Thomas Jefferson: Florist

"When I return to live at Monticello...
I believe I shall become a florist."

THOMAS JEFFERSON TO
MADAME NOAILLES DE TESSÉ
WASHINGTON, JANUARY 30, 1803

OUR MODERN-DAY IMAGE of a florist does not conform to the occupation Thomas Jefferson envisioned for his retirement years. Today we associate the professional florist with weddings, funerals, and anniversaries. The "Florist" is where we go to order greenhouse grown long-stem roses in perfect bud, spiky sprays of gladiolus, effusive floral arrangements, or intensively pruned and potted miniature azaleas.

But, floristry as a major commercial industry did not evolve until the turn of the 20th century. In 1935 Liberty Hyde Bailey described floriculture as a kind of "intensive agriculture," for the purpose of growing ornamental plants, either under glass or out doors, for their sale in wholesale and retail markets.

Philip Miller, Head Gardener at Chelsea

The 18th-century florist was more often the ardent amateur, as presented in books like Hermon (H.) Bourne's *Flore Poetici, Florist Manual for Cultivators of Flowers* and Joseph Breck's *The Young Florist: or Conversations on the Culture of Flowers and on Natural History* (both published in 1833). The florist in Jefferson's time was the serious gardener who devoted his attention to carefully cultivating, observing, selecting, and even systematically improving flowers for their beauty, fragrance, color, and grace.

Historically, the kinds of flowers typically connected with the florist have remained remarkably similar. By the last two decades of the 19th century the florist's attention began to focus on certain types of flowers; those that, as Peter Henderson described in 1890, "displayed perfection in habit of plant, and in form of flower, with distinct coloring." Both Henderson and George Nicholson in *The Illustrated Dictionary of Gardening*, 1885, cite the auricula, carnation, chrysanthemum, dahlia, fuchsia, gladiolus, hyacinth, show and zonal pelargonium, and tulips as some of the best-known examples, "each and all exhibiting evidence of the success attending the Florist's work." But, this litany of "florist flowers" echoes through previous centuries in countless garden dictionaries and calendars. Eighteenth-century British writer Philip Miller, head gardener at Chelsea, repeated monthly directions on the care of "choice" and "fine" carnations, pinks, polyanthus, auriculas, hyacinths and tulips in *The Gardener's Dictionary* (the 1768 edition of which Jefferson owned). Philadelphia nurseryman Bernard McMahon, considered Jefferson's gardening mentor, repeated the very same flowers in *The American*

Gardener's Calendar, 1806. Moreover, many of these flowers recur in Jefferson's own journals and letters, whether he was searching the Parisian markets in 1786 for "Carnations, Auriculas, Tuberoses, Hyacinths, & Belladonna lilies;" describing his extensive flower border of "tulips, hyacinths, tuberoses & Amaryllis;" or ordering seeds and plants of auricula, double anemone, double carnation, crown imperial, and double ranunculus for his collection of "handsome or fragrant" flowers at Monticello. All were the classic subjects for the amusement of the 18th-century florist.

Jefferson's success as an amateur florist — whether in growing fine garden flowers or choice indoor plants — was likely uneven. We know from his Garden Book that he was sowing seeds of carnations, pinks, sweet William, and auriculas as early as 1767 at his childhood home,

Sweet William

Sweet William, mixed colors
Dianthus barbatus
Available as seeds.

Sweet William blooming in Monticello's flower beds.

For details and to order, visit our Website or call:
WEB: www.twinleaf.org
PHONE: 800 243-1743

Shadwell. As spring progressed he went on to record the pinks (*Dianthus plumarius*) and sweet William (*Dianthus barbatus*) in bloom and carnations (*Dianthus caryophyllus*) "in full life," but there were no further observations on the auriculas (*Primula auricula*). The Garden Book gives occasional verifications that garden pinks and sweet William thrived

