



The Kitchen Garden Companion

A Brief Guide to the President James K. Polk State Historic Site Kitchen Garden, The Plants Grown There, and Some of Their Many Uses.

“Where flowers bloom so does hope. The environment is where we all meet; where all have a mutual interest; it is the one thing all of us share.”

- Lady Bird Johnson

You might be wondering...

What is a kitchen garden?

A garden where fruits, vegetables, and herbs for the family were grown. In contrast, the fields around the home were used for growing cash crops like tobacco, cotton, and corn.

Who tended the garden?

The kitchen garden was typically the housewife's domain. Children would help keep the garden weeded and bug-free, as well as assist with harvesting. On some farms, enslaved men and women would also tend their own garden plots after long days of labor in the fields. Slave gardens helped supplement the often meager rations supplied to the enslaved.

Was everything “organic” then?

In a way yes, however the people then certainly wouldn't have thought of it that way. Their main fertilizer was animal manure and they used things like soap and tobacco dust to keep pests under control. However, they also used chemicals like saltpeter that were used in other applications for things like explosives! Advice manuals certainly recognized the wisdom of practices like crop rotation, but they also weren't opposed to using whatever products were available and were affordable.

Want to know more?

Feel free to ask a volunteer or staff member any questions you may have about the garden.

If you already have a passion for gardening, just enjoy being outdoors, or would love to get some gardening experience, we welcome you to come volunteer with us! Please inquire inside or email us at polk@ncdcr.gov for more info on volunteering.



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In the Home

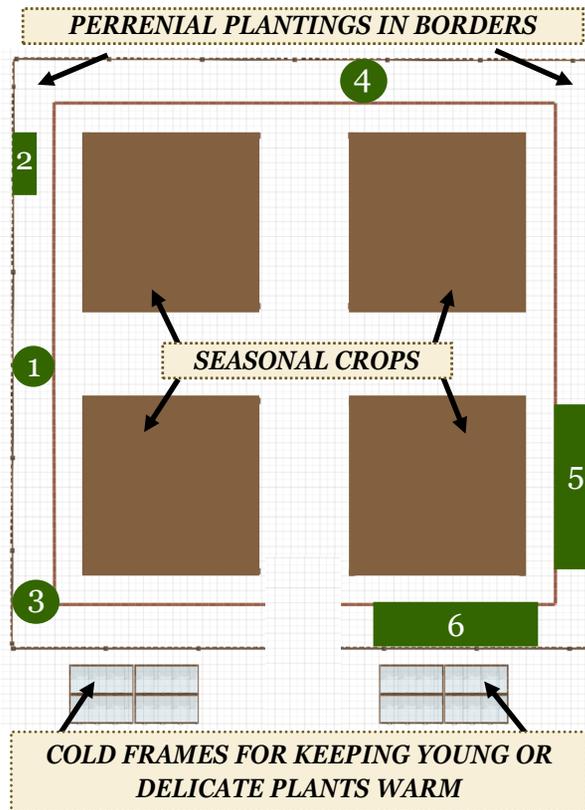
In your garden at home you may have many plants that are there primarily for their beauty or their beautiful aroma. Rarely were plants in the kitchen garden purely for looks, but quite a few plants with a strong scent were popular for their use in and around the house!

- **Strewing herbs** were strewn on the floor of a room and then swept to release their pleasing aroma throughout the space. Examples include **Hyssop** and **Lavender(1)**, both plants with many different uses other than simply freshening the air.
- Just as we light citronella candles to keep the mosquitos at bay, backcountry settlers used plants like **Southernwood(2)** and **Rosemary(3)**.
- The leaves, flowers, and roots of many plants found in the kitchen garden could also be used to create natural **dyes**. Flowers that are common in our gardens today, like **Marigold**, were used to dye fabric.

In the Medicine Cabinet

During James K. Polk's lifetime, many remedies were still made at home using plants grown or gathered nearby.

- Many plants used for medicine are **perennial**, which means they die back during the winter but regrow in the spring.
- Traditionally, these plants were placed in permanent beds along the border.
- Learning the nicknames for different plants may give you a clue to how they were used. For instance, **Comfrey (4)** was known as "knit-bone" and continues to be used by people today to help heal broken bones.



In the Kitchen

Large fields were mostly for **cash crops**, like cotton, wheat, and corn, that were grown to make money for the family. The smaller kitchen garden, in contrast, was for growing food to feed the family throughout the year.

- **Seasonality**, or predictable patterns based on the time of the year, determined what was on the family's dinner table. For instance: leafy greens like **Lettuce**, **Cabbage**, and **Spinach** grow best in cool weather, while **Okra** thrives in hot weather.
- Unlike the perennials in the border beds, most food-producing plants are **annuals**, which means that once the plant dies it will not regrow. When an annual plant dies you can remove it and plant something new in its place.
- The **Four Square** garden layout takes the rotation of seasonal crops into consideration. Each square bed in the center of the garden could be planted with different annual crops that could be removed and replaced once its growing season was complete.
- While many food-producing plants are annual, there are a few perennials that produced delicious crops for the kitchen table. One of the most interesting is **Asparagus(5)**! In the early spring, asparagus is one of the first plants to begin sending up shoots. **Strawberries(6)**, and indeed many fruits, are an equally delicious staple in the kitchen garden that will continue growing for numerous years.