

Americans Thinking Green: Thomas Jefferson to Henry  
Mitchell

By Connie Haas Zuber

Prepared for presentation at Quest Club February 22, 2013

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Here's the sneaky thing about Quest papers:

My topic directs me to two fine Americans who both — with all due respect — are dead. You'd think then that this topic would not present a moving target. But no! Jefferson and Mitchell led me straight into a fast-changing territory ... not just our climate but also our economy, our politics, our science, our communication and how we interact as nations and as individuals. Let me share my journey.

It begins in our gardens. This starting point is fitting because Americans Thinking Green is rooted in gardens.

You hear and read a lot of thinking about Americans and the natural world (along with commentary about why everything else is “natural” and people, somehow, are not) and about wilderness, both how we have come to treasure it and how we fear and destroy it past and present. My thinking has come into sharper focus while working on this paper, and I really think the topic as given to me is rather inspired to encourage me to do so. As I see it now, the hallowed and humbling act of gardening frames America's understanding of our relationship to the physical world. It's not all there is to the relationship, but it frames it. Americans have been and are “green,” but our kind of green has the black/brown/red of dirt under its fingernails and stuck onto its boots.

Americans have long looked outdoors and seen how it could be, not just what it is, and we have always found the time, energy and resources to act on our inspired visions. We have made those visions real so incredibly quickly that evaluating the consequences of our actions has been left until we had to do it. Until lovely mountain vistas were covered by kudzu vines. Until we had to figure out what had gone wrong with Lake Erie. Until we couldn't swim in our rivers any more. Until the Dust Bowl. Until declining topsoil levels made us face up to the prospect of more chemicals or different farming methods and vastly lower yields. Until yet another year of dangerous, costly, extreme weather — a year that turned out to have the hottest average temperature on record in the contiguous United States, beating the record most recently set in 1998.

Thomas Jefferson would really have to think about what we've become, and he'd be hard pressed to be very happy about it. His vision, his very green vision, was quite different.

Thomas Jefferson was born in 1743, four years after Dutch botanist John Frederik Gronovius had published “Flora Virginica,” the first systematic catalog of North American flora. Note here that North American (and other) plants had been collected long enough and efforts to propagate them where they were not native had become successful enough that a Dutch botanist

was a perfectly logical person to catalog the New World's plants. The American colonies were not yet in a position to publish their own research and have it read respectfully in the Old World.

Gronovius, it should be noted, was an advocate for Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus and had paid for the publication in 1735 of Linnaeus's "Systema Naturae." It has become the classification system used worldwide, and it was an immediate scandal. The prissy British, with decades of Empire growth and plant collecting and plenty of wealth behind them, not only resisted Linnaeus's challenge to their dominance (and their classification systems) but were appalled that it was based on the sexual organs of the plants. Appalled is barely a strong enough word, but we can have some sympathy for them in imagining what it would be like to read plant descriptions like Andrea Wulf quotes in her book "Brother Gardeners:"

"Many botanists were scandalised to learn that plants made love in the flower head — the 'bridal bed' — which God had 'adorned with such precious bedcurtains, and perfumed with so many sweet scents.' The calyx (the mostly green petal-like parts at the bottom of the flower head) Linnaeus had named the 'bedroom' .... Nor did it help that, according to Linnaeus, one wife frolicked with 'six husbands' in the lily's flower head, while tulip poplars enjoyed 'twenty males or more in the same marriage.' Oaks, pines and birch featured husbands and wives that lived in one house but had 'different beds,' while marigolds and ash trees were even more promiscuous, since their flowers contained husbands that 'live with wives and concubines.' The whole plant world suddenly seemed to be involved in a horticultural orgy — even the twenty-fourth class of flowerless plants was drawn into 'Clandestine marriages' where the 'Nuptials were celebrated privately.' Only a few flowers were 'virtuous' — like the canna, whose one stamen and one pistil were in a monogamous relationship."

