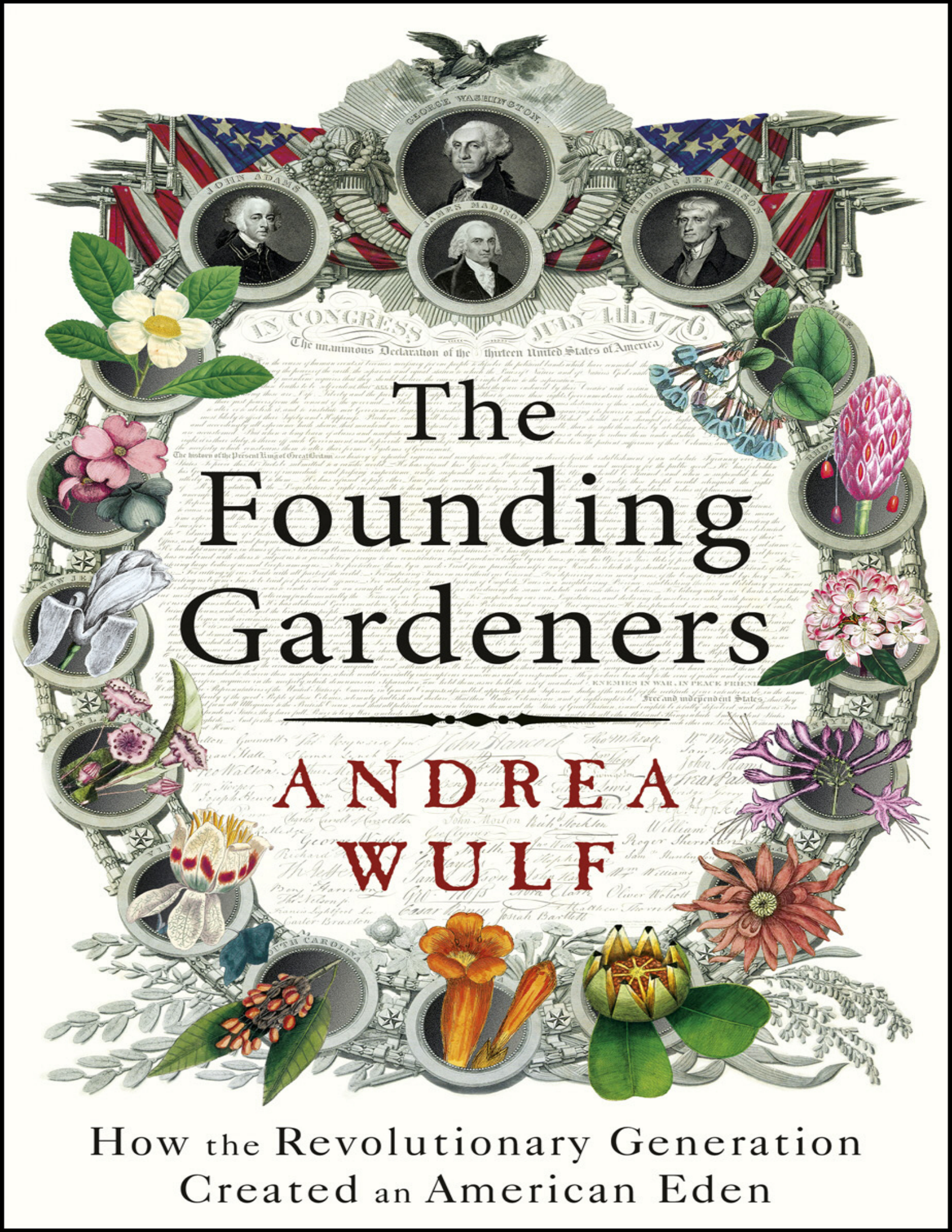

The Founding Gardeners

ANDREA WULF

How the Revolutionary Generation Created an American Eden

About the Book

Manhattan, July 1776. General George Washington faces 32,000 British troops and over 100 warships. As the city braces itself for the first and largest battle of the War of Independence, Washington retires to his study, clears away his maps, and ponders the voluptuous blossom of rhododendron, the sculptural flowers of kalmia, and the perfect pink of crab apple…

