



Caretakers use 1880s methods in garden

By the late 19th century, people had learned, mostly through parental teaching, actual experience with crops, and exposure to agricultural programs sponsored by universities and governments, that soils needed to be treasured as a valuable resource. Throughout history, knowledge on issues such as crop rotation, soil enrichment, fallow periods and insect control were certainly valuable information when your livelihood and food supply depended on good practices. This is why a team of Leon County Master Gardeners has been maintaining the Tallahassee Museum farm vegetable garden in the 1880s style.

Gardening in the 1880s style, much like modern-day organic gardening, is much more about what you don't do or use. It is more of a dedication to and practice of good soil and plant management principles. When you garden in this manner, you think of your plants as part of a whole system within nature.

Contemporary organic gardeners strive to work in harmony with natural systems, to minimize soil depletion and erosion, and continually replenish any resources the garden consumes. These concepts are understood to be the common practice during the 1880s. The following outlines the gardening methods used at the Tallahassee Museum 1880s style garden, beginning with attention to the soil:

Soil preparation: We have dedicated considerable effort and have gone to great lengths to prepare the Museum farm garden soil for multiple crop plantings per year. During the past several years, we have regularly added organic matter to the soil. From time to time, leaves and straw collected from around town were deposited in the garden and plowed under until decomposition blended them into the soil. Having properly and responsibly prepared the soil with deposits over the years, now we continually use museum animal manure as a side-dressing fertilizer.

Use of fertilizer: Through fertilizer, one must continually replenish the essential chemical elements to the plant root system in order to have good growth and production. These important elements are nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium, which are chemicals contained in all organic materials. The introduction of organic materials via pre-planting soil preparation and side-dressing of the crop can maintain the nutrients necessary for satisfactory growth and yields. Thus, as in the 1880s, we fertilize the museum garden with organic material, in lieu of commercial fertilizers.

Insect control: While some chemical pesticides were manufactured and available in the 1880s, it is highly unlikely that rural farms used them extensively, again due to cost and availability. Our goal is to use methods that were proven over time and common practices on rural farms. One must be very careful when dealing with insects in the garden because there are an abundance of both beneficial and harmful insects. There are several stages of insect control:

» The first is to understand who is beneficial and who is harmful. Pollinators come in a wide variety of shapes, sizes and species. These are not only good guys, but are absolutely necessary for crop yields. We must protect the pollinators from all pest

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control methods. Predaceous (i.e., eats bad bugs) insects are also very beneficial and do no harm to plants.

» Second, frequent inspection and the pick-off and stomp process is a proven method of pest control, particularly for caterpillars and larger pests.

» Third, dish soap and water is a very safe and effective alternative to conventional insecticides in many garden situations. Soapy water clog the breathing pores of insects so they suffocate. It must be sprayed directly on the insect and is used mainly for soft bodied pests like aphids, thrips, scale insect crawlers and spider mites.

The above methods are used when action is needed and in concert with responsible practices.

Cultivation: All cultivation is done with hand tools, as was the manner in the 1880s on a plot of this size. Larger plots would have used mule power, yet our plot is of a size that prohibits using the mules for cultivation, plus, the museum mules have shown no real interest in this project, and the leader does not have the necessary "mule skills"! We continue to row crop with 30" row spacing, which was the standard for plot layout with mule plowing. All cultivation is performed using hand plows with turning and cultivating implements, along with a wide variety of hoes and forks with in-period handles.

Water: Our area has experienced both shortfalls in normal rain patterns and long durations of no rain over the past decade or so. Vegetable gardens need from one-half to three-fourths inches of rain each week. If rain does not produce this, then watering becomes necessary. We use watering implements that are current vintage, as the only in-period alternatives were hand pumps and buckets.

Harvest: All harvesting will be done by hand. Harvesting will vary, depending on the crop variety and when it was planted. Once into the harvest, it will require attention every other day during the prime season, which will likely be May to June.

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UF/LEON COUNTY EXTENSION

The 1880s garden at the Tallahassee Museum

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