

## AHS 2023 Great American Gardeners National Award Winners



THE American Horticultural Society (AHS) is proud to announce the recipients of the Society’s 2023 Great American Gardeners Awards. These individuals and organizations have contributed significantly to fields such as plant research, garden stewardship, horticultural outreach, and teaching. The AHS will present the Liberty Hyde Bailey award at its 50th Anniversary gala, which will take place September 23 at our River Farm headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia. We look forward to sharing more information about all of the honorees and celebrating their work through the AHS website and social media channels.

### LIBERTY HYDE BAILEY AWARD

*The American Horticultural Society’s highest award, the Liberty Hyde Bailey Award is given to an individual who has made significant lifetime contributions to at least three of the following horticultural fields: teaching, research, communications, plant exploration, administration, art, business, and leadership. First awarded in 1958.*

THIS YEAR’S winner of the AHS’s highest honor is **Claire E. Sawyers**, who has been director of the Scott Arboretum of Swarthmore College, located in the suburbs of Philadelphia, for more than 30 years. In addition to transforming the Arboretum into one of the leading examples of campus gardens in the country she has overseen its acclaimed Arthur Hoyt Scott Medal and Award program, which recognizes top American horticulturists.

Sawyers has been active in publishing and other professional activities and has garnered a number of awards over the course of her career. Her book, *The Authentic Garden: Five Principles for Cultivating Place* was published by Timber Press in 2007. It received an AHS Book award in 2008. She served as guest editor for four of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden’s Handbook series, and she has also had more than 40 articles published in popular magazines, including *The American Gardener*, *Horticulture*, and *Fine Gardening*.

Her awards include the American Horticultural Society’s Professional Award (2009), The Garden Club of America, Zone V, Horticulture Commendation (2008), and the University of Delaware Presidential Citation for Outstanding Achievement (2001). She has served on boards or committees for many professional organizations.

“In a field often plagued by rapid turnover of leadership, Claire exemplifies what can be accomplished over time with devotion, commitment and vision,” says Panayoti Kelaidis, director of outreach at Denver Botanic Garden in Colorado. “As much as anyone else in public garden leadership, she has helped elevate the Delaware Valley to be America’s garden heartland.”

### LESSONS FROM BEAN SEEDS

Sawyers grew up on a farm in Missouri, where she learned



about gardening from her first mentors, her grandparents. “My parents ran a dairy farm, so I spent days with my grandparents,” she recalls. “I remember feeling very empowered and grown up when they trusted me to plant bean seeds. Being in that environment was how my direction in life got set.”

Sawyers attended some classes at Purdue University the summer after her junior year in high school and suddenly found herself in college. “They enrolled me as a regular student even though I hadn’t graduated from high school,” says Sawyers, “so

I sometimes refer to myself as a high school dropout with two master's degrees." She chose to enroll in Purdue's professional plantsman program, overseen by legendary horticulturist Harrison Flint, who became another key mentor. "He was really instrumental in giving me direction, entrusting me to be one of his TAs," says Sawyers.

After a brief sojourn in Europe, where Sawyers worked at the renowned Kalmthout Arboretum in Belgium as well as private gardens in Brittany and Normandy, she returned to Purdue for her master's degree in horticulture. She then joined the Longwood Graduate Program at the University of Delaware, which at the time was coordinated by Richard Lighty. On graduation from the Longwood program in 1983, Sawyers followed Lighty as part of a three-person administrative team put together to steer the Mt. Cuba Center for Piedmont Plants in Hockessin, Delaware, during its transition from a private estate into a public garden. "It was a very diverse position that allowed me to gain experience in developing plant collections, plant records systems, volunteer programs, visitor services, and of course I learned a lot about native plants," Sawyers recalls.

## MOVING TO SCOTT

In 1990, Sawyers was hired to be the executive director of the Scott Arboretum. "Looking back, I was probably pretty green stepping into the position, so I do feel a deep sense of indebtedness to Bill Spock, who was vice president of Swarthmore at that time, for taking the chance on me," she says.

