

## AHS NEWS SPECIAL

### An Interview with Scott C. Plein, AHS Board Chair

Editor David J. Ellis interviews Scott C. Plein, who became Chair of the American Horticultural Society's Board of Directors in July 2022, about the Board's goals for the organization and the future of its River Farm headquarters. A resident of Falls Church, Virginia, Plein is the founding principal of Equinox Investments, LLC, a real estate investment, development, and management firm specializing in community planning, entitlements, and project development in the Northern Virginia area. He established the White House Farm Foundation, a nonprofit environmental educational foundation, and is principal owner of White House Natives, a landscape-quality tree nursery that propagates only plants native to Virginia. Plein also founded KT Enterprises Inc., a leading landscape management company in the Washington Metropolitan area for over 45 years

#### **What was it about the American Horticultural Society (AHS) and River Farm that inspired you to become involved as a Board member?**

What inspired me initially was becoming familiar with the challenge that AHS was facing with the controversial proposal to sell River Farm. Because of my involvement with conservation through my work with other nonprofits—including the Potomac Riverkeeper Network and the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust (NVCT)—I was approached for advice by Alan Rowsome, the executive director of NVCT. Alan, who also chaired the Save River Farm group, invited me to visit River Farm in the summer of 2021. I have experience with the restoration of several old homes, including a historic 1890 farm in Luray, Virginia, so I was immediately struck by the beauty of River Farm, and its relationship to the Potomac River and our nation's history. The idea of selling it just seemed absurd. I started sharing my thoughts about the options for River Farm and was invited to join the Board in October 2021.

#### **Now that the decision to keep River Farm has been made, what are the Board's top priorities for the AHS?**

Of course our national headquarters is an important and historic property that exemplifies our love of horticulture and our respect for history. We have a lot of friends who want to see the property utilized better for the community, and our Board members want that and to see it utilized and recognized as our national home for AHS. To me, the most important thing going forward is that we make the AHS a more influential voice and resource to everybody who loves horticulture. We're the national horticultural society, so our number one priority is to be the best at representing every aspect of horticulture and continuing to encourage all Americans to discover the benefits and joy of gardening.

#### **You started your first landscaping business in high school. How has your career influenced your gardening philosophy?**

I've always loved creating and maintaining beautiful places through horticulture. One side of me loves classical formal landscapes, but I also do a lot of work on the ecological side with native plants. At my White House Farm in Luray, Vir-



AHS Board Chair Scott C. Plein

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View of the sunrise over the Potomac River from the porch of the Estate House at River Farm.

ginia, I have a nursery, White House Natives, that grows only landscape-quality trees native to Virginia. We are getting people to install these plants into quality landscapes and trying to convince the landscape architecture community to start including more native plants.

On the horticultural side, I'm not a purist. If you can incorporate more ecologically sensitive methods to maintain a landscape, then I'm all for it. But I like a landscape that blends both classical and ecological approaches. In looking to the future, we should be striving to be more ecologically sensitive while still respecting the role of traditional horticultural practices for the value they bring to people's lives.

**The AHS celebrated its Centennial last year. What do you and the Board see as the key objectives for the organization in the next few years?**

I view AHS as being at a transition point. We're entering a new era, thus we have the opportunity to reinvent ourselves for the next 100 years. I see horticulture changing in a very positive way using more environmentally sensitive practices and reaching out to encourage more people to become involved in plants and gardening.

More specifically, our goal in the next few years is to continue rebuilding a very strong infrastructure for this organization. In 2020 and 2021, Board members were fighting for the survival of the River Farm and had to get very involved in the day-to-day operations. Now that we have successfully weathered that period, we have been focusing on building our staff infrastructure, enhancing our communication systems, upgrading our education programs, and growing the organization. I'm a real believer that long-term success is driven by passionate Board members who have great ideas and can

give direction for strategy and allocation of resources, but at the same time know when to step back once they have brought in the best professionals in the field and instilled an understanding of the mission and where the organization wants to go.

**What do you and the Board feel are the most important issues in American gardening at this time?**

If you were to survey all the Board members, you would find a real passion for demonstrating our concern for the environment and all the things happening with climate change and, unfortunately, the extinction of so many species. Every Board member wants to see horticultural practices continue to become more environmentally friendly and ecologically

focused, yet our Board members also want to focus on the important role the beauty of plants and gardens play in enhancing our lives. Based on my own personal experience and stories from others, I do believe that a lot of people's first connections with the environment and the outdoor world occurred in their grandparents' back yard, if you will. My grandmother had a very nice garden, and my grandfather grew roses and other plants. That's where I learned my appreciation for nature. Experiencing the beauty of plants up close helps forge a lifelong connection to the natural world.

**How do you and the Board plan to balance the AHS's role as a national organization with its regional programs and presence at River Farm?**

River Farm can be an exemplary model for horticultural practices and is a big component of our ability to educate and allow people to appreciate the world of horticulture. That said, our Board's overall goal and priority is the promotion of wise and forward-looking horticultural practices that appreciate the variety of landscapes that exist throughout every region and every microclimate of our nation.

**The AHS celebrates the 50th anniversary of its acquisition of River Farm in 2023—how significant is this milestone given what has happened over the last few years?**

I think this year's Annual Gala will really celebrate everything we've accomplished by saving River Farm and knowing that it will be the home of AHS for many years to come. River Farm is a blessing to so many, especially to those who are committed to ensuring that AHS continues to be the national voice for horticulture.