While we tend to think of them as iconic nation builders, the first four presidents of the United States saw themselves first and foremost as farmers and gardeners. In the aftermath of the Declaration of Independence and the revolutionary war, they turned to America's towering trees and flowering shrubs, and their own gardens, to make the republic truly independent. The self-sufficient farmer became the embodiment of the republican dream. The sweeping vistas of the west and the sublime grandeur of the natural landscape were a unifying force, giving the original thirteen states a national identity that still resonates today. And the Founding Fathers' shared passion for flowers, plants and agriculture brought them together even when political rivalries began to splinter them.

We see the impetuous John Adams diving into a pile of manure in London's Edgware Road, emerging only to declare, with delight, that it is inferior to his own; Thomas Jefferson, the visionary polymath, using not arms and ships but botanical weapons to prove the strength and vibrancy of the new nation; the victorious George Washington returning home and liberating his garden from the rigid corset of geometry just as he had freed his nation from the

shackles of tyranny; and the diminutive but iron-willed Madison as the forgotten father of America's environmentalism. A follow-up to Andrea Wulf's award-winning and critically acclaimed history of how gardening became an English obsession, *The Founding Gardeners* shows us plants, politics and personalities intertwined as never before, in a unique retelling of the creation of America.

About the Author

Andrea Wulf was born in India and moved to Germany as a child. She trained as a design historian at Royal College of Art and is the author of *The Brother Gardeners* (long-listed for the Samuel Johnson Prize 2008 and winner of the American Horticultural Society 2010 Book Award) and the co-author (with Emma Gieben-Gamal) of *This Other Eden: Seven Great Gardens and 300 Years of English History*. She has written for the *Sunday Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, *The Garden*, and regularly reviews for several newspapers, including the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*. She lives in London.

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HOW THE REVOLUTIONARY GENERATION CREATED AN AMERICAN EDEN

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To Julia

Also by Andrea Wulf

The Brother Gardeners:
Botany, Empire and the Birth of an Obsession

This Other Eden: Seven Great Gardens and
300 Years of English History
(with Emma Gieben-Gamal)

And though the vegetable sleep will continue longer on some trees and plants than on others, and though some of them may not blossom for two or three years, all will be in leaf in the summer, except those which are rotten. What pace the political summer may keep with the natural, no human foresight can determine. It is, however, not difficult to perceive that the spring is begun.

—Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*

Author’s Note

Throughout the book I use the word ‘garden’ in its broadest sense rather than in the narrow meaning of ‘kitchen garden’ – it also includes lawns, groves and flowerbeds, as well as the larger cultivated ornamental landscape of an estate.

Similarly, I have also used ‘gardener’ and ‘gardening’ in an extended meaning. When the founding fathers are ‘gardening’ they might not actually be kneeling in the flowerbeds weeding, but they were involved in laying out their gardens, choosing plants (sometimes planting themselves) and directing their gardeners.

In order to avoid the unwieldy use in the text of both the common and Latin names of plants, I have used either one or the other, depending on the name by which a plant is most likely to be known. However, every plant is listed in the index under its common name (with the Latin name in parentheses) and under its Latin name (with its common name in parentheses).

Prologue

My first impressions of America were shaped when I went as a young woman on a seven-week road trip across the States, from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco. We drove hundreds of miles on roads that never curved, along a grid that mankind had imposed on nature. Some days we passed sprawling factories that were pumping out clouds of billowing smoke; other days we saw vast fields that seemed to go on forever. Everything differed in scale from Europe, even suburban America, where rows and rows of painted clapboard houses sit proudly on large open plots of immaculately shorn lawns. America exuded a confidence that seemed to be rooted in its power to harness nature to man's will and I thought of it as an industrial, larger-than-life country. I certainly never thought of it in terms of gardening – whereas in Britain, everybody seems to be obsessed with their herbaceous borders and vegetable plots. In America, I believed, I was more likely to see someone driving a riding-mower than pruning roses.

