

Annual Annotated Bibliography of Garden Books for 2022

This February 2023 blog post is an annotated bibliography of the 24 garden books I've read in the last twelve months. An alphabetized list is followed by my annotations. Most of the books focus on gardening; however, the two most memorable books I read this past year—Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* and Richard Powers' *The Overstory*—address a host of issues ranging far beyond flower and vegetable gardens. But while reading them, I frequently found myself reflecting on my understanding of gardens and their potential roles in my life. Thus my decision to label both as “garden books.” ~Bob

Brown, Jane. *Eminent Gardeners: Some People of Influence and Their Gardens, 1880-1980* (Viking, 1990).

Clayton-Payne, Andrew and Brent Elliott. *Victorian Flower Gardens*. (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988).

Gaydos, Ellyn. *Pig Years* (Knopf, 2022; read Kindle edition).

Goodman, Richard. *French Dirt: The Story of a Garden in the South of France* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2002).

Goulson, Dave. *The Garden Jungle* (Jonathan Cape, 2019).

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Milkweed Editions, 2013).

Kingsbury, Noël. *Seedheads in the Garden* (Timber Press, 2006).

Landsberg, Sylvia. *The Medieval Garden* (Thames and Hudson, N.D.)

Laws, Bill. *Artists' Gardens* (Trafalgar Square Publishing, 1999).

Lees-Milne, Alvilde and Rosemary Verey, editors. *The Englishwoman's Garden* (Chatto & Windus, 1983) and *The New Englishwoman's Garden* (Salem House Publishers, 1988)

Norris, Kelly D. *New Naturalism: Designing and Planting a Resilient, Ecologically Vibrant Home Garden* (Cool Springs Press, 2021).

Phillips, Roger & Martyn Rix. *Vegetables* (Macmillan Reference Books, 1995).

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

Potter, Jennifer. *Strange Blooms: The Curious Lives and Adventures of the John Tradescants* (Atlantic Books, 2007).

Powers, Richard. *The Overstory* (W. W. Norton, 2018).

Raver, Anne, *Deep in the Green: An Exploration of Country Pleasures* (Knopf, 1996; read on Kindle).

Rebanks, James. *Pastoral Song: A Farmer's Journey* (Custom House, 2021; read on Kindle).

Richards, Gareth. *Weeds: The Beauty and Uses of 50 Vagabond Plants* (Welbeck, 2021; an RHS publication).

Rose, Stephanie. *The Regenerative Garden: 80 Practical Projects for Creating a Self-sustaining Garden Ecosystem* (Cool Spring Press, 2022; read on Kindle)

Rushing, Felder. *Maverick Gardeners: Dr. Dirt and Other Determined Independent Gardeners* (University Press of Mississippi, 2021),

Stein, Sara B. *My Weeds: A Gardener's Botany* (Harper & Row, 1988).

Von Arnim, Elizabeth. *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* (Virago, 2000; originally published in 1898).

Wareham, Anne. *The Deckchair Gardener: An Improper Gardening Manual* (Michael O'Mara, 2017; read on Kindle)

Wright, Richardson. *The Gardener's Bed-Book* (Modern Library, 2003; originally published in 1929)

The Annotations

• **Brown, Jane.** *Eminent Gardeners: Some People of Influence and Their Gardens, 1880-1980.* I did not start reading this book with the open mind it deserved. I had just finished reading two volumes describing 50 British gardens and their owners, nearly all gardens associated with the British upper-crust. With dozens of unread garden books waiting for me, I should have turned

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

to something quite different (such as an informative text on how to raise vegetables in a Midwest garden), but this book arrived in the mail, I had for several years wanted to read one of Jane Brown's books, and so I dived in. In some ways the subtitle tells one a lot about this book because Brown focus is on "people of influence." During this 100-year period there was a circle of prominent people socially and culturally interconnected, and Brown has many passages explaining who knew whom. We find multiple references to the Astors, the Balfours, the Cloughs, the Fairhavens, the Wolseleys, the Bloomsbury set, John Singer Sargent and Henry James, Vita Sackville-West and Professor Henry Sedgwick, etc. Despite my periodic yearning to move beyond all these "people of influence," this book offers insightful portraits of several influential gardeners and their gardens. For example, there is a marvelous chapter on Gertrude Jekyll's garden at Munstead Wood, discussing how the interior of her home, designed by Edward Luytens, was integrated and connected with the surrounding garden.