Despite how embarrassing what Linnaeus blithely called his "simple sexual system" was to talk about in polite company, it required botanists simply to count stamens and pistils and was easy to understand and use, a valuable characteristic on a continent where everything was new and Enlightenment zeal for discovery and identification of natural laws meant everything needed to be described and classified. American gardeners, not so heavily invested in the British gardeners's expertise and experience and who had largely lacked the voluminous books and dried specimen collections required to use the leading British classification system, were impressed by its practicality and took to using it more easily.

One of the first colonial plant collectors to learn about the system is a man who is part of the botanical chain that made it inevitable that Thomas Jefferson would come to understand gardening as an essential part of building a new nation. John Bartram of Philadelphia had been collecting North American plants and sending cuttings and seeds and saplings, along with copious notes, to his friend and sponsor in England, Peter Collinson, since 1734. Collinson was a cloth merchant, inheriting a business from his father and then becoming very comfortable if not wealthy when business with both the American colonies and the West Indies boomed between the 1720s and the 1760s. Collinson was a man of his times — besotted with botany and part of an international network of gardeners, collectors of exotics from other countries and continents and designers of a new style of garden that was sweeping older more formal designs off the landscape. This network stretched from kings to anyone with a bit of ground to plant in something other than essential food crops. And Bartram was Collinson's source of North American plants and seeds. Bartram was a farmer and was deferential to Collinson, his social

better, until with the 1740s dawned his realization that he was as important to Collinson as Collinson was to him. Luckily, they were already in the process of becoming good friends. And thanks to the letters of introduction Collinson provided to the leading colonial gardeners whom Bartram visited on his annual plant collection journeys, Bartram not only realized his own expertise in his own world but became widely recognized as an expert, too.

So Thomas Jefferson was born into a world in which leading men practiced botany, collected plants and designed gardens — and in which the colonies were standing tall with pride in their much sought after flora and their own botanical expertise. He would have grown up surrounded by people who designed English, later American, gardens for their plantations, and he would have had easy entry into the colonial botany network through his College of William and Mary law professor, mentor and friend George Wythe, whose botanical plant and seed-swapping interests included interaction with John Dickinson, author of “Letters From a Farmer in Pennsylvania,” one of the first American botanical books, and a very successful one. Jefferson was one of many customers of John Bartram’s plants and seeds.

During the Revolutionary Years and shortly thereafter, Jefferson focused on plants on the scale of and with the practical purposes of agriculture. He fervently wanted the new United States to be able to feed and clothe itself and be free from mercantile ties with Europe, especially Great Britain. He used his travels here and abroad to deliver and pick up seeds that might represent useful crops, and he used his own fields and gardens at Monticello to test crops, experiment with farming methods that would renew the soil and try out new farm implements, including a plough he designed himself. Jefferson and some visionary others (including his fellow Founding Gardeners George Washington and John Adams) were horrified at the farming method most American farmers used, which was to use a field until yields fell and simply clear a new one and move on, leaving the depleted soil behind. Similarly, the average American farmer (and nearly everyone was a farmer on one scale or another at this time) was little interested in new planting or plowing methods. For what it’s worth, Adams was a connoisseur of manure and exchanged recipes and tips with both Jefferson and Washington.

In “Founding Gardeners,” Wulf tells the story of Jefferson during his diplomatic career in Europe risking all — really — to smuggle out of Italy some rice seeds that grew upland rather than submerged because he thought it so important to learn if they would be better than the paddy-grown rice American farmers then grew in malarial swamps in the South.

His green vision played a role in the development of the first national political parties as the once united Founding Fathers divided into Hamilton’s mercantile Federalists and Jefferson’s agrarian Republicans and fought bitterly for the soul of the nation. Jefferson’s green vision was of “an agrarian republic — a country of independent farmers untainted by the corrupting influence of Britain,” as Wulf describes it. “Botany would play a prominent role in this battle because useful crops would ensure America’s independence and self-sufficiency.”

