Virginia’s Earliest Settlers had to garden to grow their food. They had little time to tend flowers. As settlements expanded, the colonists constructed large plantation houses along the James River and established formal gardens. Botanists traveled between Virginia and England as early as the mid-1600s to collect plants for estate gardens.

Enslaved Africans kept kitchen (or “provision”) gardens. After working on plantations during the day, they tended peanuts, black-eyed peas, and sweet potatoes—crops they knew in Africa. They grew gourds to dry and use as water dippers, serving utensils, and birdhouses. Many Virginia African Americans use gourds as their ancestors did.

In the early 1900s, the U. S. Department of Agriculture promoted school gardens. Many African American Rosenwald Schools embraced the school garden movement, which introduced new food preservation technologies, like canning, to surrounding communities.

(Above) George Washington designed the gardens at his Mount Vernon estate in the so-called “Augustan style,” characterized by its classical influence and carefully calculated proportions.

(Left) Estate gardens such as this one in Kent, England, provided their owners with a beautiful space for relaxing or entertaining.