J. SOWERBY

Primula from Flora Luxurians, *1789-91.*

in the gardens at Monticello as well as the common primrose (*Primula vulgaris*). The success of the more difficult double carnations and auriculas seemed more elusive. Seasoned gardeners will attest that the auricula in particular demands a fair amount of gardening skill to bring to perfection in Virginia. Native to the northern Alps and south into Italy, the wild, yellow-flowered mountain cowslip that Jefferson first sowed in 1767 was described as early as 50 A.D. by Dioscorides. By the late 1400s it was being called *Auricula ursa*, meaning "bear's little ear," in reference to the shape of its leaf. In the 16th century Dutch botanist Carolus Clusius and English herbalist John Gerard described various color forms and natural hybrids, which were known as "garden auriculas." These became one of the most fashionable spring-flowering plants for pots and parterres in 17th-century Britain and Europe, especially in the gardens of the wealthy. Ironically, it was in the hands of the British working class that the auriculas became true

florists' flowers. During the 19th century, the development of show auriculas was taken to new heights in northern mill towns where the social life of Lancashire communities revolved around Auricula Societies and shows.

Jefferson's interest in auriculas was aroused again in 1807 when Bernard McMahon wrote, "of Auriculas we have none here worth a cent, but I expect some good ones from London this spring; if they come safe, you shall have a division next season." When, in February 1812, McMahon forwarded a box of plants and roots to Jefferson, it is significant to note that the box included "6 pots of Auriculas, different kinds," suggesting the plants were likely some of the "choice" varieties, possibly from London, requiring special attention and care. McMahon was well aware that Jefferson had an unheated greenhouse, which could potentially provide a perfect environment for pots of auriculas and the pot of "a beautiful polyanthus."

Gold-laced Primrose

Greenhouses and orangeries were features of a number of 18th-century country estates in Virginia and Maryland, including Governor Sir William Berkeley's

Thomas Jefferson's Monticello Greenhouse with a potted acacia.

Green Spring (en route to Williamsburg), William Hamilton's Woodlands Estate in Philadelphia, Margaret Carroll's greenhouse at Mount Clare, outside Baltimore, and George Washington's Mount Vernon. Jefferson's greenhouse, unlike the more typical free-standing structures, was incorporated within the body of Monticello as a small glass-enclosed arched loggia, which he called the South Piazza. His simple yet elegant enclosure, created with five double-sashed windows that opened as doorways onto the South Terrace and East and West Fronts, was balanced by an open gallery on the north end of Monticello. Margaret Bayard Smith, a Washington socialite and close friend of Jefferson's during his presidential years, visited Monticello in the summer of 1809 and gave a detailed description of Jefferson's "suite of apartments" consisting of the library, his cabinet, and "a green house divided from the other by glass compartments and doors; so that the view of the plants it contains, is unobstructed. He has not yet made his collection, having but just finished the room, which opens on one of the terraces."

Sweet Acacia blossoms.

Jefferson had a fondness early on for the fragrant-flowered acacia (*Acacia farnesiana*)—a member of the legume or bean family bearing tiny yellow pompom-like blossoms—which he described as a "delicious flowering shrub." Jefferson was insistent that his greenhouse was not meant for an extensive collection of plants, writing on more than one occasion that the acacia "is the only plant besides the Orange that I would take the trouble of nursing in a green house. I rely on the garden & farm for a great portion of the enjoyment I promise myself in retirement." Yet, we know that Jefferson used the space to start seeds of a variety of plants, including tender sorts.

In fact, McMahon no doubt realized that Jefferson's greenhouse could potentially provide an environment perfectly suited to the needs of another class of plants: the semi-arid South African species, which, in America were still considered novelties from abroad. Unusual species from the Cape of Good Hope filtered into Europe by the 1500s, after the Portuguese explorer, Bartholomew Diaz (1450-1500) first rounded the Cape in 1488. Some of the earliest were grown by British herbalist John Gerard in his London garden during the late 16th century. By the mid-17th century the Dutch had established a trading post on the Cape and plants began to reach Amsterdam. The 18th-century Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, who developed the binomial system of nomenclature used internationally in the biological sciences, described this rich floristic region as, "... that paradise on earth, the Cape of Good Hope, which the Beneficent Creator has enriched with His choicest wonders."

Caption......

