Cultivating History
Food, Crops, and Art

Exhibit Guide

Works from the Oak Spring Garden Foundation Garden Library Collection
The Oak Spring Garden Library. Photo taken by Maxwell Smith.

The traveling exhibit and related materials presented here were produced by the Oak Spring Garden Foundation. The exhibit was produced using facsimiles of original works held in the Oak Spring Garden Library.

About OSGF

The mission of the Oak Spring Garden Foundation (OSGF) is to perpetuate and share the gifts of Rachel (“Bunny”) Lambert Mellon, including her residence, garden, estate and the Oak Spring Garden Library, to serve the public interest. OSGF is dedicated to inspiring and facilitating scholarship and public dialogue on the history and future of plants, including the culture of gardens and landscapes and the importance of plants for human well-being.

About VMFA’s Educational Exhibitions for Loan

The Office of Statewide Partnerships offers a world of art through its Educational Exhibitions. These portable exhibitions consist of reproductions of great art from the VMFA permanent collection, or panels of informative text with photo images, or framed posters. To find out more, visit: https://www.vmfa.museum/statewide/program-category/educational-exhibitions-for-loan/
Table of Contents

How to use the exhibit 1

About the Exhibit

Introduction 2

Exploration, Exchange, and Scientific Inquiry 3

Food as Social History 4

Crops and the Economy 5

17th–19th Century Botanical Art and Illustration: Beauty & Scientific Documentation 6
How to use the exhibit

The image above illustrates the suggested layout for hanging the panels. Ideally, all of the panels should be displayed together, in order. However, if your facility is short on space, the text and panels were created so that you can display each half of the exhibit on its own—either Theme One or Theme Two.

Each panel has a number on the back that corresponds with a label copy panel. The label should hang below the corresponding image panel, as shown. In some cases, a label might go under more than one image.

OSGF has created numerous activities for grades 4-12 to go along with the exhibit. To go to the Activity Packet, click here.
Introduction

*Cultivating History: Food, Crops, and Art* exhibits the untold stories of everyday crops. The exhibit spans over 200 years of botanical art and illustration and reflects the cross-cultural histories of various plants that have contributed to the arts and sciences as well as important social and economic issues. The exhibit includes 16 images of crops and two maps that illustrate the global trade of plants before, during, and after European exploration and colonization of the New World. The exhibit relates the histories of sunflowers, maize, tobacco, pineapples, peaches, and apples to important social and economic issues in Virginia and the world. More broadly, the exhibit reveals how the process of sharing, conserving, and documenting plants has continued to shape our human understanding of the natural world.

The exhibit is broken down into two sections. In Theme One, the exhibit introduces the role of plants during the clash of colonial Europeans and Native Americans, the cross-pollination of cultures during the Columbian Exchange, and the transatlantic slave trade. Each storyline shows how the exchange of plants has connected groups of people thousands of miles apart, for better and for worse. In Theme Two, the story of the global trade of crops continues, but with a special focus on crops in Virginia and Americas and the unique environmental growing conditions that support them. The stories of pineapples, peaches, and apples illustrate how today’s gardens and grocery stores include such a wide variety of plants.

*Cultivating History: Food, Crops, and Art* provides a visual reference for starting important conversations that relate to the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs) for grades 4 through 12. Because the exhibit’s label copy is limited, this Exhibit Guide and the Lesson Plans provide more depth and background for continuing the exhibit’s lessons in the classroom. While there are many discussions that can build off the exhibit, we have focused here on (1) Exploration and Scientific Inquiry, (2) Food as Social History, (3) Crops and the Economy, and (4) 17th-19th Century Botanical Art and Illustration.
In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue. What did he find when he and his crew arrived? — A land full of vibrant native cultures and plants unique to the Americas. European explorers found many New World plants that intrigued them: sunflowers, maize, tobacco, pineapples, tomatoes, and potatoes, to name a few. Imagine a world where the Irish didn’t grow potatoes and Italians didn’t have pizza sauce! The world we live in would look much different today if the exchange and scientific study of plants had never happened.

The Virginia landscape would look much different without European plants as well. Apples, peaches, carrots, and cabbage were all brought to the Americas from Europe and Asia. What would our grocery stores look like without food from the Old World? Some of the crops we associate with Virginia, such as the pineapple, do not even grow here. Europeans brought pineapples, coffee, bananas, and other tropical plants to Virginia. To understand Virginia’s history, we must appreciate the crops that traveled here from thousands of miles away, centuries ago.