Then, in 2006, I went to visit Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's mountaintop home in Virginia, and began to understand how wrong I had been. On a sunny October morning, I stood on Jefferson's vegetable terrace, with straight lines of cabbages and squashes at my feet, and saw man and nature in perfect harmony. In the distance the horizon seemed to stretch into infinity; behind me was a

manicured lawn lined with ribbons of flowers and, below, a romantic forest that crept into the gardens. The magnificent view from the terrace across the arboreal sea of autumnal reds and oranges of red maples, oaks, hickories and tulip trees brought together Jefferson's neat plots of cultivated vegetables and sublime scenery of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Jefferson had combined beauty with utility, the untamed wilderness of the forest with the orderly lines of apples, pears and cherries in the orchard, and colourful native and exotic flowers with a sweeping panorama across Virginia's spectacular landscape. If nature had been dominated by man, it seemed it was only in order to celebrate it.

Later, I couldn't put Monticello out of my mind. I was in the midst of writing about the eighteenth-century American farmer and plant collector John Bartram, the British obsession with gardens, and the introduction of non-native plants into the English landscape – many of which had been sent by Bartram from the American colonies. The more I learned about Bartram, the more fascinated I became by the American relationship to nature during the eighteenth century.

I pored over the correspondence between John Bartram and Benjamin Franklin, and after my visit to Monticello, I learned that Thomas Jefferson and George Washington had also ordered plants from Bartram, and that James Madison had visited Bartram's garden just before the Great Compromise of the Constitutional Convention in the summer of 1787. I read in John Adams's diaries how much he enjoyed working in his garden, fork in hand. Slowly, through records, letters and diaries, I came to see how vegetable plots, ornamental plants, landscapes and forests had played a crucial role in America's struggle for national identity and in the lives of the founding fathers.[1] Golden cornfields and endless rows of cotton plants became

symbols for America's economic independence from Britain; towering trees became a reflection of a strong and vigorous nation; native species were imbued with patriotism and proudly planted in gardens, while metaphors drawn from the natural world brought plants and gardening into politics.

The founding fathers' passion for nature, plants, gardens and agriculture is woven deeply into the fabric of America and aligned with their political thought, both reflecting and influencing it. In fact, I believe, it's impossible to understand the making of America without looking at the founding fathers as farmers and gardeners.

The Founding Gardeners examines the creation of the American nation and the lives of Washington, Adams, Jefferson and Madison through the lens of gardens, landscapes, nature and agriculture. Part of this is played out in Washington's Mount Vernon, Jefferson's Monticello and Madison's Montpelier – all large plantations in Virginia – as well as Adams's much smaller farm, Peacefield, in Quincy near Boston. But it was Benjamin Franklin who was the first of the revolutionaries to place plants at the heart of the country's struggle.

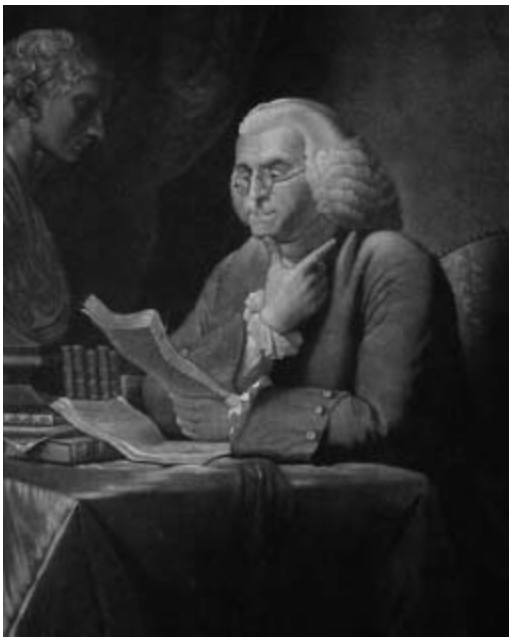
In response to the tensions between Britain and America, Franklin turned to plants and agriculture. In his 'Positions to be examined concerning National Wealth', Franklin listed in 1769 the three ways by which a nation might acquire wealth, and gave his opinion on each: 'The first is by *War* … This is *Robbery*. The second by *Commerce* which is generally *Cheating*. The third by *Agriculture* the only *honest Way*.' Eleven years before the thirteen colonies threw off the yoke of Britain's rule in 1776, the controversial Stamp Act had been given Royal Assent by King George III. This tax on paper affected almost every colonist, for it was applied to newspapers, legal documents, liquor licences, books and every deck of cards. It was a

desperate attempt to fill Britain's depleted coffers, run low by the Seven Years' War, which had seen Britain fight against the French on North American soil.[2] When the war had come to an end in 1763, the British economy lay in crisis, riddled with war debts and plagued by a series of bad harvests. Britain's solution was to make the colonists pay.

