



First lady Michelle Obama plants herbs in the White House Kitchen Garden with students from Washington's Bancroft Elementary School on April 9.

(Charles Dharapak/AP)

Michelle Obama's garden secret

The presidential vegetable garden will save on grocery bills.

By Peter Grier | Staff writer/ April 13, 2009 edition

WASHINGTON

So the Obama family is planting the first vegetable garden to grace the White House grounds in the past 60 years. Why? To placate the organic food lobby? To make the elegant first couple appear more down-to-earth? (Yes, that's a bad pun, no need to tell us.)

Here's a wild guess: They're trying to cut down on their grocery bill. It's a little-known fact of Washington life that US presidents have to buy the ingredients for their family meals.

"The president has always had to pay for his own food," says Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian of the National First Ladies' Library.

President Bush had to buy the pretzel on which he choked while watching football at home in 2002. President Clinton was billed (bonus bad pun) for Big Macs he ordered in.

So President Obama will be buying all the cereal Sasha and Malia eat, among other things. In that context, cheap home-grown arugula might look pretty good.

“This is really the new Victory Garden,” says former White House chef Walter Scheib approvingly of the Obamas’ plot. “It’s a good representation of a frugal and responsible lifestyle.”

Obama doesn’t have to pay for the free-range scallops and steamed ribs in parchment served at fancy state dinners. Those are official functions, paid for by the US government.

That wasn’t always the case. Up until the administration of William Howard Taft, US chief executives footed their own entertainment bill, says Mr. Anthony of the First Ladies’ Library. That financially ruined some, including Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe.

Nor does the president pay for business meetings. If Obama hosts members of Congress, say, to try and convince them to pass more stimulus spending, he can charge the cost of the barbecue to his expense account.

But since the dawn of the Republic, US presidents have paid for what they, their families, and their guests, eat in private.

Nowadays, that means ingredients. The US pays for chefs to cook those ingredients, and stewards to serve them, on the theory that the president and first lady are too busy with the nation’s business to fry their own eggs.