

Grow Your Own Liberty!

General

Grade Level

Middle School, High School

Author Info

CVlautzenheiser – 2014 Barringer Fellow, Monticello Teacher Institute

Type of Lesson

Challenge

Type of Project (Individual/Group/Both)

Both

Duration

30-60 minutes

Challenge Question

Thomas Jefferson experimented with over 300 varieties of vegetables and fruits in his “laboratory” garden at Monticello, but he rarely cultivated the crops himself. Jefferson relied on the toil and sweat of slave labor to carry out his own experimentation on the “little mountain.” Picture yourself as an enslaved person at Monticello in the early 19th century. How could you look toward the garden for inspiration with an eventual goal that may have included your own political freedom? Which crops (fruits, vegetables, flowers) grown in the Monticello gardens best represent the ideas of freedom and liberty?

Rationale

Students will manipulate the broader concepts of liberty and freedom through the eyes of enslaved peoples at the Monticello plantation; specifically in the gardens, vineyards and orchards of Jefferson’s working “laboratories.” How can students use the political concepts to encounter slavery as a mechanism for scientific improvement of the field of agriculture? Does the institution of slavery sour the

results of Jefferson's progressive, agricultural endeavors? How might the results have changed had Jefferson toiled with his slaves more regularly, OR had used empowered, free individuals rather than enslaved peoples?

Notes to Teacher

This lesson activity is appropriate for post-instruction of broad political concepts such as liberty, emancipation, manumission, etc. Additionally, I would suggest that instructors teach the Declaration of Independence, and have already delivered basic biographical information about Jefferson BEFORE conducting this challenge opportunity for students. Finally, showcasing some photographs of the Jefferson garden spaces at Monticello using www.monticello.org, or a collection of photographs of the actual gardens (<http://archive.monticello.org/luna/servlet> – Monticello photograph collection) could help with introduction of initial project concepts.

Technology adaptations: Instructors that are limited with student technology usage could replace the template space (t-shirt design opportunity) with blank notecards for students to utilize (1 side drawings, 1 side explanations.) The fruits, vegetables, flowers could be used as symbols or as part of a collage for representation.

Steps

1. Have students visit the Historic Gardens portion of the Monticello.org website for research and project inspiration (<http://www.monticello.org/site/house-and-gardens/historic-gardens>.) There students will be able to look into fruit trees, vegetable gardens, and flowering spaces that were (and perhaps still are) grown at Monticello. This will allow students to explore new species of plants, and perhaps pair their own "arbor interest" with the concepts of political liberty. Have students independently (or in small groups) brainstorm about the fundamental question: Which crops best represent the idea of liberty or freedom? How can students take physical objects (that are typically unrelated to political ideologies) like produce and compare/contrast their appearances, tastes, yields, etc. to a slave's life and potential goal of manumission?
2. Next, students need to spend some time conducting research about the lives of enslaved peoples at Monticello. Using the Plantation & Slavery portion of the Monticello.org website (<http://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery>), students can explore tools & techniques of agricultural production at the plantation, can "meet" some of the individuals and families that lived and worked on the plantation (through pictures/quotes/stories) and can think about the tedious labor involved in cultivating Jefferson's personal experiments. Ask students questions like: Do YOU like gardening for your parents or grandparents? Are you forced to do the work for them, or do you volunteer to help out? Which fruits or vegetables would be the least appealing to raise & maintain if you were one of Jefferson's slaves? Could you find personal joy or satisfaction in growing any of the particular crops? If yes, which ones and why?
3. Finally, students need an opportunity to take their research and individual ideas about the garden & the goal of political liberty, and put them toward some type of synthesis activity for assessment. Students will either respond with images/text, create a t-shirt, or a digital poster to explain their findings.

Regardless of activity students need to answer the following in their work:

1. What 3-4 fruit/flower/vegetable crops at Monticello would best represent the ideas of freedom/liberty/emancipation for enslaved peoples that tended them?
2. Justify your selection with your own thoughts regarding the crop planting, maintenance, harvesting, etc., as well as the broader concepts of liberty or freedom.

Extension: Have students consider the ramifications of Jefferson's own life and ideology had he not been merely a garden planner & cultivator of processes, and was actually a gardener that worked WITH his enslaved peoples rather than expecting results FROM them. Additionally, how might Jefferson's garden experiments differed if he had not owned slaves, but actually employed his gardeners and empowered them to help with his scientific discoveries & detailed results?