In contrast to her discussion of Gertrude Jekyll, certainly one of the most famous and influential of British gardeners, most of the book portrays people of influence during their lifetimes but have subsequently been forgotten:

–Frances Wolseley: daughter of a famous soldier, she had a ground-breaking career as a gardener and an educator of women gardeners, helping to establish gardening as an acceptable professional career for young women.

–Norah Lindsay: the forgotten figure most responsible for the success of the American Lawrence Johnston's Hidcote Manor Garden, one of the 20th-century's most notable gardens; Brown surmises that Lindsay has never received the recognition she deserves because she never wrote about her work at Hidcote.

–Anne Jemima Clough and Eleanor Sidgwick: two women responsible for creating the garden at Newnham College for women at Cambridge; Brown introduces their accomplishment by noting that "most schools and colleges come second only to religious foundations in the insensitivity they inflict on their gardens." Painful to read—though it is some compensation knowing that Brown wrote this book before the creation of Coe's Alumni House Garden.

–Lady Fairhaven and her sons: beginning in the early 1930s they created a spacious garden at Anglesey Abbey near Cambridge; Brown criticizes many aspects of this garden ("full of frustrations of sequences that don't follow on, of surprises like damp squibs and attempts at asymmetry that come out as lopsidedness"), but she also claims it is "the grandest garden made in England this century."

–Christopher Tannard: a fascinating figure who espoused a set of principles for designing gardens that complemented modernistic architecture, an effort that according to Brown has been almost completely ignored.

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

An issue Brown raises on numerous occasions is the importance of designing gardens which fit with the architecture. One reason for her admiration of the Newnham College garden is how its layout and choice of plants fit so perfectly with the design and principles of the institution. In her final chapter she notes that “a garden is more than its design laid out on paper and its collection of plants in a list. A garden is an experience, a moving picture, or a series of pictures through which one moves, and as Sir Frederick Gibberd said, ‘if you step into the picture it dissolves, and other pictures appear.’” That passage alone was worth the price of admission into a book that proved to be more insightful and thought-provoking than I had expected.

- **Clayton-Payne, Andrew and Brent Elliott. *Victorian Flower Gardens*.** I’ve had this book in my library for several years but had never looked at it with any care, thinking it was mostly a picture card book of sentimental garden paintings of the late 19th century. I assumed it would be comparable to a collection of Thomas Kinkade fantasies. But once I removed the book from the shelf and began to read the authors’ commentaries and look at the paintings with more attentiveness, I became totally absorbed, and it became one of my favorite garden books of the year.

Although British gardening experienced some revolutionary changes in the first half of the 19th century, the authors note these transformations in gardening practices were not recorded by contemporary painters. The landscape remained a primary theme with the artists, and flower gardens were ignored. It was only in the 1860s, with the paintings of Frederick Walker and Birket Foster, that flower gardens emerged as an important subject for British artists. Although those early paintings of the cottage garden were bathed in sentimental nostalgia, many paintings from the 1860s and 1870s did include vegetable plots, signs of poverty, and examples of child labor, suggesting some realistic elements.

In the late 19th century, the role of flowers in British gardens became increasingly more important and this shift was evident in the era’s garden paintings. The artists consistently relied on particular flowers appearing in innumerable paintings: snowdrops, crocus, hyacinths, tulips, daffodils, polyanthus, pansies, stocks, asters, mignotte, sweet peas, pinks, roses, lilies, gladioli, chrysanthemums, dahlias, hollyhocks. While these paintings were supposedly representing working-class cottage gardens, the focus was really on manor houses and country homes decorated with trappings we associate with the “cottage” garden.

