

Georgia O’Keeffe’s Garden

✎ By Thea Fiore-Bloom ✎

In the early 1960s Folgers was trying to convince American women they had a choice: buy Folgers instant coffee or risk losing their husband. Georgia O’Keeffe opted for “none of the above.” In the early 1960s Miss O’Keeffe, instead, chose to walk the New Mexican hills with her two dogs, grow an unruly paradise of a garden, and create some of the best American art of the twentieth century.

O’Keeffe kept on ignoring Madison Avenue’s plans for her throughout the rest of her long life. She just kept on painting. She also kept on grinding her own flour, baking her own bread, making her own yogurt from local sheep’s milk, and living in



her unique, independent, fiercely feisty way until just shy of her ninety-ninth birthday.

One of the most nurturing and enduring inspirations I have ever come across has been the day-to-day life of Georgia O'Keeffe. Reading various O'Keeffe biographies, perusing her letters to friends, watching video interviews of her, or viewing photos of her throughout her life never ceases to inspire me. I see O'Keeffe as having been a grounded sage of sorts, who had turned her share of personal suffering into wisdom, and whose steadying anchor in the stormy sea of life was the land.

For O'Keeffe was a natural gardener. Much of her contentment, outside of art-making, stemmed from observing nature and growing and preparing food from her own bit of earth in New Mexico. Come with me on a short walk through the garden and kitchen of one of America's favorite painters.

The Surprise to Be Found at O'Keeffe's Home and Studio

A few years back I took a pilgrimage to O'Keeffe's home and studio in Abiquiú, New Mexico. It was not surprising that her sparsely furnished, clay-walled home had the same stark look that her paintings have. What was surprising was the whimsy and lush beauty of O'Keeffe's garden. Black, branchy tree shadows draped over coral-beige enclosing adobe walls. Buzzing bees navigated through the plum, apple, and apricot trees. Sagebrush, Russian olive, and greasewood trees graced the eastern rooms of the house where O'Keeffe's sister, Claudia, often stayed (Lynes/Lopez, 216).

I felt enchanted by the property's many whispering tamarisks. I imagined how the place would feel after a rainstorm

with all the irrigation channels open to create paths of gurgling waterways. The most memorable sound for me was the billowy rustle and percussive pop of clean, white sheets still set out to dry on O’Keeffe’s windy clothesline just west of the north garden. This lucky clothesline was nestled between sweeping willow trees and fragrant lilacs. In the north garden itself, O’Keeffe’s inky green junipers curved round in bonsai waves against the turquoise sky.

At this point in my walk through the property it dawned on me that O’Keeffe did not just make a garden here; she created what the ancient Greeks referred to as a *temenos*. A *temenos* is a sanctuary, a bit of land spared from urban use. Swiss psychologist Carl Jung later defined a *temenos* as a purposefully created, bounded place where one’s most important work is encouraged to come to fruition. O’Keeffe made a clay-walled *temenos* at Abiquiú, a place where she grew and refined her thought process in the midst of her wondrous garden. Maybe we can all do this. We all have our own unique brand of genius. Perhaps all our gardens are the seeds with which we each can begin our own *temenos*. And we can start with an herb garden.

O’Keeffe Loved Herbs

O’Keeffe adored herbs. She enjoyed the unique flavor herbs imparted to her meals. The artist also honored herbs for their sensual appeal. She appreciated the beauty of their physical forms, their tactile allure, and their varying enticing aromas.

Margaret Wood, one of O’Keeffe’s live-in cooks/assistants in her later years, describes the introduction she got from O’Keeffe to the herbal kingdom, “Miss O’Keeffe acquainted me with wiry tarragon, feathery dill, stalky lovage, bushy

green and purple basil, and other herbs” (Wood, 1). O’Keeffe’s unruly herb garden also gave forth sorrel, summer savory, chives, tarragon, parsley, marjoram, and many mints (Wood, xiv). But O’Keeffe’s herbs were not grown just for pleasure. Like everyone and everything connected to her home, they had their work to do.