The most familiar plants from this region are our common garden and scented geraniums (*Pelargonium* sp.), but other species such as heaths and a great multitude of

bulbs also intrigued garden enthusiasts. Scottish botanist Francis Masson, the first plant collector engaged by Banks in 1772, made his maiden voyage to the Cape of Good Hope aboard Captain James Cook's ship, the *Resolution*. Two Swedish plant collectors — Anders Sparrman and Carl Peter Thunberg — arrived at Cape Town at the same time and, among the three, they discovered most of the Cape bulbs known today. Their introductions fostered a new fashion in British gardening, and inspired plant devotees such as William Curtis of London, who featured them in his highly influential Botanical Magazine.

Cape Bulbs for the "Greenhouse Department"

Among the auriculas and polyanthus in McMahon's February 1812 shipment were "2 Roots Amaryllis Belladonna," from the Cape of Good Hope. These bulbs were most certainly intended for indoor culture, in such an environment possible in Jefferson's greenhouse. The *Amaryllis belladonna*, or Cape Belladonna,

Belladonna Lily

was first introduced into Britain by way of Portugal in 1712, but was not likely available through American nurseries until after 1800. By the 19th century it was cultivated abundantly in Italy and exported to northern Europe. Linnaeus gave this lovely bulb the species name, *belladonna*, or beautiful lady, for the "exquisite blending of pink and white in that flower, as in the female complexion." Because the foliage, following the rhythms of the southern hemisphere, grows throughout the winter months and dies to the ground by late summer when the leafless, bronzy green flower stalks emerge, the bulb is most commonly known as Naked-lady Lily. Throughout the arid, mountainous regions of the southwestern Cape Province, these heavily-scented blossoms burst suddenly from the heat-baked soil in just a few days during early spring, corresponding with early fall in North America. Thus, when McMahon sent a second parcel of three more "roots" of the "Belladonna Lily" in October his directions noted: "if their strong succulent fibers or roots retain their freshness on receipt of them, do not have them cut off, but let them be planted with the bulbs in pots of good rich mellow earth; the flowers are beautiful and fragrant; their season of flowering is Septr. and Octr.," indicating that the fleshy roots were still actively growing and that they had likely just finished flowering.

Caption...

McMahon's packages to Jefferson sent on October 24 contained other, even more unusual South African bulbs. "With this

Tritonia hyalina

letter" he wrote, "I expect you will receive a small box containing, 6 Roots Watsonia Meriana . . . 6 do. Trittonia fenestrata [*T. hyalina*] . . . 6 Morea flexuosa [*Hexaglottis longiflora*] All Cape of Good Hope bulbs and consequently, with you, belonging to the Green-house department." The three somewhat obscure species are all members of the Iris family. Of the three, the Windowed- or Open-flowered Tritonia was the most recent introduction, having just arrived from the Cape in 1801. The flowers of this species are widely cup-shaped and bright, fiery orange-red. What is most intriguing is the base of each petal, which is nearly translucent, like a clouded glass.

In an earlier shipment that fall, McMahon also sent "3 Roots of Antholyza aethiopica [*Chasmanthe aethiopica*], a Green House bulb," again, another South African Iris species. This particularly stately plant forms a lush stand of sword-like leaves two to three feet tall. Its curved and hooded, scarlet and green flowers open like the mouth of an enraged animal, hence the derivation of its genus name, from the Greek chasme, meaning "gaping." If Jefferson had any success with his South African bulbs, it would surely have been with this species, for it grows so easily and abundantly that it is today considered a weed in southern California.

Caption...

McMahon's perseverance in enticing Jefferson to try his hand with plants intended for the "greenhouse department" is admirable considering Jefferson's repeated reluctance to provide a hospitable environment for them. In April 1811, a year

before the Cape bulbs arrived, he wrote to McMahon:

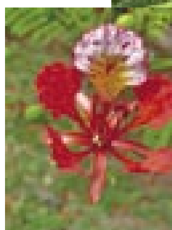
"You enquire whether I have a hot house, greenhouse, or to what extent I pay attention to these things. I have only a green house, and have used that only for a very few articles. My frequent and long absences at a distant possession render my efforts even for the few greenhouse plants I aim at, abortive. During my last absence in the winter, every plant I had in it perished."