But in what I am now seeing as our quintessential American way, that noble agrarian ideal was pursued alongside others, all of them as fast as we could with little worry about where it all would lead. The new nation needed symbols and an identity. A prevailing cultural belief was that a people reflected the strengths and weaknesses of their homeland, and Americans

quickly decided their huge, verdant, rich landscape was their identity. Jefferson got sucked into this idea, too, if he was not one of its leaders. His only book, “Notes on the State of Virginia,” was his attack on any Europeans (and there were some, one Frenchman in particular who had declared America’s landscape, animals and people to be “degenerate”) who thought the new nation and its people were any less than stupendous.

He actually took time during the desperately important and difficult Constitutional Convention in 1787 to prepare an English edition of “Notes on the State of Virginia,” which had originally been published in French (no surprise). He wanted a wider audience to hear his “bigger is better” logic. Post-Revolutionary War, a huge panther skin, measurements of the huge size of the American moose, descriptions of the huge trees and plants that grew here, and more were in his baggage when he left the infant nation to represent the United States in France, and similar measurements and proofs of America’s grandeur were in his book.

His “Notes,” Wulf writes, “was much more than a description of Virginia. It was a celebration of the whole of North America through its flora and fauna, because Jefferson believed that there was ‘nothing so charming as our own country.’ Not only was the United States of America magnificent, it was also ‘made on an improved plan,’ for Europe was only ‘a first idea, a crude production, before the maker knew his trade,’ Jefferson wrote. ...

“In Jefferson’s book, the flora and fauna of the continent became the foot soldiers of a patriotic battle to prove that America was vigorous and strong.”

It was in this spirit that Jefferson as President agreed to buy the Louisiana Purchase from Napoleon and organized the expedition of Meriwether Lewis, his secretary, and William Clark up the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean, with sufficient training and equipment to bring back hundreds of plant, animal, bird, insect and fossil samples, plus maps and observations of the fertility of the different areas they would cross.

“... the basis of Enlightenment thinking was to understand nature and nature’s productions, be they fossils, plants or animals,” Wulf writes. “Botany, horticulture, paleontology or any other aspect of natural history revealed a world to Jefferson that was orderly and governed by natural laws. At the same time trees, fossils or an awe-inspiring landscape could contribute to an American narrative that endowed the country with attributes of strength and pride, associations that would become fundamental aspects of the national identity.”

Lewis and Clark’s expedition would write a new chapter of the larger argument Jefferson had begun in his “Notes on the State of Virginia.”

This green is a very different shade from the green of an agrarian republic of small farmers. The future played out in what we now see as a different color.

Thomas Jefferson died July 4, 1826, within hours of John Adams’s passing. The men had rebuilt their friendship, soured by the Federalist/Republican conflict, on a solid foundation of their shared horticultural passions and both died knowing working the soil, experimenting with

new vegetables and examining plants were patriotic acts emblematic of their faith in America's future.

By 1826, however, a very different America was being hacked and burned out of the glorious wilderness of its west. The then only 10-year-old state of Indiana is a telling example.

Ecologist, professor and conservationist Marion T. Jackson describes the Indiana the Native Americans inhabited and the Europeans encountered beginning in the 1600s in his 1997 book "The Natural Heritage of Indiana."

"Indiana's original forests were among the finest broadleaved hardwood forests anywhere in the world. ... Groves of the finest black walnut trees the world has ever known grew on Indiana's most fertile soils, some individuals of which were 4 to 6 feet in diameter and 100 to 150 feet high. The General Land Office surveyors recognized the close correlation between soil fertility and the presence of black walnut trees when they entered such land descriptions into their field notes as 'sugar tree and walnut land, excellent for growing corn.' Most were cut and burned to clear the land for crops."

