FOUNDING GARDENERS

Andrea Wulf's *Founding Gardeners:*The Revolutionary Generation, Nature, and the Shaping of the American Nation (352pp, Alfred A. Knopf, 2011) should appeal as much to aficionados of American history as to plant fanciers. Wulf paints an unusual view of the founding fathers – Washington, Adams, Jefferson and Madison – with hoes as well as pens in their hands and seeds as well as parchment in their pockets.

Wulf follows them from the unsettled years before the Revolutionary War to the almost simultaneous deaths of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. By then we had moved from relatively self-contained colonies to a young nation, from unification in war to political polarization in peace. We had vastly increased our size, through the Louisiana Purchase (1803) and learned about the immensity beyond through the efforts of Lewis and Clark. Near the end of Wulf's narrative the Republicans, under John Madison, with their dream of a nation of independent farmers, were firmly in control.

Wulf says we can't understand what shaped us early on without taking into account the horticultural ideas and passions of the founding fathers. They were farmers and gardeners first, and, often reluctantly, politicians second. Jefferson, for example, left the presidency after two terms as if throwing off shackles. John Adams at his retirement remarked that he had made a good exchange of honor and virtues for manure. Washington and Madison similarly cast off their public roles with relief and turned to their estates.

Jefferson might have spoken for them all: "'I am entirely a farmer, soul and body.'"

Wulf tells us that we can read the farms, fields and gardens of the founding fathers like their diaries, so imbued were they with their political ideals. They tended to ignore industry, as not part of America's future. And since only one American in twenty lived in towns then, and since there were only two cities bigger than 25,000, New York and Philadelphia, it's not surprising. They were farmers living in a nation of farmers.

Ironically, many of the founding gardeners' key ideas came from English gardens and gardening books. Adams and Jefferson strolled English gardens that were "allegories of dissent"; they came home to lay out gardens inspired by liberty and filled – as were many English gardens – with American trees. At the Constitutional Convention of 1787, the founding fathers' visits to John Bartram's garden near Philadelphia, where native American species from Maine to Florida flourished side by side, helped them reach The Great Compromise – equal representation in the Senate and proportional in the House, that made the republic possible. For John Adams the balance of nature served as a model for checks and balances among executive, legislative and judiciary branches.

Experiments with mixing wild and cultivated species at Washington's, Jefferson's and Madison's estates as well as the wondrous lore disseminated after the Lewis and Clark expedition, began to change Americans' notion of wilderness from something to be feared and subdued to something to be admired and cherished.

Since farming and gardening usually involve working the land, Wulf of course informs us that most of that was done for Washington, Jefferson and Madison, by slaves. Of the three, only Washington freed his slaves, after his death.

You may be surprised to learn that the founding gardeners strongly promoted such modern-sounding concepts as soil conservation and enrichment, contour plowing and crop rotation, or that the beginnings of the environmental movement date from their years, and not as is usually thought from the Transcendentalists a generation later.

But I can best relate to Jefferson when he says, "'Tho' an old man, I am but a young gardener.'"

Or with Abigail Adams: "'I seldom meet with Characters so inoffensive as my Hens and Chickings, or Minds so well improved as my Garden.'" (626)