

The culture of African people greatly affected the history of Tennessee gardening. Many of the two hundred thousand slaves here grew gardens for themselves and their owners. We still grow crops from seeds brought here from Africa.

Brown crowder peas and California Black-eyed peas came from West Africa in the slavetrade. These define southern cooking. They are not a pea, but a bean, although a distinctly separate genus. While *Phaseolus*, the common bean, will suffer from beetles and drought, the leathery-leafed *Vigna* stays dark green all summer long. Consequently, cow peas, as they're called, make great cover crops.

Jumbo peanuts were brought to Virginia from Central Africa. The Kimbundu people there called them "goobers." We used to sing a song about eating goober peas.

Cayenne peppers came to North Carolina first. Other hot peppers favored by slaves were the Scotch Bonnet, Habenero, and the Fish Pepper.

White folks thought tomatoes were poisonous, but black folks knew better. They popularized tomatoes and grew the Cherokee purple and the Purple Calabash.

Greens were popular, too. Seven Top Turnip, Georgia Southern Collards and Southern Giant Curled Mustard have been staples in Southern gardens since the mid-1700's.

Georgia Rattlesnake Watermelons represent a common melon introduced from Africa in the 1830's. Other watermelons came even earlier.

Gourds were imported not for their looks, but their usefulness. The Long Handed Dipper Gourd hung near most every spring or well, and the Bottle Gourd carried beverages to the fields, or was hung up as a birdhouse for purple martins.

Okra is another African-American tradition. Like these gardeners, we also grow the Red Burgundy variety.

Creasy salad, spearmint, cushaws and eggplants are also part of the heritage we owe to Africa. Sweet potatoes, cabbage and many other crops were propagated in early Tennessee gardens. Our debt to these farming slaves is enormous.

I wonder if my house was built by black people. The logs are hand-hewn and put together with dove-tail notches. As one of Macon County's oldest homes, we get ancestors visiting and telling stories. Around the Civil War Era old man Barton built this home, but he could easily have had

help. From land clearing and banjos, to cooking and gardening, African culture certainly shaped Tennessee.