As news of the ratification of the Stamp Act reached America, colonists rallied together to protest against Parliament's rule. The Virginia House of Burgesses – the legislative assembly of colonial Virginia – declared the tax illegal. Throughout the colonies, riots broke out. The protesters burned effigies and raided the houses of British officials – on the way drinking their wine cellars dry – insisting that the British had no right to levy such taxes on the colonies. In Boston, an effigy of Andrew Oliver (the man who collected the stamp duty) and of the devil holding a copy of the Stamp Act were hung from an ancient elm tree near the town's common. In the evening, three thousand people marched through the streets, smashing the windows of Oliver's house before beheading and burning his effigy on a bonfire made from his furniture.

Franklin was in London at the time, having arrived in December 1764 on behalf of the Pennsylvania Assembly, the House of Representatives of the colonial government in Philadelphia. His mission was to change the governance of Pennsylvania which was controlled by the so-called 'proprietors', the heirs of William Penn, who had founded the colony in the seventeenth century. It was his third visit to the British capital, a place he loved for the intellectual stimulation and sociability. But during this visit, his relationship with Britain underwent a seismic shift – a shift that not only led to his assured signature on the Declaration of Independence, but also mirrored his changing attitude towards seeds and crops. Indeed, his

involvement with plants can be seen as a kind of barometer of his political convictions.



Benjamin Franklin, 1767.

For a long time Franklin had been interested in plants, both for their scientific and economic value. Part of a lively network of letter-writers who exchanged seeds with each other, he corresponded with farmers, gardeners and botanists in America and Europe, and experimented in his Philadelphia garden with different vegetables and crops. From London, he regularly sent seeds home to his wife, Deborah, helped by his British scientific and gardening friends. When one of them couldn't procure a new species of grain that Franklin wanted, another offered the entire produce of the previous year (clearly realising how keen Franklin was). Franklin sent a new kind of oat and barley to Deborah to distribute amongst the plantsmen in Philadelphia, as well as sending vegetable seeds and Chinese rhubarb, which was valued for its medicinal properties. As the political troubles intensified, so did Franklin's agricultural interest.

The outbreak of the anti–Stamp Act protests in America had forced Franklin to become the unofficial ambassador for the colonies in Britain. He met the Lord Treasurer, Lord Grenville, in an attempt to persuade him to abandon the scheme, but to no avail. Grenville, Franklin said, was 'besotted' with it. Yet, though Franklin thought the Act to be unconstitutional and believed that the colonies had to be represented in Parliament, he did not, at this point, contemplate the possibility of independence. A 'faithful Adherence to the Government of this Nation', Franklin insisted as houses were burned in Philadelphia, 'will always be the wisest Course'. But he misjudged how much his fellow colonists hated the impositions. In Pennsylvania, Franklin's steadfast defence of Britain was held against him and in late September 1765, furious rioters threatened to destroy his house in Philadelphia.

Britain had always nurtured the colonies as her greatest export market – paper, nails, glass, clothes and linen were all produced in Britain's burgeoning manufacturing sector and sold in American markets. In addition to staples, luxury products such as silverware, porcelain, carpets and silk became an important British export. The trade of hundreds of ships connected London, Bristol and Liverpool with Boston, Philadelphia and New York. Between 1730 and 1760, exports to the North American colonies quadrupled, filling the purses of British merchants and manufacturers. At the same time laws, regulations and duties imposed by the British and a lack of labour prevented the colonists from developing their own manufacturing sector. With plenty of fertile soil, the colonies instead became the fields of the mother-country – shipping grain, corn and tobacco to Britain. Consequently almost all colonists lived off the land. They fought against the wilderness, draining swampy soil and snatching plots from the rugged embrace of the forest. As they wrested their fields from the forest, trees fell in the

thousands, clearing the way for cash crops such as tobacco, rice and indigo.

