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Collards in North Carolina

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The collard plant has flourished as an important garden food crop in the U.S. South since the early nineteenth century because it is able to endure hot summers and still thrive in winter, when it is harvested and consumed as greens. The uneven geographic pattern of collard production in North Carolina calls into question claims that the collard is a ubiquitous Southern food crop. It is still the dominant winter garden crop on the North Carolina Coastal Plain, but fewer patches are being planted and consumption of collards is waning, especially among young people. Commercial collard production is increasing to satisfy the demand of older folk.

Key words: collards, gardens, food, North Carolina

INTRODUCTION

The collard patch has been a common element of the fall and winter landscape in parts of the U.S. South since before the Civil War. The collard, Brassica oleracea, var. acephala, is grown in the region for its greens, produced by cooking the leaves of the plant (Fig. 1). Sometimes called a headless cabbage, the collard has advantages over cabbage in the South in that it is better able to endure hot summers, while at the same time it is able to grow and thrive in winter at least as well as cabbage. The production and consumption of collards have been so closely associated with the South that one writer went so far as to state that collard greens “probably more than any other food, delineate the boundaries of the Mason-Dixon line” (Albright 1989, 649). The association of collards with southern culture is reflected in regional novels, poetry, song lyrics, and local festival themes.

The consumption of collard greens has traditionally played a vital dietary role in winter in the South, where food resources, especially in poor rural areas, were meager. Collard greens are rich in Vitamin A, and also provide significant amounts of Vitamin C, calcium, and iron. Collards have especially been lauded by historians for contributions made to food supply in the South during the crises of the Civil War and the Great Depression.

Many comments about the collard in the South, however, could be labeled as assertions. Much remains to be learned about the geography of collard production because little field research has been devoted to describing the geography of collard production, and census data have not been uniformly collected for garden crops. In addition, research on both the cultural history of the collard and its development in the South is incomplete. In this paper, we trace the development of collards in
the U.S. South, delineate the geography of collard production in North Carolina, and describe and assess the changing status of the plant in that state.

The paucity of research on the collard as a food crop is not surprising because, until recently, geographers had shown little enthusiasm for the study of food in general. Cultural geographer Wilbur Zelinsky (1985, 51) lamented that the study of foodways was “a sadly neglected topic,” and blamed that research omission on the belief by scholars that food was not a worthwhile subject for scientific study. Geographers have, however, gradually developed a body of work on food consumption patterns. Some of the more insightful studies have shown that foodways are central to the meaning of place (Pillsbury 1989, 1995; Pillsbury 1998). Others have shown that food can help maintain boundaries and linkages in and through social and cultural space (Arce and Marsden 1993; Cook and Craig 1996; Bell and Valentine 1997; Pillsbury 1998). For example, the symbolic status of a food such as collards can be used to define people and places socially. In Flannery O’Conner’s (1988) short story, “A Stroke of Fortune,” a Southern woman who aspires to join the middle class is disgusted at her brother for enjoying collards. She had hoped he would return from his worldly experiences in the Navy with less provincial tastes.

Another component of geographic research on food has been the study of food gardens as a part of the landscape tradition in cultural geography (e.g., Kimber 1973; Wilhelm 1975; Bassett 1981; Dillon 1986; Thomasson 1994). Carl Sauer’s (1952) pioneering works on landscapes
and food plant geography served as an inspiration for subsequent research in cultural history and cultural ecology (e.g., D. Watts 1987; J. Sauer 1993; Zimmerer 1996). Although historians (e.g., Leighton 1976; Zohary and Hopf 1993) and anthropologists (e.g., Goody 1982; Brown and Mussell 1984; Gabaccia 1998) have made significant contributions to the study of food production and consumption, Sam Hilliard’s (1972) book, *Hogmeat and Hoe-cake*, stands alone as the only major geographic work devoted to that subject in the South.

**DEVELOPMENT OF THE COLLARD IN THE SOUTH**

The domesticated collard plant originated in the eastern Mediterranean, where Celtic invasions may have introduced the plant from western Europe, where wild *Brassica oleracea* populations were and are still found. The plant eventually spread to northern Europe where heading varieties were developed and, as a result, the cabbage plant emerged as an important European food staple. European settlers were probably responsible for the collard plant’s introduction to North America.