It was a challenge to take on the administration and maintenance of a 400-plus acre campus with plant collections that include more than 3,000 woody taxa and a staff of 28 employees and some 200 volunteers. "Over 30 years she has used her organizational and administrative abilities to create what is arguably the most beautiful garden campus in North America," says Lighty. "She has done this while maintaining the majestic feeling for which the campus has always been noted." The arboretum is also known for its "outstanding plant collections, which have grown and flourished under Claire's direction, including hollies, lilacs, and peonies. The holly collection is one of the finest in the world," says Paul W. Meyer, recently retired as director of the Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania.

During her tenure, Sawyers was instrumental in leveraging a number of notable endowments and spearheaded the creation of the Wister Education Center and Greenhouse in 2009. And she helped elevate the stature of the Arboretum's signature horticultural award program. "Claire has guided the Arthur Hoyt Scott Award and Medal with outstanding organization, grace, and fairness," says Meyer. "Through this award program, which includes a significant cash prize, she has raised the prestige of horticulture professionals while recognizing outstanding leaders in the field."

Sawyers has rich memories of hosting a who's who of American horticulturists over the course of the award program, but one of her most poignant dates to her first year, in 1991, when the honoree was J.C. Raulston of North Carolina State University Arboretum. "This was a touchstone for me because during discussion by the committee the point was made that he was relatively young and no doubt we would have many years ahead to recognize his accomplishments," Sawyers recalls. She reminded committee members that the award was not contingent on the age or stage of career of the recipient, but rather on who had made the most singular contributions to the

science and art of gardening. Swayed by this, the committee selected Raulston who, tragically, died in an automobile accident in 1996. "If we had not given him the award that year, he might never have been recognized," observes Sawyers.

## ENGAGING THE STUDENTS

Sawyers says creating tangible and impactful ways to engage the college community in the Arboretum's mission is where she feels the greatest sense of accomplishment. "The students that come to Swarthmore increasingly have had minimal contact with nature because many have been raised in an urban environment," says Sawyers. Thus one of her goals became, "providing opportunities for students here to begin to have some plant literacy and an understanding of how we are a part of nature."



Swarthmore students participate in a popular Nature Rx class.

"The arboretum is thoroughly embedded with the college—our plant collections are all around the academic buildings," she emphasizes. "So on the one hand you would think that, of course students are engaged, but now they walk to the classrooms on their phones not looking at the landscape." To remedy this, six years ago Sawyers established a campus engagement coordinator—a dedicated staff position with the express goal of developing programs that pull students and faculty into the mission of the arboretum.

"We have established some things that feel like they are successful, such as 'Discover at the Arboretum', a series of popup events held in student lounges and the dining hall. "I would say this is what you might call fun horticulture—planting seeds, or making tea bags with chamomile grown in the gardens," says Sawyers.

Last year the arboretum hosted a career night where three alumni involved in horticultural careers were invited speakers. "The idea is to make liberal arts majors aware of careers in horticulture," says Sawyers. And the newest initiative, aided by a generous gift from an alumna, Janet Jones, is the creation of two core credit courses related to plants and horticulture—Human Culture and Plants, and Nature Rx—both housed in the Environmental Studies program. "To me this feels like a very meaningful way for the arboretum to say, here's how we are able to contribute to the core mission of the college and expose students in a comprehensive way to learn about plants and our ties to horticulture," says Sawyers.

## EMERGING HORTICULTURAL PROFESSIONAL AWARD

*Recognizes significant achievements and/or leadership that have advanced the field of horticulture in America. First given in 2017.*

Alabama native **Marcus Garner** combines his love of people and horticulture as a horticulture urban regional Extension agent for Alabama Cooperative Extension System at Alabama A&M



University in Huntsville. In addition to fielding phone calls from concerned homeowners about armyworms and other pests and teaching workshops on plant propagation and lawn care, Garner actively seeks out community organizations and facilities to assist clients in gaining self-sufficiency and better health through plants and gardening.