O’Keeffe was well aware of the restorative properties of herbs and their abilities to make a significant contribution to overall wellness. She was a health nut, and she was amazingly strong, radiant, and active. She was still rafting the Colorado River and camping in the wilderness in her late seventies. The artist was an early adopter of the teachings of exercise and bodywork pioneer Ida Rolf. O’Keeffe was also personal friends with the rebellious biochemist, nutritionist, and author Adele Davis. Nutrition had a lot to do with O’Keeffe’s vim and vigor. Salad was on the menu daily for lunch, and though O’Keeffe’s cooks often prepared meals, Georgia herself usually made the daily lunch salads with freshly picked lettuce, herbs, and vegetables (Wood, 1).

O’Keeffe Was a Foodie, a Slow Foodie

Like most successful artists, O’Keeffe had a fierce and fast work ethic. But when she was not working, she understood the pleasure and meditative importance of life in the slow lane. One of her favorite books was the 1906 classic *The Book of Tea* by Okakura Kakuzo, which lyrically describes the Japanese tea ceremony, the merits of simplicity, and the philosophy underpinning tea (Udall, 220). O’Keeffe enjoyed taking tea daily, often favoring a spearmint tisane plucked fresh from the garden and slowly served from her modest, yet comely, Japanese teapot.

Inside O’Keeffe’s Kitchen

O’Keeffe’s recipes, like her teapot, were not meant to impress; they were no-nonsense and good for you. However, that did not mean food from her kitchen was bland or put together in a slapdash fashion. Celebrity chef and author Deborah Madison has been quoted as saying the following about O’Keeffe’s ostensibly overly simple recipes, “It looks as if there’s nothing special going on with the recipes, but read between the lines and everything that promises deep goodness is there, mainly the fruits of the garden translated with a sure hand into, say, a salad of torn herbs or a soup scented with lovage” (Wood, ix). Why not peruse one of O’Keeffe’s personal recipes written by Margaret Wood and decide for yourself?

O’Keeffe’s Herb Salad Dressing

From *A Painter’s Kitchen: Recipes from the Kitchen of Georgia O’Keeffe*, courtesy of The Museum of New Mexico Press, 2009© by Margaret Wood.

2 teaspoons herbs: lovage, tarragon, dill, basil, parsley

2 tablespoons olive oil

2 tablespoons safflower oil or other high quality vegetable oil

1 teaspoon lemon juice, or more to taste

¼ teaspoon whole seed mustard

2 garlic cloves

Herb salt, to taste

Freshly ground pepper, to taste

Pinch of sugar (optional)

Chives, as garnish

Wash the herbs and pat them dry. Then chop all herbs medium fine, except the chives. Blend the olive oil and safflower oils with a fork, add the lemon juice and mustard. Squeeze one medium garlic clove through a garlic press and add it to the liquid. Then add the chopped herbs to the dressing. Add herb salt and freshly ground pepper to taste. Add a pinch of sugar if the mixture is too sour. Allow this dressing to stand for an hour, if possible, so that the herb and garlic flavors can permeate the dressing. This quantity will dress a salad for 4 to 6 people.

Before serving the salad, rub a wooden bowl with a garlic clove split in half. Add the lettuce to the bowl. Pour the dressing over the lettuce and toss the salad. Chop the chives into ¼-inch pieces and sprinkle them on top.

Note: There are quite a number of herbs included in this dressing. For practicality, use the herbs available or preferred. Sliced or quartered sweet cherry tomatoes, thinly sliced small radishes, or chopped and seeded cucumbers are possible additions to this salad. In the salad dressing, a variation for the lemon juice is balsamic vinegar; the vinegar lends a rich, slightly sweet taste to the dressing.

People get weirdly enthusiastic about salad when it has a homemade herbal dressing like this on it. Maybe it's the unique taste imparted by unusual ingredients like lovage. Why does lovage keep cropping up in an American kitchen in the southwest?