One of the difficulties in tracing the history of the collard involves the development and use of the word “collard.” Collard is a corruption of the word “colewort,” which translates to “cabbage plant.” In past centuries, however, “colewort” was often used in Europe to refer to other forms of *Brassica oleracea*. In eastern North America, both colewort and collard were used to describe *Brassica oleracea*, var. *acephala* before approximately 1840, but since then the use of the word collard has been nearly universal in the United States. Early references to the terms colewort and collard in eastern North America reveal that the plant was widely known there during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was only in the southern colonies, however, that the collard flourished and became a significant component of the mix of foods that formed the regional diet.

We have discovered a few brief references to collard growing in the South during the late eighteenth century. For example, a soldier visiting Hanover County, Virginia, in 1781 observed (Feltman 1969): “The Negroes here raise great quantities of snaps and collards [sic]. They have no cabbages here.” Benjamin Hawkins (1916), who visited mountainous western North Carolina in 1796, reported that Cherokee women were growing collards (no mention of cabbage) in their gardens. Our search also produced an occasional mention of collard production during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Evidence for the presence of collards in eastern North Carolina during the 1830s was found in a Record of Wills for Hyde County. Among the wills was one for Barney Ballance, and the inventory of his property revealed “one patch of collards” (Hyde County 1830).

Frederick Law Olmsted (1856, p. 348), traveling in eastern North Carolina in the 1850s, found collards to be an important element of the landscape associated with turpentine farmers in the “longleafed pine forest land:”

They have habitations more like houses—log cabins, commonly, sometimes chinked, often not-without windows of glass, but with a few pieces of substantial old fashioned heirloom furniture; a vegetable garden, in which, however, you will find no vegetable but
what they call “collards” (colewort) for “greens;” few dogs; more swine, and larger clearings for maize, but no better crops than the poorer class.

Documents show that by the mid-nineteenth century the collard was widely grown in the South, especially as a winter food crop. Writing in 1860, Dr. John S. Wilson of Columbus, Georgia, a critic of the southern proclivity for pork consumption, suggested that the collard was the vegetable commonly served with pork for dinner in the region (Hilliard 1972). Travelers during and just after the Civil War often made reference to collards as a common food in the South. For example, Hyacinth (1869, 128) stated that: the collard “is the kind of cabbage found everywhere in the South, whose leaves, not heads, furnish the greens for the inevitable dish of bacon and greens. The word is so common it has not found its way into the dictionaries.” Another observer, Stearns, wrote in 1872 (p. 76) that:

Every negro garden abounds in that universal Southern esculent, the collard; a plant closely resembling cabbage, but cooked in the form of “greens,” and used nearly the whole year. This article is devoured eagerly by the Southern people, both white and black, and is not despised by even the Northern residents.

Writers in the late nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth century also commented on the pervasiveness of collards in parts of the South. Smith, for example, wrote in 1883 (p. 46) that “In the South no word, as no dish, is better known among the poorer whites and Negroes than collards or greens.” In 1929, Vance (p. 247), in his classic study of cotton culture in the South, stated that during winter months, “cotton farmers subsist on turnips, collards, sweet potatoes, and fried pork.”

References to collards in the twentieth century were often derogatory or disrespectful, especially comments by nonsoutherners. For example, a horticultural reference book at the turn of the century describes the collard as a southern garden crop, and states that, “In Northern states, where heading cabbages can be raised, collards of whatever kind are not highly prized” (Bailey 1914, 828). Other sources simply claim that collards are a standard food (e.g., Carmer 1934, 4). Those writers refer explicitly to the smell produced by cooking greens and the unappealing taste of the finished product.