Franklin believed that the colonists' reliance on agriculture for their main income, combined with the seemingly endless resources of land, could be turned to their advantage. America could be self-sufficient. And as tension over the Stamp Act grew, Franklin argued that the colonies would be able to pressure the British by boycotting their goods. 'I do not know a single article', Franklin told MPs, that the colonies couldn't either 'do without or make themselves'. It was his four-hour testimony in front of Parliament, many believed, that led to the repeal of the Stamp Act a few weeks later. But it soon became clear that the British had no intention of offering the colonies representation in Parliament. Instead, more duties were imposed, including on tea, paint and glass – all imported products that the colonists were only allowed to buy from Britain.

For the next three years Franklin tried to persuade both the colonists and the British politicians to reach a compromise. In essays and letters in newspapers, he was constantly explaining, moderating, smoothing and arguing. But when the government refused to compromise, he finally had to admit that words were no longer enough. In January 1769, he rallied behind the colonists' call for a sweeping boycott of British goods.

The boycott made Franklin's seed collecting all the more urgent. Not only was he sending larger amounts of seeds and more varieties home, but these were now for America's profit alone, not for Britain's. Every time someone told Franklin about a new edible plant, he was thrilled by the possibility of its economic potential. 'I wish it may be found of Use with us', he told one correspondent when he forwarded seeds for a new crop, and when he heard of tofu, it so excited his curiosity, he said, that he procured a recipe

from China, dispatching it together with chickpeas to a friend in Philadelphia.[3] These dried seeds carried the possibility of a new world and political freedom. In the coming years he sent upland rice and tallow tree[4] from China and seeds of 'useful Plants' from India and Turkey, as well as introducing kohlrabi and Scottish kale, amongst many others, to America.

Franklin, who had been the 'chairman of British Colonies' of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts Manufacturers and Commerce in London, now rarely went to the Society's meetings. The Society had tried to encourage colonists to grow commercial crops by paying premiums and awards, but by 1770 Franklin accused the Society of betraying the new nation, claiming that the 'true Spirit of all your Bounties' were in the interest of Britain, not America. No longer was America to be a colonial grain store, or a market for Britain's goods. America, Franklin was convinced, could provide all the necessaries herself and they would just have to renounce the luxuries they couldn't produce. He echoed what John Adams had written in Boston's newspapers under the rustic pseudonym Humphrey Ploughjogger. In response to the Stamp Act, Adams had suggested that colonists should wear coats made of the hides of their own oxen rather than woollen ones from Britain. Adams promised that he would not buy 'one shilling worth of any thing that comes from old England'. As such, self-sufficiency became a weapon in the fight for parliamentary representation and against British economic restrictions. Slowly colonists began to equate home production and agriculture with the upholding of domestic liberty.

To Franklin's regret, the boycott did not pressure Parliament into relinquishing authority over the colonies. Nothing was achieved, and in May 1771 Franklin wrote that 'the seeds [are] sown of a total disunion of the two

countries', while at the same time urging patience in order to postpone 'this catastrophe'.

Franklin continued to plead for moderation, but it became clear that Britain would never accept an empire that would give the colonial assemblies the same rights as Parliament. As the clashes between Britain and her colonies escalated, Franklin became the voice of American rights in Britain and the scapegoat for the troubles. At the end of January 1774, six weeks after a group of colonists dumped more than three hundred chests of tea into Boston's harbour in protest against the tax on tea – known as the Boston Tea Party – Franklin was questioned and attacked in the Privy Council about the colonial affairs. As the abuse was hurled at him, the sixty-eight-year-old Franklin, dressed in a blue suit made of Manchester velvet, stood motionless and with his head held high before the British accusers.

