

BOOK REVIEWS

Recommendations for Your Gardening Library

Wildscape: Trilling Chipmunks, Beckoning Blooms, Salty Butterflies, and Other Sensory Wonders of Nature

Nancy Lawson, Princeton Architectural Press, Hudson, NY, 2023. 304 pages. Publisher's price, hardcover: \$27.50

Through the engaging writings of Nancy Lawson, *Wildscape* will open your eyes and heart to the ways in which nature works, while the stunning nature photography lures you to read on. Divided into five chapters, or “scapes”—scent, sound, taste, touch, and sight—the book invites you to stand, sit, or take whatever position is best for you to ignite all your senses. Be still. If you need to be somewhere, prepare your apologies in advance.

In one of Lawson's musings on scent, she watched in wonder as a male monarch alighted on a boneset (*Eupatorium serotinum*). Through her stillness and focus on this magnificent butterfly, she discovered the male was not resting, but working hard to extract what was within the leaf. Never having witnessed this, Lawson went down a rabbit hole to learn more, which led her to publish her findings in an acclaimed scientific journal.

Wild animals make themselves heard and Lawson explores their many sounds. She writes about a study that documented the white-crowned sparrow living in the city singing a narrower range of pitch than counterparts in more rural areas, by trilling more rapidly. Yes, noise pollution affects all that is around us.

As she delves into the sense of taste, Lawson weaves the fascinating tale of ants gathering seeds for specific nutrients from seed parts and then later dispersing the seed. She also shares a thoughtful and scientific-based argument for limiting supplemental bird feed.

Lawson entwines nature and its loss in such a way that anyone can relate. Her interpretation of functional complementarity, where different species offer different contributions to a collective function, gives the concept an interesting new life. By planting a garden, you will bring in the wildlife within your reach. Seeing is believing.

This book would be appreciated by gardeners and nature lovers, and also as bedtime reading to young enthusiasts. The stories are enchanting.

—Helen Yoest

Helen Yoest is a sustainable garden advocate and the executive director of Bee Better Naturally, helping homeowners garden with nature. She lives in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Grasses for Gardens and Landscapes

Neil Lucas, Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2023. 328 pages. Publisher's price, hardcover: \$50

“Blur and merge” sums up author Neil Lucas's approach to gardening with grasses. Grasses, he states, are the “perfect group of plants to help us blur the lines between natural systems and designed spaces, border and lawn, trimmed hedge and natural shelter.” He encourages gardeners to “merge our focus on plants as individuals with the cultivation of the garden as a community rather than a series of unrelated individual plants.”

Director of Knoll Gardens in Dorset, England, Lucas is a Chelsea Flower Show award-winning author, designer, and nurseryman. He lists suggestions for creating a garden grassland, including how to integrate grasses with other plants. He defines the many unique features of grasses, including long-lasting foliage color with golden sedge (*Carex elata* ‘Aurea’) and blue oat grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*); texture and shape with Chinese silver grass (*Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Fleming’) and fastigiate switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum* ‘Northwind’); matrix and mass with prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*) or feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis xacutiflora* ‘Karl Foerster’); movement and sound by using switchgrass or needlegrass (*Nassella* spp.)

Lucas, who describes his style as naturalistic, suggests gardeners should be “editors rather than enforcers,” working *with*, not against nature. He includes helpful suggestions of grasses for tough environments: dry and damp shade, alternative lawns, habitat restoration, green roofs and rain gardens.

About half of the book is devoted to individual plant descriptions with numerous cultivars, including 46 *Miscanthus sinensis* and 22 each for *Panicum virgatum* and *Pennisetum alopecuroides*. This level of detail is essential for gardeners who are looking for the best grasses for specific sites. Many of the recommendations and suggestions pertain to mild Mediterranean climates, which is a boon for California gardeners. Gardeners in cold climates should check local resources for more accurate hardiness information. All gardeners need to be aware of the invasiveness of some grasses, such as *Miscanthus* and *Imperata*, and consult local Extension services websites for pertinent information. ■

—Mary Hockenberry Meyer

Mary Hockenberry Meyer is a professor emeritus and Grass Collection curator at the University of Minnesota Landscape Arboretum in Chaska.