The numerous references by elderly informants to the widespread practice of “collard stealing” as a Christmas season recreational activity during the 1920s and 1930s confirms the ubiquitous presence of collard patches during that period in eastern North Carolina. Collard stealing was engaged in by groups of teenagers who would spend hours on a cold December night walking the dirt roads and trails of their rural communities to play tricks on people thought to be wealthy or eccentric. Participants in a few areas participated in collard stealing in early January as a part of the celebration of Old Christmas. In this folk activity, a few mature collard plants would be pulled from a roadside garden, then taken to a nearby residence and dropped on the front steps. The celebrating youths would then knock on the door of the unsuspecting recipients of the collards, yell loudly and run away. The offended residents would answer the door to
discover their gift of collards. During the hard times of the Great Depression, the practice of collard stealing was sometimes feigned by teens who would bring stolen collards to their own homes and leave them on their steps or porches. Their unsuspecting parents would discover the collards the next morning, and think they were left by mischievous neighbor kids. Then, of course, they would cook and eat the needed food.

The South remained more rural than other parts of the country during the first half of the twentieth century, but the 1940s and 1950s saw a massive exodus of farm workers from their rural homes to factory jobs in the cities of the South, North, and Midwest. The new urban residents usually did not have the opportunity to grow garden crops in their city settings. Their longing for southern foods such as collards created an opportunity for the production of new truck crops in the South. By the late 1940s a considerable volume of collards was being shipped by rail and truck from Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia to southern and especially northern cities. For example, during the 1948–49 season, 272,332 bushels of whole-plant collards were shipped from the Norfolk, Virginia area. About 25% of the produce went to New York City, but Philadelphia, Washington, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and Detroit also received significant portions of the total amount shipped (Bowman 1950).

The shift of some manufacturing plants from other regions to small towns and rural areas in the South helped slow the movement of people from the region during the 1960s, and by the 1970s parts of the South were said to be experiencing a rural population revival (Beale 1975). A continuing decrease in employment in agriculture did not mean that rural residents had to leave the countryside. Many chose to live in rural areas and commute to jobs in nearby towns and cities, while others opted to travel considerable distances to pursue employment opportunities (Hart and Morgan 1995). With non-farm employment came a tendency for people to buy more food at the grocery store and to produce less in home gardens (Holzer 1996). The home garden persisted strongly in some areas, however, and certain food crops that were distinctive to the South, such as the collard, largely continued to be produced by consumers.

The collard patch remained a strong element of the winter landscape in the southern Coastal Plain in the late 1970s and 1980s. Evidence for that is provided by William Least Heat Moon, who, while traveling the Blue Highways (1982) of eastern North Carolina, observed that between Dunn and Greenville (a distance of 80 mi) collard patches remained beside unpainted sharecropper cabins, brick veneer bungalows, and even the new houses. Heat Moon’s observation about the ubiquity of the collard patch helps dispel a myth about collards, i.e., that collard greens are almost exclusively consumed by African Americans in the South. Collards are grown and consumed by rural folk, both white and black, at least in eastern North Carolina.

TRADITIONAL PROCESSES OF PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

Collards are usually planted in spring in rows three to four feet wide, withstand the summer heat, and mature in mid-fall, when they reach a height of one to two feet (Fig. 2). Some gardeners plant col-
Collards in August for late winter and early spring harvest. Collards are usually transplanted from seedbeds started in late winter or early spring, but a few gardeners produce a successful crop by direct seeding. The plants require regular spraying or dusting to combat cabbage worm attacks or infestation by other pests. Plants are typically harvested as needed after the first frost in fall, when collard leaves become more tender and taste less bitter after cooking. They continue to be harvested and eaten through the winter.

Some gardeners buy collard seeds from nurseries or farm supply stores, while others save seeds from their crops for future use. Seeds sold in stores may be hybrid (e.g., Blue Max, Top Bunch), which cannot be saved for future crops, or open-pollinated cultivars, such as the Georgia collard, which can be collected in spring for subsequent seeding. Many gardeners in eastern North Carolina save seeds, and their most popular heirloom is the cabbage collard, which forms a rosette of leaves (but not a true head), has a yellow tint and is sweeter than other collard varieties. Most collard seed savers are more than fifty years of age, and are often carrying on a family tradition of seed collecting that spans several decades.