Three days later he wrote to his son William that 'my Office of Deputy-Postmaster is taken from me'. The British government had stripped him of the post that he had held for almost twenty years, severing their connection with Franklin. In this briefest of letters, Franklin then advised William, who was the royal governor of New Jersey, to give up his position in order to become a farmer: 'I wish you were well settled in your Farm. 'Tis an honester and a more honourable because a more independent Employment.' It was a turning point for Franklin, who for so long had clung to the idea that Britain would recognise the rights of the colonists. Farmers, he now believed, held the key to America's future because they, not the henchmen of the British empire, would create a new nation.

For one more year Franklin tried to facilitate a compromise, but then he realised that it was time to return home. With no reason to stay any longer in 'this old rotten State' he boarded an American ship in March 1775, never

to return to Britain. When he arrived in Philadelphia a little more than six weeks later, the Second Continental Congress was convening and the following day Franklin was made a delegate. 'We should be prepared to repel force by force, which I think, united, we are well able to do', Franklin wrote to a gardening friend shortly after his arrival. He described the atmosphere in Philadelphia as one of mounting belligerence, containing 'all Ranks of People in Arms'. The next day George Washington, with his military uniform packed in his trunks, arrived in the city. The colonists were preparing to fight the British.

Franklin believed firmly in America's ability to survive. America would rise, Franklin wrote to an old friend in Britain in September 1775, because 'it will itself by its Fertility enable us to defend it. Agriculture is the great Source of Wealth and Plenty. By cutting off our Trade you have thrown us *to the Earth*, whence like *Antaeus* we shall rise yearly with fresh Strength and Vigour'.

The other founding fathers shared his belief. Agriculture and the independent small-scale farmer were, in their eyes, the building blocks of the new nation. Ploughing, planting and vegetable gardening were more than profitable and enjoyable occupations: they were political acts, bringing freedom and independence. When, after the War of Independence in 1783, the former colonies had to mature from being a war alliance to being a united nation, nature also became a unifying force. It was the Constitution that welded them together politically, legally and economically, but it was nature that provided a transcendent feeling of nationhood. America's endless horizons, fertile soil and floral abundance became the perfect articulation of a distinct national identity – of a country that was young and strong.

The founding fathers' passion for nature and plants can still be seen today for it shaped America in all its

contradictions – from the rise of industrial agriculture in the Midwest to the protected wilderness in the national parks. America's most revered patriotic songs revel in images drawn from nature: the 'amber waves of grain,/For purple mountain majesties / Above the fruited plain!' in 'America the Beautiful'; in 'God Bless America', 'From the mountains, to the prairies, / To the oceans, white with foam'; and in Woody Guthrie's 'This Land Is Our Land', with its chorus of 'From the redwood forest, to the gulf stream waters / This land was made for you and me'. Today's slowly changing attitude towards local produce, home-grown vegetables and inner-city gardening in the United States are part of the same endeavour. The new 'food movements' (accompanied by a flurry of books and initiatives) – ranging from the promotion of urban agriculture to the preservation of farmland, from the first lady's vegetable garden at the White House to the returning interest of native species in ornamental gardens – can be placed in the context of the founding fathers' legacy.

For me, one of the greatest surprises was that the cradle of the environmental movement did not lie in the mid-nineteenth century with men like Henry David Thoreau or John Muir, but that it could be traced back to the birth of the nation and the founding fathers. The protection of the environment, James Madison had already said in a widely circulated speech in 1818, was essential for the survival of the United States. The founding fathers might not have romanticised nature as later generations did, but they were equally passionate about it. Madison did not suggest living in misty-eyed harmony with nature but living off it in the long term. He condemned the Virginians for their ruthless exploitation of the soil and the forests, fearing that nature's equilibrium would be unbalanced. Humankind, Madison said, could not expect nature to be 'made subservient to

the use of man'. Man, he believed, has to find a place within the 'symmetry of nature' without destroying it – words that remain as important today as they did when he spoke them.

In politics, the founding fathers have been evoked by almost every politician across a wide spectrum. This book offers a window into a new and important aspect of the lives of the founding fathers. It is significant that the old elm in Boston, from which the effigy of the loathed stamp distributor had dangled, was renamed the Liberty Tree. America's landscape, soil and plants played a crucial role in the creation of the nation and became steeped with political ideology but also with the hope for the future. Jefferson, for example, crafted the grounds at Monticello as carefully as his words – it became a living tapestry of the themes that made America after the revolution. Every time I visit Monticello now, I go first to the vegetable terrace. Each time, no matter how often I see it, the contrast between the breathtaking view and the orderly rows of vegetables stirs me. I pick up a handful of the red soil and let it run through my fingers and I feel a visceral connection to the founding fathers and to their vision for this country.