One of these organizations is the Legacy Center, a nonprofit that supports programs for older, disabled, and special needs adults and other underserved populations. Legacy's executive director, Morgan Saintjones, says Garner "mobilized groups of over 100 volunteers to beautify our neighborhood gardens and the outdoor courtyards for low-income seniors." Jennifer Bail, an assistant professor in the college of nursing at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, who worked with Garner during a cancer research project, says he "delivered gardening supplies and mentored participants in the planning, planting, and maintaining of a home vegetable garden."

As an educator for the Water Wheels Mobile Conservation Laboratory—Alabama Extension's traveling classroom—Garner crisscrosses Alabama teaching citizens about environmental stewardship. Through interactive activities and games, Garner makes learning about watersheds, water pollution, and conservation accessible and meaningful. Garner has an Associate of Science degree in ornamental horticulture from Bessemer State Technical College in Alabama, and a Bachelor of Science in plant science and a Masters of Business Administration, both from Alabama A&M University in Huntsville.

### Great American Gardeners Award Committee

The 2023 Great American Gardeners Awards committee is chaired by **Holly Shimizu**, former executive director of the U.S. Botanic Garden. Committee members include **Kaifa Anderson-Hall**, a horticultural therapist in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area; **Panayoti Kelaidis**, director of outreach at Denver Botanic Gardens in Denver, Colorado; **Ryan McEnaney**, marketing and communications manager at Bailey Nurseries in St. Paul, Minnesota; **Kelly D Norris**, a garden designer and horticultural communicator in Des Moines, Iowa; **Nan Sterman** of Encinitas, California, a garden designer, writer, and host of the PBS program, *A Growing Passion*; and **Steven Still** of Hilliard, Ohio, a past president of the Perennial Plant Association and professor emeritus at The Ohio State University.



## GARDEN STEWARDSHIP AWARD

*This award is given to a public garden that embraces and exemplifies sustainable horticultural practices in design, maintenance, and/or programs. First awarded in 2021.*

As the first botanic garden in the United States to focus exclusively on native plants, California's **Santa Barbara Botanic Garden** has grown from 13 acres in 1926 to today's 78-acre property featuring more than five miles of walking trails, an herbarium, seed bank, research labs, library, and a native plant nursery. Their steadfast dedication and commitment for almost a century to the research, practice, education, and promotion of sustainable horticulture positions them at the vanguard of the sustainability movement.

Holly Shimizu, former executive director of the U.S. Botanic Garden and an AHS Board member, explains that through the Garden's applied research in sustainable landscapes and water-wise planning/design in built landscapes, they introduced "over 30 California native plants cultivars and selections to the horticultural trade... In addition, their research on habitat restoration and pollinator networks has positioned the Garden as a regional leader in applied ecology..."

Through sustainable garden features, the Garden captures thousands of gallons of rainwater every year that is used for irrigation. Solar energy also provides 70 percent of the power needed at their LEED-certified Pritzlaff Conservation Center.

To support sustainable gardening practices to local and regional home gardeners, the Garden retails native plants in its nursery and provides hands-on educational programs on using native plants in gardening. They are also researching how planting natives enhances the quality of life in communities.

## MERITORIOUS SERVICE AWARD

*Recognizes outstanding service and generosity in support of the American Horticultural Society and sustainable gardening. First awarded in 1980.*

The Society's Meritorious Service Award honors the late **Enid A. Haupt** (1906–2005), a philanthropist and publisher whose generosity benefited numerous gardening, cultural, and medical research causes. It was Haupt's \$1 million donation to the



American Horticultural Society (AHS) in 1973 that allowed the Society to purchase River Farm as its permanent headquarters. Born in Chicago, Haupt was the daughter of publishing magnate Moses Annenberg. She was publisher of the magazine *Seventeen* for 18 years before turning her focus to

philanthropy. In addition to the AHS, recipients of her love of horticulture included the New York Botanical Garden, the Smithsonian Institution Gardens in Washington, D.C., the Lady Bird Johnson Wild Flower Center in Austin, Texas, and the gardens around the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