The entire collard plant is harvested
with the stalk being chopped off near ground level. Leaves are then removed from the stalk, washed, put in a pot with water and pork, and boiled until tender. After cooking, the greens are removed from their juice, finely chopped and seasoned with salt. Vinegar is added to the greens when served. The juice or “pot likker” is prized by many, and likely will be served over cornbread as a side dish or dessert. Typically accompanied by cornbread, collard greens are also commonly served with sweet potatoes and/or black-eyed peas. The consumption of collard greens and black-eyed peas is a New Year’s Day tradition in the South, with the amount of greens eaten believed to represent the dollars one will earn during the coming year and the peas symbolizing the number of cents to be earned.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF COLLARD GARDENING IN NORTH CAROLINA

In an effort to understand the role of the collard in the South better, we conducted a case study to determine the recent status of the plant in North Carolina, a state strongly associated with collard culture. Based on field interviews, our observations, and a survey of county extension agents, we determined that collards are grown in each of the state’s 100 counties, but with considerable variation in magnitude of production across the state (Fig. 3). A map showing the status of home collard gardens in the state was prepared, with each county placed in one of three categories: (1) collard is a dominant winter garden food crop; (2) collard production is common but not a dominant winter food crop; and (3) collard production is not common (Fig. 4). The map reveals three nearly contiguous regions of collard production. In the Coastal Plain, including the Tidewater, the collard is the dominant winter vegetable. Other greens, especially turnips, are grown in the region but suffer in competition with collards because they do not fare as well as collards in winter. The Coastal Plain remains a leading southern agricultural region, with livestock, tobacco, cotton, soybeans, and corn playing key roles in the farm economy. In winter, however, after the crops have been harvested, many farmsteads (and non-farm gardens) display only one crop growing: the collard in the solitary collard patch. Patches vary considerably in size, depending primarily on the number of members in the gardening family. A typical collard patch for a family of four might have 50 plants. Those plants would provide the family a bowl of chopped collards twice a week for a three-month period.

The Piedmont region grows collards, but with the exception of a few counties that border the Coastal Plain, collard production is secondary to that of other greens. Rebecca King (2000), Manager of Soviero’s Tri-County Garden Center in High Point, which serves the Greensboro-High Point-Winston-Salem areas, stated that her business sold enough collard seeds to buy and sell them in bulk, but that the demand for collard seeds could only be considered “moderate” when compared to the much greater demand for turnips, mustard, and kale. She believes that the pattern observed for her area holds true for the broader Piedmont region. Comments from several extension agents support that view.

Extension agents in most mountain counties in western North Carolina indicated that collard patches were found
Figure 3. North Carolina counties, cities and regions.
Figure 4. Collard gardening in North Carolina. Source: Field research and surveys by authors, 2000–2004.
infrequently in that region. The mountain South, with relatively mild summers, has long been associated with the production of cabbage, both as a subsistence and commercial crop. Production of collards is greatest in Swain County, where they are grown in gardens on the Cherokee Indian Reservation. According to a reservation extension agent (Taylor 2000), about 70% of reservation residents have home gardens and most grow collards in them. It should not be surprising that the Cherokee are growing collards in their gardens, because they were doing so in the 1790s. Collard patches in the mountains are smaller than those in locales to the east because of a shorter growing season in higher elevations. Because the collard plant tends to “freeze out” at a temperature of 17°F, collards are usually not available for harvest in mountain patches beyond early January.

Changes in the status of collards

We have observed for several years that numbers of the once ubiquitous collard patch have declined in eastern North Carolina. Our observations are supported by extension agents who mentioned that collard production had waned in their counties. If Heat Moon were to drive from Dunn to Greenville today, he would surely find that a minority of houses are accompanied by an adjacent collard patch. Consumption of collard greens has also decreased significantly, perhaps at about the same rate as the decline in production in the region.

