter roaming livestock and wildlife, with walks that were either swept cleanly with tree branches or paved with creekbed gravel. They were easily weeded and watered and kept neat to show the gardeners' abilities to create order in an otherwise wild and woolly land.

There were two main kinds of growing arrangements: Small "kitchen" gardens filled with fruits, vegetables, and herbs, and a few flowers, most often grown in easily-managed and replanted raised beds; and occasional "pleasure" gardens, afforded by more leisurely and educated relatives, which were usually miniature copies of European parterre gardens divided into smaller but equal squares, rectangles, and triangles enclosed with bricks, rocks, or small shrubs, and

filled with flowers, herbs, and vegetables.

Because most folks had no horticultural expertise, and this was way before hoses or pesticides, their plants had to be very, very easy to grow in just plain dirt with little or no water, and generally pest free. Plus, they had to be easy to save from year to year by seed, plant division, or rooted cuttings, making them even easier to share with others.

While European settlers cherished and tended familiar plants from "back home" we incorporated New World squash, corn, beans, pumpkins, oil sunflowers, and peppers. And when we found many cool-climate mainstays suffer in our South's hot, dry summers, we quickly adopted African staples including okra, peanuts, melons, and cowpeas.

There were also hardy fruits like figs, pecans, persimmon, elderberry, blueberries, apples and pears. Everyone also grew culinary rosemary, parsley, chives, garlic, and mints, and utility herbs including yarrow, iris, feverfew, soapwort (for washing clothes and hair), and other part-ornamental, part-medicinal plants.

There is lots more on all this, easily found online and seen up close in various interpretive gardens



AG MUSEUM HERITAGE GARDEN IN JACKSON

like found at Colonial Williamsburg and the authentic raised beds in the Herb and Heritage Garden at the Ag Museum in Jackson. But fact is, many of us still tend small, productive kitchen gardens filled with time-tested staples from the past, almost exactly the way it was done in 1776.


From survival in early days to modern community gardens, plants have been a common denominator that helps knit today's diverse communities. Regardless of how we managed to make it to 2026, it's good to reflect on how our gardens can at least temporarily bridge differences.

And to me, especially in these polarized times, this makes sharing through gardening especially patriotic.

Felder Rushing is a Mississippi author, columnist, and host of the "Gestalt Gardener" on MPB Think Radio. Visit his blog at felderrushing.blog. Email gardening questions to rushingfelder@yahoo.com.

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