[1] The term 'founding fathers' describes a group with a fluctuating membership. When I refer to the four main protagonists of this book as a group – George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and James Madison – I have taken the liberty of using the term 'founding fathers'.

[2] The Seven Years' War was a global war in which Britain fought for dominance over India, sugar production in the West Indies and the slave trade in West Africa, as well as battling French power in North America.

[3] Franklin dispatched the wrong 'vegetables', because he sent 'Chinese caravances', which most certainly were chickpeas (also called 'garbanzos'). The process for making tofu was correct, but it is of course made of soybeans.

[4] The wax of the seeds of the tallow tree was used in China to make candles.

1

‘The Cincinnatus of the West’:

George Washington’s American Garden at Mount Vernon

By the summer of 1776, Manhattan had been transformed into an armed camp. American soldiers drilled in the wide tree-lined streets and troops took over the elegant brick mansions normally occupied by the New York elite. Huge wooden barricades were erected where fashionable women had promenaded only weeks earlier, and forts were built around the tiny hamlet of Brooklyn to defend the city. New York faced 32,000 British troops – more than one and a half times the city’s entire peacetime population and the largest enemy fleet ever to reach American shores. The prospects of victory were slim. The commander-in-chief, General George Washington, had less than half the manpower, with his numbers declining even further as smallpox spread through the camps. Many of his officers had yet to experience the field of battle; those who had, had certainly never seen warships as menacing as those which approached New York – the combined firepower of just five of these was enough to outgun all the American cannons onshore. On the first day alone, more than one hundred enemy vessels had anchored in a bay south of the city, turning the water into a forest of looming masts.

New York was ‘in commotion’ one observer said, as the frightened inhabitants of Manhattan fled. Over the next few weeks seventy-three British warships and almost four

hundred transport vessels sailed into the bay. Washington inspected the forts, observed the enemy movements as they encamped on Staten Island and rallied his men, reminding them that they were ‘Freemen, fighting for the blessings of Liberty’. Then, as the British troops were preparing their ferocious onslaught, Washington brushed aside his generals and his military maps, sat in the flicker of candlelight with his quill and wrote a long letter to his estate manager and cousin Lund Washington at Mount Vernon, his plantation in Virginia. As the city braced itself, Washington pondered the voluptuous blossom of rhododendron, the sculptural flowers of mountain laurel and the perfect pink of crab apple. These ‘clever kind[s] of Trees (especially flowering ones)’, he instructed, should be planted in two groves by either side of his house.

It may seem baffling that amidst this unprecedented crisis the commander-in-chief was designing new ornamental groves for his pleasure ground. But his horticultural letter is perhaps easier to understand when we consider the trees Washington was insisting be planted: soaring white pines and tulip trees, glorious alabaster dogwood and stately red cedars. Only American natives should be used, he instructed, and all could be transplanted from the forests of Mount Vernon. As the young nation faced its first military confrontation in the name of liberty, Washington decided that Mount Vernon was to be an American garden where English trees were not allowed.

As the war intensified in the months and years that followed the battle of New York, Washington’s dedication to his garden and plants did not abate. Sometimes new planting schemes seemed to occupy his thoughts more than the desperate situation of his country and men. In December 1776 he wrote, ‘I tremble for Philadelphia’, but a few lines later in the same letter, ‘it runs in my head that I have heard of some objection to the Sycamore’. Washington

always longed for his estate manager's 'infinitely amusing' letters because they included detailed horticultural reports on how his grounds were progressing, from digging up some flowerbeds to descriptions of the groves. Even during the terrible winter at Valley Forge two years later, when his army was hungry and sick, Washington urged Lund to continue work on his estate because such improvements were the 'principal objects I have in view during these troubles'. It was almost as if Washington escaped from the trials of war by imagining fields of healthy corn swaying in the wind and thinking of the promises of spring when 'the Buds of every kind of tree & Shrub are swelling'.

