



## **Bermuda's Gardens, Homes and Holiday Magic December 3-8, 2024**

### **Q&A with AHS Host Naomi Mermin**

***What do you hope AHS Travel Study participants will take away from the Bermuda program in terms of both practical gardening knowledge and a deeper appreciation for the intersection of nature, culture, and conservation?***

The greatest thing we always bring back from travel is new connections: to other people, to new ideas, and to the magical world we're living in. I think those elements—a sense of wonder, joy, magic, and connection to other people—are fundamental to cultivating a culture of care for each other and for the planet. It's part of what I love about the AHS travel program: getting people into gardens and nature preserves, as we will be in Bermuda, feeds and grows our appreciation of the natural world.

***At the Bermuda Natural History Museum, AHS travelers will learn about the island's unique natural history and diverse habitats. What aspects of Bermuda's plant life are you most excited to explore?***

I'm very excited to see the live corals. Coral reefs are critical ecosystems that are threatened by human activity and warming oceans. Bermuda's coral reefs are the northernmost in the Atlantic Ocean, and some of the healthiest. That is not an accident—there are many researchers and others who have been studying and working to protect the coral in Bermuda, recognizing its critical role in supporting the ecosystem and maintaining fish populations (including critical commercial fish needed for food). I'm absolutely thrilled to learn more about the restoration and coral "gardening" techniques they are using.

***Are there specific garden features or botanical sites on the AHS Bermuda program itinerary that particularly intrigue you?***

There are so many, but two significant nature preserves will be highlights for me: Spittal Pond, which has one of the highest concentrations of different habitats in a small area leading to its designation as a Wetland of International Importance; and Cooper's Island, which is another redemption story. Volunteers are removing invasive plants and restoring the habitat. In December when we visit, we will have the extra special treat of the birds who have migrated here for the winter, joining many year-round residents.

Almost as exciting to me as the flora and fauna is the Masterworks Museum of Art. The inception of the museum was based on three extraordinary artists: Winslow Homer, Andrew Wyeth, and Georgia O'Keefe, who each visited the island and painted important works there. These three artists relished the

grace and beauty of the natural world. I'm intrigued to see their interpretation and expression of the Bermuda landscape.

***A cultural highlight of this program will be the celebratory "Christmas Walkabout," Bermuda's signature winter holiday event on the first Friday in December, when the UNESCO World Heritage Site of St. George's and all its residents get into the Christmas spirit, decking out homes and historic sites with lavish Christmas décor, candlelit streets, live performances, caroling, and more. What are you most looking forward to experiencing with AHS travelers during this special cultural event?***

An outdoor party across an entire community with candlelit streets and caroling? And I don't have to clean up after? I am so excited to experience the Christmas Walkabout. It's such a beautiful thing in December to enjoy the earlier night with a celebratory light festival!

***What initially drew you to study horticulture and ecology, and how have your experiences shaped your perspective on gardening and environmental stewardship?***

Nature takes center stage in my earliest and fondest memories. First that nature was a suburban backyard in Buffalo, then it was New York City's Central Park. Both places were, in a sense, gardens—cultivated areas that gave me the joy of climbing the Montmorency cherry in our backyard in Buffalo and the excitement of sledding down the hills of Central Park, the smell of peonies each spring and the fascinating mystery of ants and caterpillars. I grew up in the 70s and 80s when we began to recognize the need for not just land conservation but also environmental stewardship of our water and air. When I headed to Smith College as an undergraduate, I thought I wanted to be an environmental lawyer, but I couldn't resist getting my hands dirty in the soil. Smith College has an unbelievable campus, an Arboretum, and the trees drew me in—I'm literally and figuratively a tree hugger.

Later at Cornell, another campus with an extraordinary botanic garden and arboretum, I focused on ecology, specializing in wetland science. After graduation I got my dream job working on the Boston Harbor cleanup. With the Harbor cleanup, people were trying to protect and restore something that was not a perfect image of a "wetland," but water ringed by cities and towns and industrial uses. My boss, a wonderful environmental hero named Lorraine Downey, considered it of equal importance for us to ensure public access to the Harbor: we even asked industrial sites which had their backs to the water to put in walkways and areas for public access. Lorraine said that if we want people to protect and invest in the restoration of the harbor, we need to get them to the water, and eventually that meant not just to the water but on the water, and in the water. All people are nature lovers, really, and it's important to have people see and access the beauty that surrounds us.

***Many experiences offered on the program will provide insight into natural habitats and conservation. As an environmental strategy consultant and founder of a community garden, what are some key principles you believe are important to consider when designing sustainable gardens or landscapes?***

Paying deep attention to what naturally wants to be in a landscape is my first and most important principle. What is the geology, soil, hydrology suited to? What birds come through? What other creatures—including people! All of the elements should be treated as part of a micro ecosystem. Even if

a plant is native, a specific landscape may not be the place for it. This approach of focusing on what wants to be there makes a habitat easier to maintain, because the plants will thrive and block invasives. If you've planted for habitat and food value, the birds and critters will come. And, and when people come, you're nourishing their spirit, while helping them through design to be good stewards. We also design to keep a sense of adventure and wonder.

***Could you share a bit about your journey in founding a community garden? What motivated you to get involved, and what have been some of the most rewarding aspects of that experience? What role do you see gardens playing in fostering community connections and conservation?***

Many people in our neighborhood had been looking for gardening space, either because their yard was shaded or too small or because they were renters. When I lived in Boston, there was a person who we called the fruit and nut guy—he was always asking city permission to plant fruit and nut trees on public land, and I often was assigned to determine if this was okay. Fast forward ten years, and I had my daughter Hannah who was a toddler. We lived in an apartment, and I didn't have my own garden, but because of the fruit and nut man, Hannah and I could walk around our city neighborhood and pick the ingredients for a pie. When neighbors found a large plot of city-owned land at the back entrance of the historic Evergreen Cemetery (a gorgeous designed historic cemetery with over 100 acres of woodlands behind it), I was committed to having both a beautifully designed community garden that respected the historic cemetery design as well as publicly accessible orchards.

We were lucky that amongst the people who came together to spearhead this garden was a librarian and a landscape architect. The benefit of the landscape architect is probably obvious: she made a beautiful design that nods to the historic cemetery with winding paths intersecting within a larger circle — from the aerial view you'd think it had been designed as part of the original cemetery master plan. The librarian, however, was our secret weapon. She researched our parcel and discovered that it had been a farm! She found old photos and located the descendants of the farm, who were still living.

One of those descendants, who remembered having ice cream on the steps of the old greenhouse with his grandfather, was the owner of Risbara Brothers Construction, a major earthwork construction firm, and he connected us to his niece and her husband who were the owners of Risbara's Greenhouse, a plant nursery and garden center in Portland. The family had lost the land to tax foreclosure during the depression, and they took a real interest in restoring the "farm," and helped us bring in high-quality soils to the site so we could safely start growing organic vegetables. They offered us discounts on the fruit trees for the public orchard, and on blueberry and raspberry patches. The whole city has become enchanted with the story of the farm being returned to farming, and the gardens have absolutely become a community gathering spot, both for neighbors who have plots and for children picking a pie (though there's more picking and eating directly!).

During the winter, we have a new tradition of building a candlelit solstice spiral through the garden where people gather round and take a meditative walk through to welcome the solstice. A space that had been only a sort of staging area for the cemetery, and a bit of an eyesore in the neighborhood, is now a central spot where people grow nourishing food and community.