Jackson is not without some sympathy for the Europeans who came to our Forest Primeval. After a recitation of the historically immense sizes of trees here (data Thomas Jefferson would have been delighted to have), he explained "but the most impressive feature of the primeval forests of Indiana was not the size or height of the trees. Rather it was the dense shade that all but excluded sunlight. In the words of Amos W. Butler in his presidential address to the Indiana Academy of Science in 1895: 'Over the greater part of this State were spread dense forests of tall trees — heavy timber — whose limbs met and branches were so interwoven that but occasionally could the sunlight find entrance. There was little or no undergrowth in the heaviest woods, and the gloom of those dense shades and its accompanying silence were terribly oppressive. Mile upon mile, days' journey upon days' journey, stretched these gloomy shades and giant columns and green arches reared by nature through centuries of time.'"

Jackson cites academic research to provide detail and perspective.

"If the 20 million acres of forestland believed extant in Indiana in 1790 contained 110 trees above four inches in diameter on an average acre ..., then prior to settlement, Indiana must have contained approximately 2.2 billion trees, or about 400 trees for each Hoosier resident today. ...

"How do you consume a wilderness resource of 2.2 billion trees, two thirds of which were cut down before 1870? Assuming that relatively few trees were removed prior to 1800, by either Native Americans or pioneers, it would require the cutting of an average of 20 million trees annually for 70 years — a rate almost equal to that of an averaged-sized county per year, or more than 7,000 acres per day, on average. Our ancestors did to the Indiana wilderness what is presently occurring in the tropical forests of Brazil, Borneo, Sumatra, New Guinea, Zaire, and elsewhere."

Our ancestors saw what this place could be, and they both feared and heartily disliked what it was. And they got busy changing it according to their vision — the Federalist mercantile one more than Jefferson’s agrarian-republic one, I dare say. We are the ones who, at least occasionally, are stopping to think about it.

Henry Mitchell is one of us who not only thought about it, but he had and used the bully pulpit of a newspaper column to share his thoughts with the rest of us. Born in Memphis, Mitchell attended Thomas Jefferson’s University of Virginia in Charlottesville until World War II military service called him away. He married after the war and began his journalism career as a copy boy (a job that no longer exists, for sure!) in Memphis, moving to the Washington Post to become a reporter in 1970. In 1973, his Earthman garden column began and continued until days before his death in 1993. Along the way he wrote a second column, too, called Any Day, in which he wrote about whatever interested him. His thinking is incisive, balanced with compassion and humor, and his writing is of the finest quality. He knew a lot about gardening, at least about the gardening he had done, but it’s impossible not to cherish him at least a little bit more for what he shares about the human condition along the way.

It’s hard to find the color green, in the sense we are considering it today, in Mitchell’s Earthman columns. On the one hand, they are green to the core because they are about gardening, but on the other hand they exhibit that familiar American — and gardener’s — ability to look outdoors and see what it could be rather than what it is. And to work toward that vision anyway. Even, as Mitchell might admit, if that means planting roses.

It’s one of his Any Day columns that pulls together all the hints, the subtexts and the glints of green we see elsewhere in his writing. It’s his column titled “Conservation,” originally published in August of 1987.

He hangs it on his frustration with the shallowness of the reasons people were giving for and against conservation. His argument is profound — and one I deeply feel myself — to the point that I have to step back and reflect on how amazing it is that a people who a mere 200 years ago were felling 7,000 acres of ancient and glorious trees a day in Indiana alone now have given birth to people who can and will think so deeply about such a thing as conservation. Granted, conservation has an urgency today it did not back then, given that today we have so much — or should I say so little — to conserve.

Here’s Henry’s reasoning:

“People say our early forebears began to worship gods to ward off bad luck and avoid disasters of many kinds. But it is possible, surely, that awe came before fear and that the first source of awe was the panoply of life. ....

“If there is a divine order, as most Americans are said to believe (though I have always doubted any such general belief exists among us), then to exterminate it willy-nilly must be a wrong interference in a divine setup.

“If there is no divinity, on the other hand, it is still the case that the richness of animal and plant life is complex beyond comprehension. At the least, this life exists in accordance with natural forces more awesome than anything in human life, and to blunder about ignorant of what

we are doing, like a young setter romping through the garden, or like a madman hacking works of high art, is stupid or worse.