Nor was this love for gardens and nature restricted to Mount Vernon. In his General Orders, for example, Washington recommended that the troops make 'regimental Gardens' in order to produce vegetables for army rations and also because he believed it would be healthy and comforting for his men – what we would call therapeutic. If the soldiers gardened, Washington was sure, 'it will become a matter of amusement and of emulation'. Even as his army trudged through blizzards and deep snow, he remained open to the allure of nature. Only days after describing how the men struggled through conditions so severe they 'exceeded anything of the kind that had ever been experienced in this climate before', Washington reflected not on the hardship of this icicled embrace but noted in his diary that 'the Trees and Earth being glazed looked beautiful'.

For Washington, trees were both a glorious expression of America's beauty and a political trope. It was a tree that had become the most striking emblem of the revolution – the Liberty Tree, which, as Thomas Paine wrote in his eponymous poem, was the 'temple' of the revolutionaries. So significant was the old elm in Boston that many old specimens in towns across America had been designated as

Liberty Trees. Similarly, during the early years of the war, the schooners with which Washington defended Boston against the British carried flags that depicted a green pine tree with the inscription ‘An Appeal to Heaven’. And when Washington described his lack of funds to pay his soldiers as ‘an Ax at the Tree of our Safety Interest & Liberty’, he used trees as metaphors in the struggle for independence. Later, in August 1777, he roused his army by ordering every soldier to march through Philadelphia with ‘their heads adorned with green branches’ as a sign of hope.

By the end of the war Washington had become, for many, the greatest of heroes, a man who had led his men across the icy Delaware to surprise the British army in a daring attack and who sat upright on his horse as bullets whizzed past him. Washington, however, did not think of himself in such a heroic way. The war had been a long-drawn-out ordeal. His soldiers starved, were regularly forced to serve without pay and had walked barefoot through snow. More men died of disease than at the hands of the enemy. Washington himself spent the whole war in the field with his army, waiving his pay and wrestling with Congress for supplies. He was tired after so many years away from his fields and garden. He had walked over the broken earth of battlefields and seen his army almost extinguished by the British. Instead of the young green of Indian corn pushing through the furrows of Mount Vernon’s freshly ploughed fields, he had seen the blood of wounded soldiers staining America’s soil.

The only time he saw his beloved Mount Vernon during the whole eight years was on a short stopover on the way to the last, decisive battle in Yorktown in October 1781. But even after this victory he could not go home. Two years later, frustrated and impatient to ‘quit the walks of public life’, Washington was still waiting for the official end of the

war, first in Princeton, New Jersey, where Congress had convened, and later in West Point (Garrison, New York). It wasn't until November 1783 that he at last received the news he had so longed for: the Treaty of Paris had been signed, and the British troops had ended their seven-year occupation of New York and Long Island. The war was officially over. Washington, exhausted but elated, had achieved the unthinkable, leading the thirteen colonies to victory and securing the birth of a new nation.

Washington the soldier had done his duty and delivered victory, but this was not the only legacy he wished to leave his country. The commander-in-chief saw the future of America as a country peopled not by soldiers but by farmers – an agrarian society that would be industrious and happy, where 'our Swords and Spears have given place to the plough share and pruning hook'. The general who had defeated the British army idealised not the military tactician or the political revolutionary, but the farmer. 'The life of a Husbandman of all others', he believed, 'is the most delectable', both 'honorable' and 'amusing'. Again and again he had written of his wish to sit 'under my own Vine & my own Fig tree' – using metaphors that the prophet Micah had invoked when referring to the messianic kingdom of peace.

This biblical image of peaceful rural retirement after the ravages of war appealed to Washington, but not all of his officers shared his vision. Rather than a tearful farewell and comradely embraces, they wanted to bow before their general and put a crown on his head. During the war, as supply chains of food, ammunition, clothes, tents and money collapsed, there had been calls to invest Washington 'with dictatorial power' and to appoint him 'sole Dictator of America' to bring order to the chaos. One officer wrote that he believed that postwar America needed to be ruled by Washington with 'the title of king'. Washington, though,