

Vergil in his poem on farming called the Georgics tells how an old countryman with only a few acres of poor land can be as happy as a king when he comes home from gardening all day long to enjoy the "unbought feasts" his country garden provides. Many Roman writers add their support to the views of the satirist Juvenal, who recommends a country cottage with these words:

There's a little garden, too, and a small well which easily provides
a drink for your seedlings without your needing to haul up the water
with a rope. Live there, happy with your hoe, as the gardener of a
neat plot from which a hundred vegetarians could be given a good supper!
(Satires III, 226)

If a Roman needed advice on how to plant and care for a productive garden, Columella, a Spaniard living in Italy some time in the first century A.D. (perhaps while Nero was emperor of Rome), provided an excellent handbook on farming and gardening. He recommended a rich sandy loam soil for the selected site, which should be surrounded for protection by a thick thorn hedge. Irrigation was necessary for successful production, and so a stream or, failing that, a well had to be handy.

After digging the ground thoroughly in the fall, and manuring and cultivating it in the spring, the garden was ready for planting. Columella suggested that the gardener should divide the plot into raised beds which were small enough for those who did the weeding to make their way along the paths between, weeding first one side and then the other of each bed. When the soil was thoroughly prepared, then flowers, herbs or vegetables might be sown. Flowers that Columella recommended, calling them "earthbound stars", included snowdrops, marigolds, narcissus, snapdragons, lilies, hyacinths, violets, pansies, and roses; several flowers, such as celandine or poppy, were planted for the juice or seeds which were said to have medicinal properties.

Many of the herbs that we are familiar with (at least in their dried form at the supermarket, if not in our gardens), the Romans also grew. Mint, fennel, dill, mustard, garlic, basil, parsley, marjoram, thyme, and coriander were all found in Columella's garden, with due care taken to see that mint was set in "sweet marshy soil", that thyme should grow in ground "neither rich nor manured, but sunny", and that garlic was both planted and picked when there was no moon visible at night, so that it should be "less pungent, and not inclined to make the breath smell of those who chewed it".

Columella's vegetable patch contained a number of varieties we still enjoy: asparagus, beets, lettuce, parsnip, cucumbers, onions and leeks; as well as several we are perhaps not so familiar with: artichokes, mallows, capers, lupines (which we grow for flowers more commonly than for their tiny pea-like seeds), colewort, and several kinds of herbs for salads and for seasoning. If we had been there to give him a hand with his weeding, we should have missed the corn, tomatoes, or potatoes we expect to find in our gardens, and might very well have pulled out the rue or purslane which he had carefully transplanted in early April for his summer salads!

But the king of his garden was undoubtedly the cabbage, which he said gave "its stalks and leaves to peasant and to palace alike throughout the world, in plenty." Two hundred years before him, Cato, another farmer and gardener, had said of the cabbage: "Cabbage it is that stands head and shoulders above all the other vegetables, and you can eat it either cooked or raw." Not only was it considered to be a most wholesome food, but many medicines could be prepared from it, Cato declared, which could be used to cure an astonishing variety of ailments, from digestive upsets to dislocations, from ulcers to arthritis. Apparently the more "warm cabbage, with (olive) oil and a little salt the patient would eat while convalescing, the more quickly he would recover from the disease."!

As summer ended, and the last rows of turnips and radishes had been sown for gathering in the fall, Columella would leave his garden for a while:

Now the wine-god is worrying about his grapes, and calls to us, telling us to shut up our well-weeded gardens. We countrymen obey him, close up the garden and happily busy ourselves with the grape-harvest, fermenting the grape-juice in the vats, and filling our wine-jars to overflowing with the rich new wine. (De Re Rustica X, 424-432)

But after the vintage, we can be sure he was back in his garden again, digging and hoeing in preparation for another season's produce.