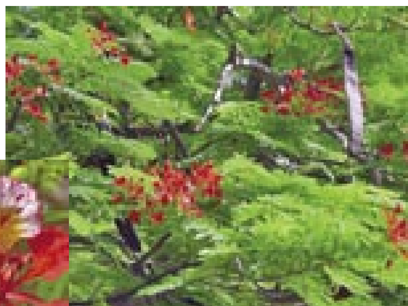
TJF

Cornelia Randolph

Stewardship of the tender plants at Monticello may ultimately have fallen to Jefferson's granddaughters, especially to Ellen Wayles Randolph (1796-1876) and Cornelia Jefferson Randolph (1799-1871), who inherited their "grandpapa's" devotion to gardening. Correspondence between the young women in later years indicated that plants were actually removed from the frigid greenhouse during winter months. Cornelia Randolph wrote to her sister Virginia on December 1, 1820, "I had all our plants moved into the dining room before I left home and yours along with them. I hope they may be able to bear this bitter cold weather." Again, on October 31, 1825, Cornelia would write, this time to her sister Ellen, "Mary and myself are established in mama's room with all her furniture and the sunny window in which I shall range my green house plants when the weather is cold enough to take them in..."

Writing to her mother from Poplar Forest in July 1819, Ellen Randolph specified a most unusual treasure: "I rely on Virginia's care of my pride of Barbadoes and multiflora rose, if my mocking birds and other multiflora should arrive, I recommend them most particularly to the whole family." Again, in September of that year, she wrote to Virginia Randolph: "Thank Aunt R [or M?] for taking such good care of my pride of Barbadoes." In the appendix of *The American Gardener's Calendar* (1806), McMahon classified her "pride of Barbadoes" as "Barbadoes Prickly Flower-fence... *Caesalpinia pulcherrima*," under his listing of "Hot-House Trees and Shrubs." This curious tropical American species, a relative of the Brazil wood, was brought to Europe as early as 1691. A member of the bean family, this lanky shrub or small tree with formidable thorns resembles the acacia in foliage. Its highly ornamental blossoms, distinguished by long and gracefully curled red stamens, vary in color from scarlet-red edged with yellow to rose-colored to pure yellow. William Curtis' *The Botanical Magazine*,



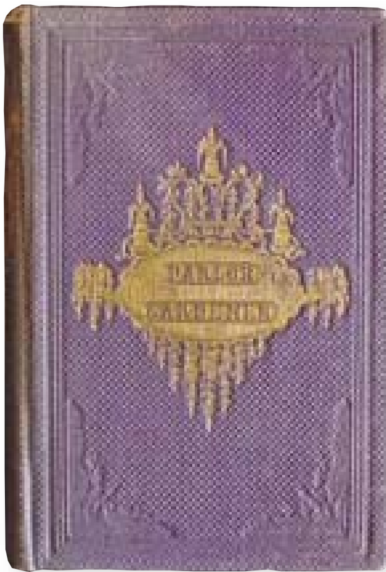


JOSEF BEERY

Barbadoes Prickly Flower Fence, "Pride of Barbados"

Fig. 1.—The Mantelpiece Garden.

1807, described the plant under its synonym *Poinciana pulcherrima*, and noted "Although common in the West Indies… it was probably imported into Barbadoes from the Cape de Verde Islands." The descriptive text also indicated that, even in England, the plant "cannot be preserved out of the stove."



Many years after Thomas Jefferson's death, Cornelia Randolph's gardening legacy would be further confirmed through the publication of a small book on indoor gardening, originally printed in France, which she translated and edited. *The Parlor Gardener: A Treatise on the House Culture of Ornamental Plants. Translated from the French and Adapted to American Use by Cornelia J. Randolph, of Virginia.* (Boston, 1861), complete with Victorian-style line drawings of parlor flower stands, *étagères*, and chandelier vases, includes instructions on propagating plants in portable greenhouses and creating gardens upon the balcony, terrace, window, and even mantle piece. Certainly well beyond the scope and breadth of her grandfather's interests, Cornelia studied a whole host of the novel as well as traditional floral subjects, becoming an ardent amateur florist in her own right.

Peggy Cornett, Director
Thomas Jefferson Center for Historic Plants