

## ON CULTIVATING VEGETABLES (AND LEADERS)

*By David A. Watson, Ph.D.*

*“No occupation is so delightful to me as the culture of the earth, and no culture comparable to that of the garden.”*

*--Thomas Jefferson*

Sometimes the best books are found in the bargain bin, and the moments we cherish most in retrospect are those that cost little or nothing and come when we least expect them. I like to garden. I grow vegetables, at least a few every spring and fall. Though my plot is not large, it is fertile. I keep it that way by making and spreading onto my garden my own compost. I cook it in a big pile under the blazing Texas sun until the grass clippings, weeds, and leaves I add to it break down to yield that magical substance known as humus. This transformation happens because of the action of bugs (both visible and invisible), earthworms, and grubs. This, of course, means that snakes, lizards, and toads aren't far behind. These, in their turn, magnetically attract little boys. And so it was not long ago that my youngest son, Zack, and I built ourselves a new compost bin from chicken wire and metal stakes, while at the same time searching for geckos, garters, and grubs.

Speaking of bargain books, one I happened upon recently proved instructive concerning the character and approach to leadership of our third American president. Writing in [Thomas Jefferson On Leadership: Executive Lessons from His Life and Letters](#), Coy Barefoot offers up ten lessons in leadership as Jefferson saw it from the perspective of how to succeed as a gardener. First, get the right tools. Its tough to do any job without the proper instruments, and it is easier to procure them before they are needed. Second, prepare the ground. Make ready the base for what you wish to grow.

Decide what you hope to nourish, and which nutrients will be required to stimulate growth. Third, plow deeply and plant the seed. Barefoot says Jefferson felt strongly that while a seed placed near the surface of the soil may sprout quickly, its roots won't run deep, making the young plant subject to being washed away with the first heavy rain. A new shoot with deep roots, however, will benefit from rainwater, just as a nascent leader having a firm foundation will be strengthened each time he or she weathers a storm. Fourth, nurture the seedling. Young plants need a helping hand to pull out the weeds, drive away bugs, and add water when the rain doesn't fall. They require this assistance, and they also need patience; Rome wasn't built in a day, a garden doesn't yield produce overnight, and a leader doesn't become one in an instant. Fifth, watch the weather. Some factors are beyond the control of either a gardener or a leader. If we carefully watch the skies and read the signs available to us, we can prepare, at least to some extent. If thunderstorms appear on the horizon, a gardener can e.g. tie his tomato plants to stakes, and a leader to can anchor him or her self to something solid as well. Sixth, work the day. Whether it's a garden or a career, sometimes all we can do is roll up our sleeves and do what must be done. Seventh, weed and prune. Too many plants, weeds or neighbors, will mean that none has the opportunity to rise above any other, and that all are in danger of producing no fruit. Cutting back in one area may well provide a chance for advancement in another, again whether the topic is plant growth or leadership. Eighth, learn from the best. Our third president appreciated that other gardeners developed cultivars superior in some cases to his own, and freely borrowed from his fellow enthusiasts. He also knew that rival politicians and bureaucrats possessed expertise he did not, and Jefferson freely sought out their knowledge as well. Ninth, protect your

garden. We can control some negative influences, both in growing vegetables and in nurturing leaders. Fences help keep out garden pests, and boundaries let young leaders know they are protected. Tenth, celebrate your harvest. This last maxim represents good, and easy to follow, advice. A gardener who does not enjoy eating his own produce is rare indeed, and a mentor who doesn't savor the successes of his or her charges, is (at least I hope) rarer still.

Seems to me the most important job we have is to adequately prepare the next generation for the passing of the torch. Rather than lamenting lower standards among the younger generation, our aim ought to be cultivating ever higher standards of leadership. I explained to my little man that we would bear the heat of the afternoon (albeit with plenty of water close at hand) to build something of lasting value, and that our immediate reward would be (we actually both hoped) the chance to catch and examine a snake or a lizard. "You're my favorite seven-year-old," I said to him as Zack and I sweated our way toward a new compost heap, "please promise me you'll stay this age forever." "I'm sorry, Daddy," he answered, almost apologetically, "but I can't. I have to grow up." Just at that moment he spotted a small reptile with a striped tail and dove after it. As he showed me his prize, I told him, "I was only joking, pal, I know you have to get bigger. I'm looking forward to it." We all are, buddy, we all are.

*"I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past."*

*--Thomas Jefferson*