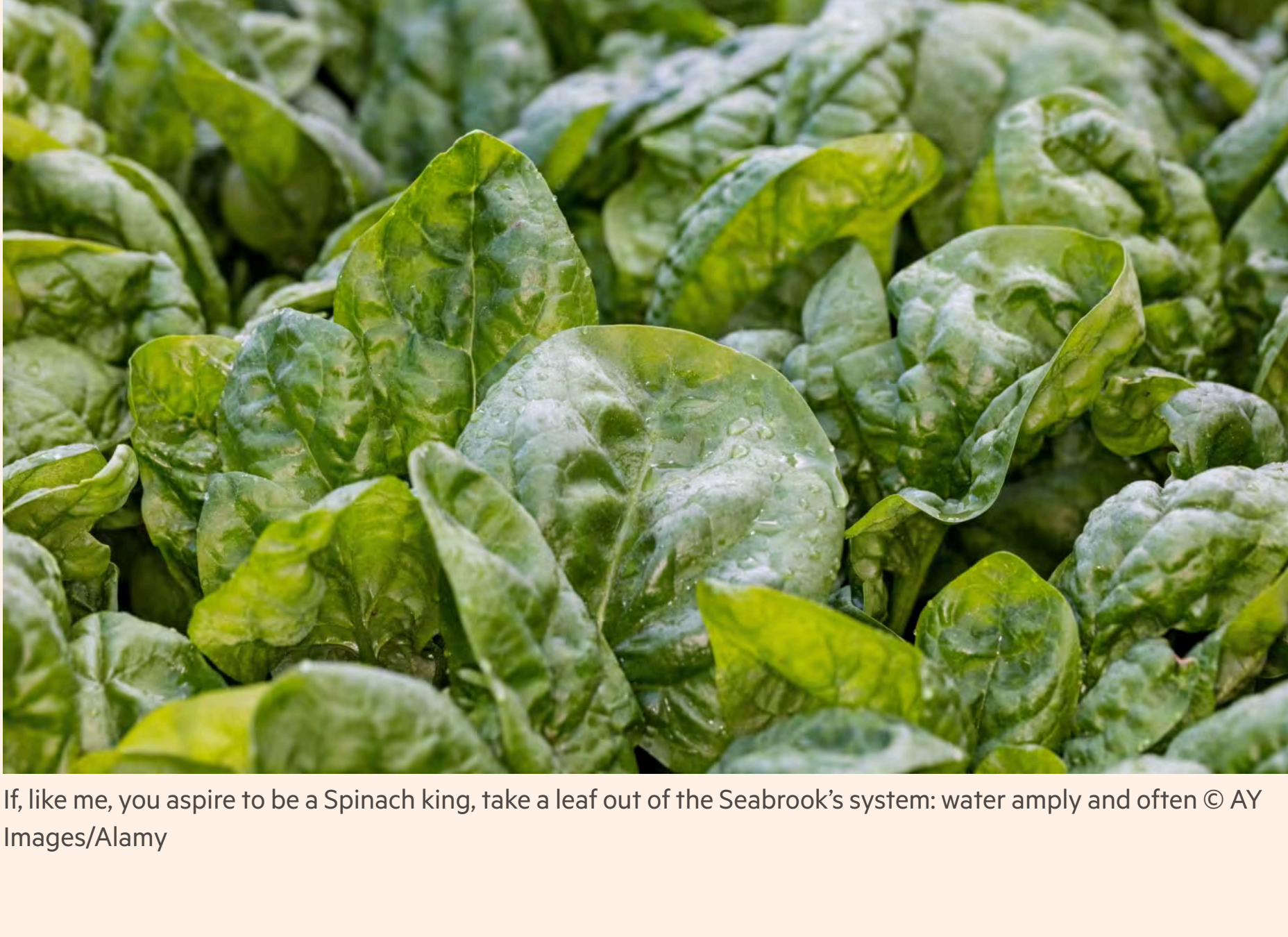


## Lessons

## References

pioneering spinach farms. For gardeners — as for business leaders — its story provides both inspiration and caution

ROBIN LANE FOX [Add to myFT](#)



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I am only a spinach pretender. I cannot outdo Popeye the Sailor, who downed a

gives a man strength. Spinach is a quick-growing crop, progressing from seed to edible leaves in less than six weeks. As boys we used to munch through plates of it saying it would make a man of us in only 40 days.

I am not too worried about losing my title to Louis XIV of France. On the site of his huge potager at [Versailles](#), I learned from the head gardener that spinach has been dropped as a summer crop in the warming climate. Unlike Madame

From the 1890s to the 1950s three generations of the Seabrook family grew

spinach and fresh vegetables on a scale far beyond our rows for personal consumption. John Seabrook, from the fourth generation, has now dug into what seemed on the surface to be the American dream come true, in his book



weeks © Allstar/King Features

of the 58 acres his father had worked hard to buy. He turned them into Seabrook Farms on 50,000 acres, eventually growing about a third of the US's frozen vegetables, spinach to the fore. To keep up with the market he repackaged spinach as frozen creamed spinach, sold in a boil-in-the-bag format. In 1959 the Seabrooks' advertising proclaimed "Food Miracle Frees Wife . . . Delights Husband". No wonder creamed spinach swept through the kitchens of the East Coast.