“I am not all-wise. No, really, please. But I have come to the conclusion that when a hornet gets in the house (and I yield to nobody in my terror of hornets) it is as easy to open the screen and let him out as it is to dash around for the hornet spray. And I feel better about it (in this age of trying to feel good) afterward. I do not get stung any more or any less than when I thought slaughter was the first order of business, hornetwise.

“Is it conceivable that the better we think of lichens and flea beetles the better we behave toward humans? Maybe, maybe not.

“But visualize an animal that has no usefulness at all (such a creature does not exist, but the mind can invent one for purposes of the argument) and no beauty at all and no value to science at all. Even so, It was born, it was ‘meant’ to live, and if it has enough neurons in the brain to live it has enough to suffer. If it is killed, there should be a ‘good reason’ for the killing, and the extermination of that whole species at human hands is something to give thought to.

“Those electrical wire lures that zap bugs on the terrace at night are an abomination, and while the gung-ho types consider them a dandy fruit of technology, such devices are nothing more (and nothing less) than an expression of a mini-brain and an ill-developed conscience. Fly swatters have one advantage — the ordinary man of sense soon notices they are not worth the effort.

“The purpose of conservation, then, is not the perpetuation of gorgeous form and color, nor the preservation of useful creatures, nor the advancement of our knowledge of the world, however good all those things may be.

“The purpose of conservation is to celebrate life, which in itself is good. Good may fight against good, of course. If a dog races toward you with open fangs it may be right to kill the dog. But that hardly means you exterminate dogs in general.

“Life, for God’s sake, is supposed to be on the side of life.”

I think that deserves a moment’s silence.

This point is where this Quest topic refused to behave for me. Refused to have a beginning and an end.

It has a beginning, and I hope where we are now is the middle — because we have a long way to go to actually live like we are on the side of life. Saying it, even as eloquently as Henry Mitchell, just isn’t good enough. Doing it is what will count, what will give this topic about Americans and the natural world an honorable rather than dishonorable end.

My research for this paper strayed into several books on wilderness, several books on the American experience of wilderness (and our wilderness’s experience of Americans!). Ecology of the future as well as the past looked important and possibly useful for this paper. I wrote a story last summer for Fort Wayne Monthly about the Myaamia people who lived here before and after Europeans arrived in North America. I respect that the people I interviewed last summer are the present incarnation of a people who have survived three or more centuries when nothing they held sacred was respected in the slightest by people — and this is important to me and to this line of thinking I am sharing with you — who saw themselves preparing a world that would include me, today. I was struck silent — and this is the first time I have said this out loud to anyone else



— by my respect for how their language and their culture — one almost lost but being revived and one that they never abandoned — would have led, three centuries on, to a different world in which I cannot imagine I would ever have come to be.

That's enough to stop me in my tracks, thinking green-wise, as Henry might say, but so much has already stopped me. Maybe you feel the same way. The changes wrought in our names are so immense and the forces propelling now the entire world down this path are so huge that the change and that future can seem inevitable. What on earth can I do that will make a difference? I recycle, buy food from a CSA and drive a Prius. Laudable. Not enough.

I even bought and started reading Al Gore's new book, "The Future: Six Drivers of Global Change," after Time magazine did a feature on it and him. Briefly, the six drivers are economic globalization; the emergence of a planet-wide electronic communication grid; a changed balance of political, economic and military power in the world; the emergence of massively more rapid than ever before unsustainable growth; revolutionary new and powerful biological, biochemical, genetic and materials science technologies; and a radically new relationship between the aggregate power of human civilization and the Earth's ecological systems. I haven't finished it yet and may never make it. It stops me in my tracks, and I cannot imagine how the man can sleep at night thinking like this or how one might ever laugh about something with him at the dinner table. It's gloomy, and it's complex, and nearly all of it is beyond my power to influence, especially given the state of American democracy today.