Interviews with residents of eastern North Carolina combined with comments made to us by extension agents allow us to put forth reasons for the decline in production and consumption of collards. Rural folk are today less connected to the land they live on than in previous years. They typically commute to work, buy most of their food from grocery stores, and often prepare meals quickly in a microwave oven. Moreover, rural dwellers now tend to eat several meals per week at restaurants, especially fast-food franchises. Perhaps more often than not, those persons leading the so-called modern lifestyle will not opt to plant a home vegetable garden. Even if one does grow vegetables in a home garden, there is no assurance of collards being planted for winter harvest. Many older folk would like to grow collards but may be unable to for a variety of reasons, including the absence of younger family members to assist with gardening.

For decades, fewer and fewer young people have opted to eat collard greens. Taste buds that have been “refined” through years of eating Big Macs, curly fries, and pizza are unlikely to find love at first bite with collard greens. One agricultural extension agent recently expressed the opinion that he, at thirty-nine years of age, was among the youngest southerners to like collards.

Several extension agents mentioned that the recent arrival of non-southerners into the region was changing the traditional culture in their counties. Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, Wilmington, and Greenville are areas receiving in-migrants. Many of the residents choose to live in large-lot subdivisions where the opportunity for home gardening is readily available. Chances are, however, that if the in-migrants plant a garden, they will select familiar plants, as opposed to experimenting with collards. One agent stated that
the new residents had a strong dislike for collard greens.

With lifestyles changing and less emphasis on winter gardens, many rural and urban people, especially in eastern North Carolina, have shown a willingness to purchase collards from several relatively new sources. Twenty years ago, if one wanted fresh collards but did not have a garden, a neighbor would probably provide collards for a neighbor in need. They might have found collards in grocery chain stores, but probably would not have purchased them unless they were assured that they were locally grown.

For the last several years consumers have been able to purchase fresh collards from pick-your-own operations (for $1.00 a plant), farmers’ markets, or at locally-oriented grocery stores which sell the greens by the whole plant or by the pound. Some stores now provide ready-to-serve collard greens year round, cooked the old-fashioned way, and sold in vacuum packs. The demand for cooked greens has been strong in some areas, as evidenced by sales at Carlie C’s IGA, a small grocery chain headquartered in the town of Dunn. In 2002, Carlie C’s purchased from local growers about 30,000 lb of collards, which were boiled in a large pressure cooker and sold in the store’s meat cases (McNeill 2002).

Those longing for collards can now find them served frequently in North Carolina restaurants. Traditional greens are offered at “home cooking,” barbecue, “soul food,” and buffet restaurants. Some restaurants advertise on signs or windows that collard greens are served on a particular day of the week. Collards prepared in non-traditional ways are appearing more frequently on the menus of upscale eateries, perhaps as a result of attention now given to the nutritional benefits of dark leafy greens. The last two decades have seen a great increase in the number of commercial collard operations in the state, especially in eastern North Carolina. Such operations are found in at least 54 of the state’s 100 counties (Fig. 5). Of the 54 counties with commercial collard farms, 46 of them form a contiguous block comprised primarily of Coastal Plain counties but also containing a few Sand Hills and eastern Piedmont counties. The collard farms include small units (< 5 ac), medium-sized operations (5–20 ac), and large farms (> 20 ac). Small operators may plant pick-your-own fields, have roadside stands, or sell to independent grocery stores and at farmers’ markets. Medium-sized operators would likely sell to independent grocers or small regional grocery chains, and at farmers markets. Some small and medium-sized operators are members of recently organized produce cooperatives. Large operators typically sell their produce to national grocery chains, large regional chains, or to wholesale food distributors or brokers. The overwhelming majority of commercial producers in North Carolina are small operators, with their number exceeding 200. There are perhaps 30 medium-sized growers, and no more than a handful of large collard producers in the state.

One small commercial grower is Bo Wood, Sr., who grows about four acres of collards each year in the Clayton community of Johnston County. He is quite proud of the collard cultivar he inherited from his mother, who for a number of years marketed her collards from the family farmstead to passing traffic, as well as some local grocery stores. Wood now sells his collards to grocers and restaurants
Figure 5. Commercial collard production in North Carolina. Source: Field research and surveys by authors, 2000–2004.
Another example of a small operator is Dick Williford, who lives near the eastern North Carolina town of Benson in Johnston County. Williford is a self-employed auto mechanic who, since 1996, has been growing three acres of collards as part of a small general farming operation which also includes tobacco, corn, and soybeans. He sells his collards to an independent grocery store in Fayetteville, some 30 mi away, and to Carlie C’s grocery in Dunn, located ten miles from his farm (Williford 2003).

