GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

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Planting With Purpose

Alex Correia & Anton Ginella



At first glance, the guest-facing Idea Garden at Longwood Gardens captivates through beauty and a multi-sensory experience of annuals, perennials, vegetables, fruits, herbs and more. Beyond its visual splendor, however, the garden reflects a growing shift within the food and horticulture industries. Here, crop diversity and thoughtful planting design aren't simply ornamental; they're intentional tools to inspire menus, nourish diners and challenge long-standing ideas.

Chef Noah Worthington and intern Julianne Dodson harvesting basil.
Photo by Marleigh Flanagan.

The heart of this work is the Ornamental Kitchen Garden, a space dedicated to growing vegetables since 1927. Today, it supports the growth of more than 200 rotating fruit, vegetable and herb crops throughout the growing season, with nearly 90% grown from seed each year. The garden tells a clear agricultural story: Food production is foundational to horticulture. As an educational space, it introduces guests to familiar and uncommon varieties, and growing techniques alike.

Equally important, the Ornamental Kitchen Garden is a highly intentional production space for Longwood's onsite restaurant, 1906—a dining experience rooted in the seasons, the soil and the Gardens themselves. Much of what appears on the plate is grown just steps away in this living laboratory of culinary treasures, the result of close collaboration between gardeners and chefs.

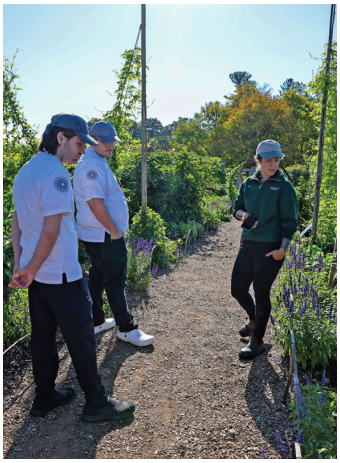
As we grow almost everything from seed, we enjoy exceptional flexibility in variety selection and crop scheduling. Heirloom crops with cultural stories grow alongside modern, time-tested varieties bred for performance and flavor.

Together they form a crop list equally shaped by chef demand and gardener expertise.

Production is rooted in purpose and begins months before planting. Gardeners and chefs work together to forecast realistic harvest windows to plan menus that are firmly grounded in seasonality. A watermelon, for example, may feel symbolic of summer, but in our garden isn't available until August at the earliest—and menus reflect that reality. This commitment to true seasonality strengthens both flavor and integrity.

Once we've selected our crops, we engage in garden design and layout, guided by principles of crop rotation and the design goal of visual drama. Succession planning then extends production across spring, summer and fall, supporting 1906's menus, which change every six weeks. We stagger harvests by planting multiple varieties with different days to maturity and by planting the same variety at regular intervals. The result is a steady, reliable supply without sacrificing diversity.

Though not certified organic, the garden follows a rigorously organic approach. We don't use chemical fertilizers or pesticides. Instead, we support soil health through a systems-based approach focused on biodiversity, including targeted organic amendments informed by soil tests, minimal tillage, compost teas and mulches. On leaf surfaces, compost teas and ferments to encourage beneficial microbes.



We also manage pests through biodiversity, challenging the idea that insects in gardens are inherently problematic. We interweave flowering plants, especially those in the Apiaceae family, throughout the beds to attract beneficial insects. Spiders patrol soils surfaces, wasps and hoverflies target aphids, and our purple martins and raptors provide additional pest control. This living system allows for some pest presence, while keeping damage below action thresholds, offering guests a more nuanced understanding of how production gardens function.

Ornamental Kitchen Garden walkthrough with chefs Noah Worthington (left) and George Murkowicz and Senior Horticulturist Alex Correia. Photo by Marleigh Flanagan.

What makes a crop beloved by both gardener and chef? Flavor comes first. Varieties like Badger Flame golden beets, bred to eliminate the earthy flavor often associated with beets, stand out for both taste and color. Jimmy Nardello peppers deliver exceptional sweetness when blistered or fried. Texture matters, too. Glossy Mochi tomatoes look and taste like gumdrops. Little Gem and Salanova lettuces provide crunch, color and speed from garden to plate.

Versatility is equally prized. Crops are harvested at precise stages and multiple parts of a plant are often used. Fava bean flowers become edible garnishes, while leaves of Bulls Blood beets are dried into powder before roots are harvested later.



Some of the most in-demand crops aren't traditional vegetables at all. Edible flowers—nasturtiums, violas, marigolds, salvias, zinnias and sunflowers—fuel garnishes, cocktails and dramatic plating. Unconventional crops, such as sprouting cauliflowers, replace bland supermarket standards with spicy, sculptural stems, underscoring the power of diversification.

Aerial view of chef and horticulturist meeting in the Ornamental Kitchen Garden. Photo by Carol Gross.

As growers and chefs respond to consumer curiosity and the demand for flavor over uniformity, gardens like ours point to a future rooted in diversity and intention—where production, ecology and cuisine thrive together. **GT**

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