Lovage: O'Keeffe's Favorite Herb

The answer is because O'Keeffe loved lovage; it was her favorite herb. She had this in common with the medieval emperor

Charlemagne. He was so enamored with the look and taste of lovage that he commanded all his estate gardens overflow with it. However, lovage was not just a favorite with the royals. Lovage was a staple in the healing gardens of monks and very popular amongst the common folk, as it was a vital ingredient in love potions. In fact, lovage used to be commonly known as “love root.”

Etymologically, lovage was derived from two words: love and ache (ache being a medieval word for parsley). So technically, lovage is the parsley of love. For the last few centuries, though, lovage’s popularity has wilted, and with occasional exceptions, it has languished on the sidelines of herbal history. O’Keeffe paid popular sentiment no mind and enjoyed lovage anyway. And so should you. Here are six ways to delight in that certain *je-ne-sais-quoi* nuance lovage can offer.

Six Sumptuous Ways to Love Lovage in Your Kitchen

Roast It in a Chicken

Gail Monaghan of the *Wall Street Journal* recommends that cooks “Tuck a sprig or two inside a whole chicken or fish before roasting, and you’ll be rewarded with intriguing, *je-ne-sais-quoi* nuances; guests will be racking their brains to decipher the delicious enigma.” (Monaghan)

Candy It

You can candy thick lovage stems to decorate a cake top or enhance homemade biscotti. Use them in a dish as you would use candied fruit pieces or the candied stems of angelica (lovage’s botanical cousin).

Pretend It's Bok Choy

Lovage stems can be simply steamed and eaten with a splash of balsamic vinegar. Personally, I prefer to douse my steamed greens with soy sauce or a bit of Bragg's Liquid Aminos™... delicious and healthy.

Make Soup

As we saw earlier, O'Keeffe added lovage to salad dressing and used it for salad greens, but the craftiest way she deployed lovage was in her soups. Lovage was actually the star ingredient that could make ordinary tomato soup, in O'Keeffe's words, into something, "quite special." (Wood, 20).

Pretend It's Fennel

Lovage's root can be chopped, grated, or shaved like fennel. Include it as one of a few ingredients in an easy but daring salad combination. For example, you could put it in a version of a blood orange salad served in Sicily, a country whose dishes benefit from an exotic North African influence. Grate or chop lovage root over navel and blood orange sections, add a bit of mint, some very thin slivers of red onion, and serve with a tangy, hot paprika vinaigrette.

Lovage: The Cocktail

Or better yet, use mature lovage stems as savory Bloody Mary straws. O'Keeffe didn't imbibe much, but that shouldn't prevent you from occasionally partaking in a refreshing herbal cocktail.

Lovage in Your Garden

Lovage is a member of the tasty Umbelliferae family, along with the likes of dill, celery, carrot, fennel, coriander, and pars-

ley. If given the right conditions, this perennial will reach six feet tall and resemble parsley on steroids. If you want to experience lovage, you may have to order the seed online and grow it from seed. I have yet to find it at Southern California farmer's markets or local grocery stores. And poor Charlemagne might be horrified to hear that many United States nurseries do not carry lovage seedlings, though some sell lovage seeds. You may meet with more success in your own area. (For improving your lovage's odds of thriving, see the Underhill and Nakjavani link in endnotes). If you give ho-hum, ordinary lovage a chance, the reward may be extraordinary.

The Extraordinary Ordinary

Celebrating the extraordinary within the ordinary was a big, silky theme that threaded itself through O'Keeffe's life and art. She wanted people to see the magnificence she saw in the simplest of natural things. O'Keeffe is famous for her huge, arresting paintings of flowers, but it is her renderings of bones on canvas that personally send me to the moon. The artist also did a heck of a job on rocks and shells. An entire O'Keeffe canvas like *Inside Clam Shell* (1930) could be devoted to showing the miniature, watery universe contained within a humble shell—a universe that a viewer of her work may have been too busy to notice. To physically feel the wallop that even a wee 7" x 9" O'Keeffe shell painting can pack, nothing beats viewing one in person. Or better yet, see a few in a row.