Nearly all of it. Not all of it, though. In Gore's discussion of unsustainable growth occur the words "depletion of topsoil and freshwater supplies," and they went click in my head because topsoil and freshwater are the two reasons (as the late, great black walnut trees also knew) this lovely part of the world has had human inhabitants since the latest ice sheets retreated nearly 15,000 years ago. We are the current (and wasteful and careless) beneficiaries of some of Earth's most fertile topsoil and largest supplies of clean, fresh water. I know soil erosion is a problem here. I know who to ask to learn precisely how many inches of topsoil we have lost, as well as everything being done to conserve and renew our topsoil. I know we live within one of the world's greatest resources of fresh water as a Great Lakes state, and I check on the Great Lakes Commission projects every so often to make sure that this wealth of water is still being properly protected. As a member of the board of ACRES Land Trust and a fellow Quest member with Betsy Yankowiak of Little River Wetlands Project, I know water quality is one of the greatest, easiest to extoll benefits of the wetlands, forests and prairies both organizations preserve and protect.

In short, I know intelligent and able people who are committed to protecting and revitalizing both these natural treasures, soil and water. Right here. Right now. These efforts are on a scale on which I can work, and I am glad to and eager to do more.

I know Henry Mitchell wasn't willing to believe we would treat our fellow humans better if we treated flea beetles and lichens better, but surely it's worth my efforts — our efforts — to protect and revive our soils and water here so they can sustain us and our descendants for centuries to come. Everything we do toward those ends most assuredly will contribute to the greater goal of conserving the entire globe for an honorable, not dishonorable, future. I have to

believe that honorable future is possible, and I have to act on that belief. The next book I'm going to read, now that I'm focused and brave enough, is Scott Russell Sanders's "The Conservationist Manifesto." While rooting himself and his family in Bloomington's beautiful landscape, Sanders became a popular English professor at Indiana University and a well respected and award-winning writer on his and our relationship with our land, among other things. He's here and now, and I think it will be good to read this book of his.

On your table are sheets listing the books, gloomy and otherwise, I have cited today, along with links to some examples of our friends and neighbors who are at work here and now for soil and water quality. My greatest joy will be if my Quest paper helps any of you get unstuck with me and think — and live — in a brighter, stronger shade of green.

### Americans Thinking Green resources

"The Brother Gardeners: Botany, Empire, and the Birth of an Obsession" by Andrea Wulf

"Founding Gardeners: The Revolutionary Generation, Nature, and the Shaping of the American Nation" by Andrea Wulf

"The Natural Heritage of Indiana," edited by Marion T. Jackson

"Any Day" by Henry Mitchell

"The Essential Earthman" by Henry Mitchell

"The Future: Six Drivers of Global Change" by Al Gore

"A Conservationist Manifesto" by Scott Russell Sanders

### Some Fort Wayne area organizations (and people) living green

- ACRES Land Trust Inc. at [www.acreslandtrust.org](http://www.acreslandtrust.org)
- Little River Wetland Project at [www.lrwp.org](http://www.lrwp.org)
- The Nature Conservancy at [www.nature.org](http://www.nature.org)
- Allen County Soil and Water Conservation District at [www.allenswcd.org](http://www.allenswcd.org)
- Indiana Department of Environmental Management at [www.in.gov/idem](http://www.in.gov/idem)
- St. Joseph River Watershed Initiative at [www.sjrwi.org](http://www.sjrwi.org)
- Maumee River Basin Commission at [www.mrbc.org](http://www.mrbc.org)
- Waterkeeper Alliance at [www.waterkeeper.org](http://www.waterkeeper.org)
- St. Marys River Watershed Project at [www.stmarysriverwatershed.org](http://www.stmarysriverwatershed.org)
- Save Maumee Waterkeeper Project at [www.savemaumee.org](http://www.savemaumee.org)
- Great Lakes Commission at [www.glc.org](http://www.glc.org)