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Milestones

The World Was His Garden

Anne-Taylor Cahill

Very few of us are familiar with the name David Fairchild (1869-1954), yet every time we go to the grocery store we reap the benefits of his life's work. David Fairchild was a botanist, adventurer and food explorer. He brought many of the fruits and vegetables we eat today to America. He also brought the blossoming cherry trees to Washington, D. C.

When he was 10 his family moved to Kansas where his father became president of Kansas State Agricultural College. Growing up in an agricultural atmosphere, Fairchild began experimenting with flowering plants, fruits and vegetables. At age 20 he joined the United States Department of Agriculture and began a life of food exploration. His mission was to travel the world to find food-bearing and flowering plants that were not native to the United States. The idea of finding new food-bearing plants resulted from the boring American diet of the time, which was mostly comprised of bread, meat and cheese. Vegetables and fruits as we know them today did not abound or were non-existent in the United States.

Representing the USDA, Fairchild gave his first public presentation to the Horticultural Society of Western New York. His audience as he described them were "gray beards," and were fascinated by this young man who spoke so authoritatively on the topic of parasitic fungi of grapes. He was a great success as they kept him afterwards for one hour asking questions. Thereafter, Fairchild was in demand from New York to Virginia for his opinions on grape growing.

Despite all this Fairchild wanted to study abroad, where he felt he could learn even more about his field. Luckily, he secured a research position with the Smithsonian and headed for Europe. Aboard the ship, he met a wealthy Chicagoan named Barbour Lathrop who became interested in Fairchild's work and eventually became his travel sponsor.

Fairchild's first European adventure was in Naples. He arrived speaking no Italian and having no place to stay. Undaunted, he accepted the hospitality of a local journalist. Having been assigned to visit Corsica to obtain specimens of citrons indigenous to the island, he traveled by boat and donkey. After a long hot climb he arrived in Borgo, a small mountaintop town. The mayor greeted him somewhat hastily with a glass of wine and departed for a funeral. Left to his own devices, Fairchild amused himself by opening his accordion-like camera and began taking pictures. As he waited for the mayor to return, the villagers began to congregate. They all wanted to have their pictures taken. All was going well when Fairchild suddenly felt himself being grabbed by a policeman. Convinced he was a spy for the French, the police demanded his papers but Fairchild had none with him and he could not explain, as he did not speak Italian. He was carted off to jail.

After much drama and many gesticulations, Fairchild tried

one last ploy. Trying to prove he was an American, he showed the police an envelope from America with a stamp with the picture of Ulysses S. Grant on it. "Americano! Americano!" the police shouted. They slapped him on the back and let him go with a firm



David Fairchild (1869-1954), c. 1900. Courtesy Linda Hall Library.

warning to leave town. Getting on his donkey, he departed the mountain post haste. On the way down, Fairchild spotted an orchard of citron trees. Just in case he was being watched, he crouched down and broke off four small buds and several small citrons and these he sent home to America. His first mission was accomplished. The cuttings arrived in Washington, D. C. and were determined to be valuable to California citrus growers for years to come.

Fairchild had many more adventures traveling to Europe, South America and Asia to bring back watermelons and avocados. From Venice he brought red seedless grapes. From London and Croatia he brought kale and from Malta he brought pomegranates. He brought dates from Baghdad and nectarines from Afghanistan, peaches from China and papaya from Ceylon, mangoes from Vietnam and soybeans from India. Grocers slowly began to have an array of fruits and vegetables to offer American customers.

Most interestingly, Fairchild brought the famous blossoming Japanese cherry trees to Washington, D. C. Fairchild and his wife Marian (the daughter of Alexander Graham Bell) loved the trees and grew them abundantly in their Chevy Chase, Maryland garden. Enchanted by these trees, the Fairchilds donated one tree to each public school in Washington, D. C. One child from each



Blossoming cherry trees in Washington, D. C., c. 1910. Courtesy Library of Congress.

school was designated to receive a tree in a grand ceremony at the Franklin School on K Street. Fairchild gave a talk, and told the children how to care for their school's tree. So important was this endeavor that the D. C. Street Car Company provided free transportation for the students and their little trees. The *Washington Star* published a story with photos of the ceremony.

The First Lady, Helen Herron Taft, got wind of all this and became a promoter of the blossoming cherry trees for public spaces in Washington, D. C.; President Taft saw this as a diplomatic opportunity to draw Japanese and American cultures closer. For the Japanese it was an opportunity to demonstrate a beautiful aspect of their culture. The first shipment of trees arrived from the Yokohama Nursery Company to much excitement. Sadly they were diseased and had to be burned. It nearly caused an international incident. The mayor of Tokyo, the Honorable Ichiro Fujisaki, had arrived for the ceremonial planting and was on hand when the disaster occurred. He deftly stepped in with profuse apologies and the promise of more trees—healthy ones.

The second shipment of trees duly arrived—healthy and disease-free. They were accompanied by a note from the mayor of Tokyo's wife, describing the trees as a "memorial to national friendship between the United States and Japan." In return the U.S. sent a shipment of white flowering dogwood trees to Tokyo. Fairchild and Fujisaki exchanged photos of their respective trees once they had flourished and blossomed. Fairchild closes his story of the trees with a haiku by Frances Hodgson Burnett. She wrote this haiku on her place card after a dinner with the Fairchilds:

*Only in dreams of Spring
Shall I see again
The flowering of my cherry trees.*

The Fairchilds were delighted to note that she had written this poem in Japanese characters!

In 1938 Fairchild and his wife Marian moved to Coral Gables, Florida. Here they felt like they were in a tropical climate and Fairchild could continue to experiment with his beloved plants.

Today their home and extensive gardens are open to the public as the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Gardens, and are an enduring testament to David Fairchild and his love of all things beautiful in nature.



Anne-Taylor Cahill is a professor of philosophy at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, and serves on the national board of the Victorian Society in America. She is also founding member and former president of the Eloise Hunter Chapter of the VSA.

For further reading:

David Fairchild, *The World Was My Garden*. (Scribner & Sons, New York 1938).

Amanda Harris, *Fruits of Eden: David Fairchild and America's Plant Hunters*. (University of Florida, 2015).

Daniel Stone, *The Food Explorer*. (Dutton, New York 2018).

fairchildgardens.org