Make Your Own Pilgrimage to O'Keeffe Country

Why not visit her museum? The Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in downtown Santa Fe holds the largest collection of her

work in the world with over a thousand of her pieces. While you are in the area, fast becoming known as “O’Keeffe Country,” don’t miss touring her home/studio and garden. Travel writer and pilgrimage scholar Phil Cousineau has declared the visiting of O’Keeffe’s home and museum a modern pilgrimage, one especially important for American women. Any important journey can bring you face to face with some of your own fears. O’Keeffe, like all of us, constantly encountered her own fears. As she used to say, “I’ve been absolutely terrified every moment of my life—and I’ve never let it keep me from doing a single thing I wanted to do.”

If you are at all inspired by Georgia O’Keeffe’s life or her paintings, I urge you to leave the comforts of your own home and journey to her home. This journey could help you to continue to uncover your own unique brand of genius. And besides, it beats staying home and worrying if you are making someone else the right brand of instant coffee.

Further Info

A little advance planning and a rental car will make it possible for you to easily tour the O’Keeffe Museum, and Georgia O’Keeffe’s home and studio in Abiquiú on the same day. Be on the safe side: book a tour reservation a few months ahead of time. Tour groups are small and conducted sparingly from March to November. Private tours can be scheduled off-season. Visit www.okeeffemuseum.org/abiquiu-home--studio.html.

Travel Tip

You may find some of O’Keeffe’s quotes as inspiring as her paintings, her life, and her garden. Pack the best selling *Por-*

trait of an Artist: A Biography of Georgia O’Keeffe by Laurie Lisle as a companion on your voyage.

Endnotes

- Lisle, Laurie. *Portrait of an Artist: A Biography of Georgia O’Keeffe*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980.
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Maria Chabot, Georgia O'Keeffe in the Abiquiú Garden, 1944. © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum. While traveling in rural New Mexico in the 1930s, Georgia O'Keeffe. Indeed, the garden is one of the highlights of a visit to the Abiquiú home and studio, which has been overseen by the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum since 2006, and is accessible to the public via guided tours. (Hers is among a long tradition of gardens created by artists for inspiration and enjoyment.) With its original layout and adobe irrigation ditch, the garden sits across a series of terraces over nearly an acre of land beside the house. It bears everything from lilacs and day lilies, to kale and chard, to the fruits of a small orchard of apricot, peach, pear, and apple trees. The current show of Georgia O'Keeffe's work, *Modern Nature*, at San Francisco's DeYoung Museum reveals the the gardener observing nature. The works in the exhibition are all from a period of her life when she painted at the vacation resort town of Lake George, New York, before moving to the Southwest where she spent most of her career. We see her studies of the Eastern landscapes with the trees, leaves, and most remarkably the garden flowers from the summer garden of the Stieglitz family, seen with the appreciation of a gardener that seeks to celebrate plants. "I wish people were all trees and I think I could enjoy them then." Georgia O'Keeffe 1921. A heliconia in "Georgia O'Keeffe: Visions of Hawaii" at the New York Botanical Garden. Photo courtesy of Sarah Cascone. Perhaps unsurprisingly, she was first drawn to the belladonna, which bore a striking resemblance to the Jimson weed, the subject of one of her best-known "not to mention most expensive" canvases. The garden looks beyond O'Keeffe as well. Greeting visitors at the entrance's reflecting pool is a massive stainless steel sculpture by Hawaiian artist Mark Chai. The sun-shaped work is actually inspired by one of O'Keeffe's paintings. Completing the celebration of Hawaii is a full slate of programming, with music performances, a fashion show, and a traditional tattoo demonstration, plus a food truck serving poke.