Map from *West Indian Atlas* (1775) by the cartographer Thomas Jefferys
Food as Social History

“There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace.”
— Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac

Food is steeped in tradition and is a part of what develops and defines culture. People connect through food. But all too often, people do not connect food with the country where it comes from or the land on which it grows. Cultivating History: Food, Crops, and Art explains how the global crop trade has influenced food and cultures in both the New World and Old World. The exhibit covers a wide breadth of exchange—from how apples became a symbol of the American melting pot, to how maize emerged as a dietary staple throughout the world.

The activity “Colonial Dinner Menu” for example, takes a deeper look at how the exchange of crops and cultures produced what we now call “Southern Cuisine.” When the English colonists arrived in present-day Jamestown, they found comfort and familiarity in mimicking European cuisine as much as possible, which made them heavily reliant on English imports instead of growing their own crops. Although the Native Americans taught them how to grow American staples, such as maize, colonists stuck to English tradition whenever possible, making favorites such as plum pudding when they had the means to. However, American and English cuisine merged with the introduction of new crops. Over time, different cultures and diets united, forming what we know now as Southern Culture and Cuisine.

Plate from *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* (1705), a work by the artist, botanist, and entomologist Maria Sibylla Merian.
Crops and the Economy

Because we depend on crops, our marketplaces depend on them too. We need them in order to eat, grow, and live, and also use them for clothes, chemicals, and other materials. Whether we realize it or not, we rely on crops on a day-to-day basis. Likewise, the buying, selling, and trade of crops happens daily. Our crops fuel more than just our stomachs—they are a large part of what powers our economy.

In early Virginia, tobacco was the “cash crop” —or high-earning crop—that made the colonial economy successful. Virginia tobacco cultivation competed with the production of Spanish tobacco, which had previously dominated the market, and brought wealth to both England and the colony. Because of the crop’s popularity, the desire to quickly grow and export the crop influenced other industries as well, particularly the slave trade. Enslaved Africans were taken captive and brought to Virginia as cheap labor in order to increase the cultivation of the plant.

Apples were also important to Virginia’s early economy. Brought from the Old World to the colonies in the early 1600’s, they were used primarily in cider-making. Cider was an important colonial commodity—the drink was a cultural staple for settling Europeans and was even produced and traded from the orchard yields of Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello and George Washington’s Mount Vernon.

Today, maize and the sunflower are also two important crops in the world. Maize is used as food for both humans and livestock as well as in starches, syrups, chemicals and biofuels. It is one of the most widely cultivated crops in the world, with the United States, China, and Brazil as top growers. Sunflowers on the other hand are just coming back into production on American farms. The crop is cultivated the most in Russia, Ukraine, and Argentina, primarily for its oils.

Crops have been economic influencers historically and globally. Because we often take the significances of such plants for granted, Cultivating History: Food, Crops, and Art takes an important pause to look at how crops have worked and continue to work for us in our lives.
Works of botanical art—created for aesthetic purposes, and often including images of flowers—have appeared throughout history for centuries. However, botanical illustrations—used to accurately depict plants for scientific study and a record for posterity—were not popular until the Scientific Revolution in the 1400s. The works in *Cultivating History: Food, Crops and Art* include both botanical art and botanical illustration and date from the 17th to the 19th centuries, including from the onset of “the golden age of botanical art” in the 1600’s. They cover both botanical art and botanical illustration. Several of the activities in the packet explore the artists and artistic processes of early botanical works.

Regardless of if the work was botanical art or botanical illustration, the works in *Cultivating History: Food, Crops and Art* all played an important role in communicating visual information about plants. Explorers, scientists, and herbalists, among others, were heavily reliant on artists to illustrate and explain observations about plants. Students today may be surprised by the idea that these paintings and engravings were such an important part of documenting history before the advent of photography and the digital age. The artworks in *Cultivating History: Food, Crops and Art* provide insight into human interactions with plants through time and across various disciplines.

Plate from *Hortus Eystettensis* (1713), a florilegium from “the golden age of botanical art” by the botanical scholar Basilius Besler.