### B.Y. MORRISON COMMUNICATION AWARD

*Recognizes effective and inspirational communication – through print, radio, television, and/or online media – that advances public interest and participation in horticulture. First awarded in 1987.*

**Jennifer Jewell** is the creator and host of the acclaimed national weekly public radio program and podcast *Cultivating Place: Conversations on Natural History and the Human Impulse to Garden*,



a coproduction of Northstate Public Radio, in Chico, California, in which she interviews a broad range of personalities in horticulture, from plant explorers to artists, scientists, and landscape designers. According to Jewell, “gardens and gardening are integral to our natural and cultural literacy—on par with Art, Science, Literature, Music, Religion.” Launched in 2016, the podcast received the 2017 Gold Award for Best

Overall Broadcast Media from the Garden Writers Association (now GardenComm). Jewell was recognized as the Best On-Air Talent in both 2017 and 2018 by the same organization.

A resident of Northern California with a degree in literature from Harvard, Jewell is also the author of *The Earth in Her Hands, 75 Extraordinary Women Working in the World of Plants* (Timber Press, 2020), winner of the Council on Botanical & Horticultural Libraries 2021 Award of Excellence in Biography, and *Under Western Skies, Visionary Gardens from the Rockies to*

### Nominations for 2024 Awards

Help us give recognition to deserving “horticultural champions” by nominating someone you know for one of the 2024 Great American Gardeners Awards. Look for more details in the July/August 2023 issue of this magazine or online on our website at [www.ahsgardening.org/awards](http://www.ahsgardening.org/awards).

*the Pacific Coast* (Timber Press, 2021). Her third book, *What We Sow: On the Personal, Ecological, and Cultural Significance of Seeds*, will be published later this year.

A recognized speaker at national horticultural events, Jewell’s greatest passion is elevating the way we think and talk about gardening, the empowerment of gardeners, and the possibility inherent in the intersection between environments, cultures, individuals, and the gardens that bring them together beautifully, “for the better of all the lives on this generous planet.” When she is not on the air or on the road, she makes her hiking and gardening life with her partner, plantsman John Whittlesey.

### JANE L. TAYLOR AWARD

*Given to an individual, organization, or program that has inspired and nurtured future horticulturists through efforts in children’s and youth gardening. First awarded in 2000.*

**Michael Craig** is a special education teacher and horticulture program instructor at the Charles R. Drew Transition Center in the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD)



in Michigan, where he runs and supervises the Gardens at Drew. The Center is a postsecondary vocational school for adult students who have moderate to severe cognitive deficits. He founded the program eight years ago to help students gain functional independence, a purpose and connection within society, and possible future employment in horticulture.

The Gardens serve as a national model of excellence. Through Craig’s carefully designed interactive teaching methods and curriculum, students learn every step of the horticulture process, from planting and management to harvest and retail sale. The student-grown produce is available at a low cost for students, families, and the local community at the on-site school farm stand.

Craig also initiated a partnership with Michigan State University’s School of Agriculture to research, recommend, and integrate a Science/Food Nutrition/School Horticulture curriculum to support school garden programs and gardening curricula at 82 DPSCD elementary and middle schools. He oversees the program to ensure the schools continue to receive materials, supplies, and supplemental science curriculum components for their school garden programs.

He also successfully applied for a major grant to create a therapeutic sensory butterfly garden that helps special needs students overcome the many triggers that negatively affect their learning capabilities.

“Michael is uniquely talented, highly qualified and immensely dedicated to improving the quality of life for special needs individuals,” says Robert Avedisian, principal of the Drew Center. “He has become a leading fixture in the greater Detroit food community, a source of inspiration to program visitors from across the country, and a provider of food for our community, one that is sorely in need.”

# 2023 AHS Book Award Winners

Each year, the American Horticultural Society recognizes outstanding gardening books published in North America with its annual Book Award. Nominated books are judged by the AHS Book Award Committee on qualities such as writing style, authority, accuracy, and physical quality. This year's award recipients, selected from books published in 2022, are listed below.