GARDENER'S BOOKS: MINDFUL GARDENING

As Nancy Lawson noted in her book (reviewed, opposite page), one of the hardest things for a gardener to do is to stop and really pay attention. Performing our familiar garden tasks with full awareness and deliberation can be a challenge, especially if we're feeling the pressure of time constraints and the passing of the seasons. But gardening mindfully increases the pleasure and satisfaction and opens up new ways of experiencing the garden. Here are two new guides to a more mindful gardening practice.

Mindfulness in Gardening: Meditations on Growing & Nature (Leaping Hare Press, 2023, \$15)

Author Ark Redwood, a professional gardener since 1988, puts his years of Buddhist practice into a horticultural context to introduce readers to mindful gardening. He describes mindfulness as “the practice of being in the present moment, and attempting to hold that attention to whatever you are doing.” Drawing also from his experience working at Chalice Well Gardens, a recognized World Peace Garden in southwest England, Redwood acknowledges the importance of finding or creating quiet spots for meditation and reflections in the garden.



Following a brief introduction, the book delves into a seasonal approach, guiding readers through common garden tasks in a mindful way. There's a pruning meditation and a deadheading meditation, as well as walking and still point meditations, and other exercises to help us to pause and experience our gardens more completely. Redwood doesn't try to show how to garden, but rather how to garden with attention, to truly see each plant, each element of the garden, as well as to be fully aware of our own place in the garden. And throughout each exercise, he advises using breath as an anchor to focus our attention, and when our mind wanders, bringing it always back to our breath.

For those times when gardening can feel more like a chore than a joy, *Mindfulness in Gardening* can provide a refreshing reset and a way to recalibrate how we garden.

The 30-Minute Gardener: Cultivate Beauty and Joy by Gardening Every Day (Timber Press, 2023, \$30)

While the word “mindfulness” never appears in Greg Loades' book, the approach he advocates of spending 30 minutes every day tackling projects large and small is similar to a meditation practice in which brief daily efforts are helpful in building a closer relationship with nature. Loades says, “Our goal in becoming 30-minutes-a-day gardeners is not to make an efficient garden maintenance regime ... but rather to open the door to a parallel universe that is bursting with life, to delight in the process of natural growth, and to embrace nature's pace.”

Loades has lots of tips for gardening in bite-size, 30-minute chunks that produce real results. Many of the tips rely on a word that often comes up in any mindfulness practice—focus. For example, if you feel overwhelmed with weeds, he suggests focusing on just one type of weed, such as dandelions, and focusing only on removing dandelions that day.

Loades includes a considerable amount of basic gardening advice, but doesn't let it get in the way of the steady and deliberate method he advocates. One of his strongest recommendations is to spend at least one 30-minute session a week “facing north, just sitting in the garden (facing in any direction) or walking around and taking it all in.” At the end, he says, write down everything you observe, thereby creating an account of the year to look back on.

—Claire Splan, Associate Editor

MORE NEW AND NOTABLE BOOKS

The Cut Flower Sourcebook: Exceptional Perennials and Woody Plants for Cutting by Rachel Siegfried. (Filbert Press, \$55). A different take on cutting gardens, with a focus on perennial and woody plants providing floral material through the seasons.

Rebel Gardening: A Beginner's Handbook to Creating an Organic Urban Garden by Alessandro Vitale. (Penguin Random House, \$26.95). A guide to organic gardening for city dwellers by the popular YouTuber and TikTokker known as Spicy Moustache.

Searching for Sunshine: Finding Connections with Plants, Parks, and the People Who Love Them by Ishita Jain. (Chronicle Books, \$25.95). An illustrated, heartfelt journey into answering the simple but vital question, “Why do plants and green spaces make us happy?”