The greatest concentration of small commercial operations is found in Robeson and Columbus counties, located along the South Carolina border. There are about 35 growers in the counties, with the average production unit equaling about 3.5 ac (Parker 2000). Perhaps the major impetus for that concentration of farmers is the presence of a state farmers’ market in nearby Lumberton. Other farmers’ markets are found in Raleigh, Charlotte, Winston-Salem and Asheville. There is a strong demand for collards in Raleigh, considerable demand in Charlotte and Winston-Salem, and more than a modicum of demand in Asheville, located in the state’s western mountains. The market in Asheville is supplied with greens by small farmers in counties (especially Henderson) south of the city, as well as by farmers from South Carolina. A few small commercial operations are found in mountainous Cherokee County, in the state’s southwest corner. Greens produced there are largely shipped to the Atlanta market, about 100 mi away.

A medium-sized commercial grower is Charlie Cannon of Halifax County, who grows 12 ac of collards each year using his own heirloom seeds. He claims his collards are preferred by the independent grocery stores in the area because of their flavor. In a good year he earns $3,000/ac (6,000 collard plants per acre sold at $0.50 per plant), which he says is “as good as my tobacco crop” (Cannon 2003).

Whereas the small and medium-sized producers have often begun to engage in commercial collard operations recently and are serving local markets, the large operators have typically been in business for decades and sell most of their produce to out-of-state buyers. The two largest collard operations in the state are both located in Duplin County. One of those, Burch Farms, in operation near Faison since 1950, produces sweet potatoes and greens, including several hundred acres of collards each year. The collard produced is “Hi-Crop,” a hybrid cultivar that is easy to grow, disease resistant, and has a dark green color which displays well in grocery stores. Burch Farms harvests collards at intervals throughout the year and sells their greens to Food Lion and a number of large food distributors (Burch 2002).

Another large greens producer is the Rouse and Teachey Farm, which has been in operation near Rose Hill since the early 1950s. During the first decade of operations, the farm sold to grocery chains, especially A & P and Colonial Stores, in the Raleigh area. Now the business ships most of its products to food distributors in mid-Atlantic and northeastern cities, especially Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. Rouse and Teachey grows a variety of greens including turnips, kale, mustard, rape, and spinach, but collard production has always dominated the operation. Each year more than 400 ac of collards are harvested on the farm, which is comprised mostly of leased land. About 100 ac of col-
Collards are transplanted in spring, but in August nearly 300 acres of the crop are directly seeded, with a six-row planter. The farm produces the “Top Bunch” hybrid collard, which the owners claim is a reliable plant that looks good in the store and produces flavorful greens (Teachey 2002).

**CONCLUSION**

The collard has been an important food crop in the U.S. South since the early nineteenth century. Geographic variation in production and consumption of collards in North Carolina suggests, however, that claims of a “solid” collard South are inaccurate. The collard remains the dominant winter vegetable in the North Carolina Coastal Plain, but home gardens are declining while commercial collard operations are increasing. The lack of enthusiasm for collard greens by young people will bring further decline in consumption of the crop. That decline in consumption of a food rich in nutrients may be indicative of a general deterioration in the diet of the region’s youth. An increase in consumption of collards by a health-conscious segment of the national populace may allow for expansion of commercial collard production in both North Carolina and the South.

We are currently conducting field research on collard culture in the broader region. Our preliminary map allows us to suggest an extension of our North Carolina “collard belt” through a section of the Atlantic and Gulf Coastal Plain, but work remains to be done before that region can be accurately delineated. Further research is needed to unravel the story of the collard’s voyage to North America, and to develop an understanding of the social, cultural and ecological aspects of the plant’s emergence as an important food crop in the South.

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