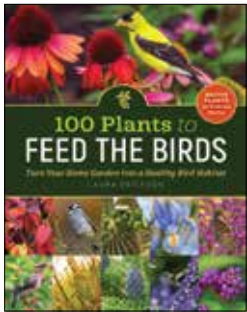


AHS's 2023 Book Award Committee was chaired by **Kimberly Toscano Holmes**, a freelance communicator and professional horticulturist based in Stillwater, Oklahoma. Members of the committee include **Amy Campion**, a Portland, Oregon-based freelance writer and co-author of *Gardening in the Pacific Northwest*; **Perla Sofia Curbelo-Santiago**, a garden communicator in San Juan, Puerto Rico; **Viveka Neveln**, garden editor for BHG.com in Des Moines, Iowa; **Caleb Melchior**, a Fort Myers, Florida based landscape architect, writer, and podcaster; and **Doug Oster**, garden writer, television producer, and radio host from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

## 100 Plants to Feed the Birds

by Laura Erickson (Storey Publishing)

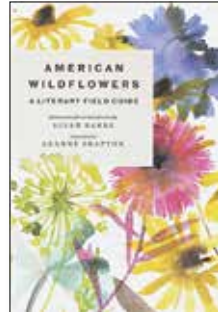
■ The award committee members were largely in agreement that this book will be a valuable resource for gardeners everywhere. “I am definitely drawn to this kind of content—it is practical and relatable and will give a lot of people content they can use right away in their backyard regardless of the amount of space they have,” says Perla Sofia Curbelo-Santiago. “The type of information I appreciated—and don’t tend to see in other books—was what each plant provides for birds,” says Kimberly Toscano Holmes. “I really think we need this kind of book—it’s an important resource for gardening for wildlife,” says Amy Campion.



## American Wildflowers: A Literary Field Guide

edited by Susan Barba (Abrams)

■ Committee members were divided on whether this compilation of poems and essays on wildflowers by prominent writers fit the criteria of a garden book, but its uniqueness tipped the scales. “I love this sort of thing,” says Doug Oster. “The uniqueness of it for me was a big selling point—I have not seen anything like this.” Viveka Neveln agreed, noting that “so much passion went into the curation of the pieces that were chosen, and they all give you insights into these specific plants. I feel like it sort of touches people on a different level, as a celebration of plants and what they mean to us,” she says. Curbelo-Santiago was among the committee members who appreciated the lavish watercolor illustrations by Leanne Shapton.

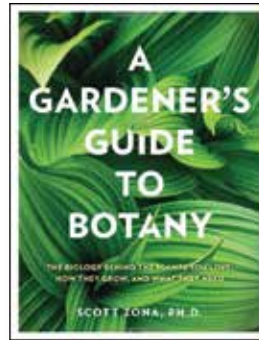


## A Gardener's Guide to Botany

by Scott Zona (Cool Springs Press)

■ “The author’s explanations of concepts made this book so easy and fun to read. It made me wish I had this book when I was studying biology in high school and college,” says Curbelo-Santiago. “When I was reading it, I found myself thinking, wow, plants are so freaking amazing and I just want to grow them all,” says Neveln.

Holmes was impressed by the quality of the scientific illustrations and felt the book was “useful for people at different levels of learning—it’s for readers who want a deeper understanding.” Caleb Melchior agreed, noting that a chapter on seed dispersal offered insights into the complex interrelationships of plants and animals.



## Honorable Mentions

**Bloom: The Secrets of Growing Flowering Houseplants Year-Round** by Lisa Steinkopf (Cool Springs Press)

**Color In and Out of the Garden** by Lorene Edwards Forkner (Abrams)

**Florida's Carnivorous Plants** by Kenny Coogan (Pineapple Press)

**Grow More Food** by Colin McCrate and Brad Halm (Storey)

**The Prairie Gardener's Go-To for Soil** by Janet Melrose and Sheryl Normandeau (Touch Wood Editions)

**Wild Plant Culture** by Jared Rosenbaum (New Society Publishers)