

**African American History Month**  
**Greg Grant, Tyler Morning Telegraph**  
**February 7, 2019**

I love both cultural and horticultural history. Since February is African-American History Month, it's a good time to note the plethora of Southern landscape influences from Africa.

Although most Texas yards are blanketed with manicured modern turfgrasses today, not long ago, bare dirt, swept yards were the norm. Although there is some debate, most authorities credit Africa with their introduction into the South. Whether it was for neatness, fire suppression, or fear of rodents and snakes, most rural homes and cemeteries were once scraped bare of all grass and weeds and raked or swept smooth with home-made twig or grass brooms.

And long before plastic pink flamingos dotted the vernacular landscape, one might have found bottle trees gracing the front yard. These early forms of Southern yard art actually have their origins in Africa as well, where early glass bottles were hung from trees to trap evil spirits before they entered the home. In Texas and the South, assorted bottles were generally stuck on branches of dead cedars and other small trees in the yard for crude, but effective, "stained glass" ornament.

But the greatest African impact on our landscape is firmly rooted in our gardens. As a lifelong gardener, it's almost impossible to fathom an East Texas garden without peas, watermelons, and okra. And yes, they're all from Africa. Cotton, rice, and sorghum too, were native African crops that altered Southern history as well as Texas agriculture. And speaking of production agriculture, every time I watch my dad bale hay, I can't help but remember that both his Bermuda grass and the cattle egrets gliding above are from Africa as well. Whether you tread on your great-grandmother's swept yard or on a modern golf course, you're walking across Africa.

My favorite plants have always been flowers. I bet very few gardeners realize that our summertime scene full of crinum lilies, periwinkles, and castor beans are all heirloom African introductions passed down by our ancestors. Geraniums, gladiolus, plumbago, airplane plant, gerbera daisy, and of course African violets are African natives as well. Guineas and coffee are from Africa too.

Even a number of our Southern words are African in origin including *goober* (peanut), *yam* (sweet potato), *jambalaya* (ham rice), and *gumbo* (okra). Remember, the next time you order gumbo, if it doesn't have okra in it, it's really not gumbo. You can thank Africa for that. You can also thank Africa for a heat tolerant landscape and a heaping dose of your Southern roots as well.

**Greg Grant is the Smith County horticulturist for the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. He is co-author of *Heirloom Gardening in the South* and before he got married had a swept yard. You can read his “Greg’s Ramblings” blog at [arborgate.com](http://arborgate.com), follow him on Facebook at “Greg Grant Gardens,” or read his “In Greg’s Garden” in each issue of *Texas Gardener* magazine ([texasgardener.com](http://texasgardener.com)). More science based gardening information from the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service can be found at [aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu](http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu).**

**Image caption: *East Texas favorites, peas and okra are both from Africa.***