Thomas Jefferson as Landscape Architect

On a recent trip to Charlottesville, Virginia, this editor visited Thomas Jefferson’s home, Monticello. It is well-known that Jefferson was a lawyer, a first gardener of his country, an inventor, the primary author of The Declaration of Independence, founder of the University of Virginia and the list continues. To paraphrase President John F. Kennedy when entertaining a group of Nobel Laureates: *There has never been such a gathering of great minds in the White House except when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.* But this trip was not to discover more about these accomplishments. It was a journey into the mind of one of America’s earliest landscape architects.

The term “landscape architect” had not been used until Frederick Law Olmsted, America’s preeminent landscape architect, defined and named the profession. But looking at the homes of our Founding Fathers, it is evident they were using the skills without the name.
For any who have visited the home of George Washington - Mount Vernon – it is evident that he had the skilled eye of a landscape designer. The same can be said of James Monroe and James Madison when visiting their homes which are also near Charlottesville. All of these presidents designed their estates long before Olmsted named the profession.

To learn more about Jefferson and his inspirations for designing, read the well-researched book, *Thomas Jefferson – Landscape Architect* by Frederick Doveton and Ralph E. Griswold published by The University of Virginia Press.

**PRINCIPLES OF LANDSCAPE DESIGN**

The basic elements of landscape design are unity, scale, balance, simplicity, variety, emphasis and sequence as they apply to line, form, texture and color. However, before beginning to think about any of these, a site must be chosen. Even though Thomas Jefferson knew that water would be a problem for his chosen site, the view that it commanded was worth the extra effort. Monticello, his “little mountain,” was indeed on a mountain top. Water would have to be transported there from the river below. But Jefferson was an aesthetic. He would have this site and no other. In his designs, he planned how water would be transported and stored including how ice would be brought to the mountain top and kept there.
This photograph illustrates one of Jefferson’s ingenious ways to supply his plantation. The water for the fish pond was first brought up from the river to the mountain top. Then fish were brought from local streams to stock it. Monticello then had fresh fish right outside its door!
Feeding, clothing and caring for the vast number of family members and enslaved people took careful planning well ahead of anyone living on the site. Jefferson was renowned for his meticulous record keeping. He did careful research to know just how much of each crop needed to be planted. He would keep those records from year to year (and they still exist). Gardens and fields were planted in pleasing designs and situated from the mansion to give beautiful views. They were a landscaping wonder.

*Enjoy these photos of the vegetable gardens:*

*Notice the privy in the top left photo. Privies were often placed in or near the garden and were often designed for beauty and to complement the home’s design. Thus the brick facing was used on this privy.*
On this page are views of the west lawn serpentine walk designed by Jefferson in 1808 and the flower beds which border it. By 1812, he had another thought and decided not to mix up the flowers but to plant each in its own section. The flower beds were destroyed by a subsequent owner of Monticello. With thanks to The Garden Club of Virginia* and Jefferson’s detailed record keeping, these flower beds have been restored for all to enjoy. *Member of NGC

Sign below center
was placed by The Garden Club of Virginia.
A Few Useful Tips

Designers design for people.
Choose the right plant for the site.
Consider maintainability when designing.
A design should match the owner’s interest.

Watch for a Landscape Design School coming up near you or offer to sponsor one in your part of the state. You will make new friends, hear exciting speakers and fill your mind with useful knowledge.