These spinster knigs were not stuck in the mud gardens. They adopted new technologies and reacted acutely to market changes. For them, at least, social ascent was entwined with success. Charles, son of a working tenant farmer, aspired to the status of upper class families in Britain whose *estates* he advised on farming. He claimed his life's work was to recover the similar status his ancestors had once enjoyed there: in fact they had had none. How aspirations have changed: imagine a Gates or Bezos commissioning monogrammed English silver cutlery and inventing a bogus link to earls in Britain.

Jack Seabrook, son and business partner of Charles, took on the same models and rose even further. He was immaculately dressed by tailors from London's Savile Row. He drove horses to pull a carriage copied from the finest old English style. Subsidised by spinach he entered high society. In 1956 he travelled to Monaco, visited the Onassis's private yacht and attended Grace Kelly's wedding, wearing a top hat and tails. He took two slices of the wedding cake, nonetheless, and concealed them under his hat so as to send them home



gardener: location, water and soil. The founder, Arthur Seabrook, bought land which was close to rail links into 1890s New York and then to their rivals, main roads. Out to it, therefore, came cheap city manure, human and also animal, as New York produced a million pounds of horse manure a day. The farm's soil was already rich from the nearby coastline's silting debris. The Seabrooks exploited it for celery and lettuce as well as spinach. They intercropped strawberries between straight rows of onions, doubling their farm's capacity. Manuring heavily, they aimed to grow three or four crops a year on the same ground.

**The Seabrooks invested in overhead irrigation, buying into a system patented in Ohio. Learn from them: spinach needs ample watering if it is to thrive**

Into the city they sent loads of fresh vegetables, realising the new scope for trucking crops by road to clients. Surging forwards, they also revolutionised watering. Sprinklers for lawns and golf courses were becoming popular in the 1890s. In 1907 the Seabrooks invested in

system patented

Which variety did they grow? The main one, I think, was Bloomsdale Long Standing, but in Britain newer hybrids have pushed it out. Seeds are still sold on Amazon and I can testify to the results: big leaved, full of vitamins and tasty. For my autumn sowing I also use Giant Winter, which sounds chic in Italian as **Gigante d'Inverno** from Franchi seeds. A good pair, from the same source, is Viking, also suited to autumn sowing.

In the mid 1950s, the third generation of Seabrooks went into mechanised picking and weeding, but Charles, the elder titan, loathed it. He championed hand weeding and what he described as “fine gardening”. He thought readily in terms of a garden, not a farm. He had laid out a garden and park in the English style round his house as befitted his social aspirations. He had teamed up in the 1920s with a prominent horticulturist, Peter Koster, breeder of the popular Koster spruce tree, and was growing acres of tulips, roses and rhododendrons. He looked on the vegetable farms as glorified flowerbeds, citing how he had crawled all day in them picking spinach at the age of seven.



One of the company's trucking fleet © Collection Seabrook Farms

In her poem "Memoirs of a Spinach-Picker" Sylvia Plath evokes herself bent over spinach plants "in my leather-kneed/ Dungarees, proud as a lady in a sea/ Of prize roses". She had briefly picked spinach in summer 1950 on a farm in Massachusetts before going to college. Charles would have deflated her unrealistic hope. He wanted to be known as a builder, not a dreary farmer. In the 1930s he even travelled to Communist Russia to bid to lay roads for Stalin's five-year plan.

Italians, then African Americans moving north, then Japanese Americans mostly moving east from wartime internment in California. John Seabrook's research here has uncovered a dark underside. In the 1920s and '30s workers were paid the minimum and African Americans were housed atrociously. Charles banned unions, detested communists and believed in an international Jewish financial conspiracy. In 1934 his workers went on strike: the Ku Klux Klan terrorised them back to work.

### Recommended



Robin Lane Fox

## What really counts as butterfly-friendly planting?

From the 1940s onwards his son Jack was less extreme, allowing unions and stating “the desire to do something” for his workers. However, Charles had also cheated his own father financially. In the 1950s he let some creative accounting destroy investment brought in by banks on Wall Street. Before 1960 accusations of misconduct by a man some called “the Mad Dog of Finance” had been leveled

I take away another lesson too. The spinach kingdom was not brought down by a press exposé of its owners. In mid-October 1954 a hurricane destroyed the late spinach on which the year's profit depended. The Seabrooks' realm never recovered, but it remains a cautionary tale. Our mini realms of spinach grow

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