

What was a woman's role on an 18th-century Virginia farm?

The busy life of women on colonial Virginia farms fit into the seasonal cycle of growing tobacco. Sometimes they also helped their husbands care for the tobacco crop, but their main job was to run the farm household and raise the children.

In the spring and summer planters' wives often grew herbs such as spearmint, peppermint, lavender, rosemary, and parsley, which were used to flavor foods and make home health remedies. They also tended a kitchen garden where vegetables such as beans, turnips, and peas were grown. In the late summer and fall, women harvested, dried, and stored fruits and vegetables for winter meals. Many foods were also pickled in vinegar and spices for the long winter ahead. Hogs were butchered in the fall, and the whole family helped process the meat into hams and sausages which could be salted and smoked to preserve them. Lye soap was made with leftover fat from the hog butchering. Many farmers also kept and butchered cows for food. Their fat, called tallow, was used to make candles.

Throughout the year, women cared for their children and taught them to do simple work tasks. On the farm, feeding poultry, collecting eggs, tending the garden, making and mending clothing, doing laundry, and preparing meals over the open kitchen hearth were daily activities of the farmer's wife.

During the Revolutionary War, many farm women grew flax, a tall grass-like plant. Flax was harvested for the long, tough fibers inside the stalks. These fibers could be smoothed, combed and spun into thread on a spinning wheel, a job that may have been done in the winter. Once the thread was spun, it could be sent to a weaver to be woven into cloth for clothing and sheets. Very few women had a loom on the farm, or the special skills needed to weave their own cloth.



Preparing the garden



Cooking dinner



Watering the garden



Feeding the turkey



Making candles



Spinning



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