By the Edwardian era, the artists were presenting an idealized image of the cottage garden, stripped of any realistic portrayal of economically marginalized workers. The painters relied on the same old-fashioned flowers growing around a half-timbered house with a thatch roof located in a gentrified village and perhaps a cat or a few doves at the edge of the garden. The

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

paintings might have a child playing in the front of the house or an older female character, perhaps wearing a long apron and picking flowers. Gardeners were never portrayed, and there was rarely any suggestion the gardens required maintenance or care. During this period painters did begin to produce more paintings of specific, formal gardens. In this period British gardeners were blending the old-fashioned garden (with its formal, enclosed structure) and the cottage garden (with flowers mixed together in a more naturalistic aesthetic). The paintings of this era would have a profound impact on flower gardens throughout the 20th century as many gardeners remained committed to this hybrid tradition.

This book introduces over 20 painters active from the 1860s to the beginning of WWI. Some of the more notable artists include Myles Birket Foster, Helen Allingham, the Stannards (Lillian, Theresa, and Henry John Sylvester), Arthur Clyde Strahan, Thomas Mackay, David Woodlock, Beatrice Parsons, Charles Edward Wilson, George Samuel Elgood, and Ernest Arthur Rowe. Although many of the most prominent painters working in this genre were women, the authors do not explore this gender issue. Nor do they discuss how these artists fit into a broader understanding of what was happening in the British art world during this period. Many of these painters appear to have been influenced by French impressionism, but I don't recall that issue was ever raised. One distinct pleasure of the book is the inclusion of over 100 photographs of paintings representing the different artists. Although the paintings were often quite attractive, the colors were quite similar, and I was not sure how accurately these reproductions rendered the works' original colors.

- **Gaydos, Ellyn. *Pig Years*.** This memoir does not focus exclusively on raising pigs, but pigs play an important role as Gaydos recalls her years working on small hog and truck farms in New York and Vermont. While references to gardening occur throughout the book, Gaydos' primary commitment is to the well-being of swine.

I love a fat pig. These numerous pigs became favored personalities and came to represent a link between myself and the natural world. Reliably, they grew into symbols of fertility, good fortune even, as the seasons mounted. Their untimely deaths came with the cold, when they were handsomely fat and ready for slaughter. I've helped to raise many pigs and vegetables for the table. This repeated culling is an act of faith simultaneously in the continued fertility of the herd and the land. Faith in the continuance of things, of reaping and sowing, is necessarily invoked over and over again. Life is conjured and cut short. From cotyledons, those first hidden leaves enclosed in a seed, to florets of broccoli, from the thrust of a boar to a small and perfect piglet, all of it part of the flowering of the earth, its bloom and attendant rot.

Toward the end of the book Gaydos provides a wonderful description of a special cornmeal cake she prepares for her pigs the day before they will be butchered. The cake includes a

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

frosting of cream cheese, butter, and turmeric. The cakes resemble buttercups on purple cabbage leaves, arranged to resemble the petals of blooming flowers. On one of the cakes she writes “Thank You” and adds around the edge chopped beet confetti and a ring of dried shrimp. Having grown up on a farm, I had a difficult time imagining my father creating such a treat before sending his hogs off to the auction barn.

Gaydos expresses “an abiding unquantifiable love” for farming, and she imagines the earth opening up and taking her into its fold. Guydos periodically reflects on how farming is an effort to achieve a balance between the wildness of life and a farm’s need for order, “corralling life toward the desired fecundity.” While you can feel pride in your manipulations of the natural world, nature always has the final word. The hard work on a farm is like a prayer, seeking results over which you ultimately have no control.

Gaydos does have some lovely passages on her work with carrots, cucumbers, cabbages (noting how the cabbage heads look the same regardless of the season), and other vegetables. Here is one of my favorite passages, describing the growth of potatoes:

First will come their leaves, green and smelling of nightshade, like a stinkbug, a bittering of the soil above ground. Amongst the green leaves they’ll flower in small white blooms, but below they turn soil to cream as the thin tubers fatten into fleshy potatoes. When we dig up the plants in the fall, they will be heavy with underground potatoes, round and multiplied in the dirt that they displaced to form starchy globes. When washed they glow. For today, they go dormant into the earth.

A few days after planting the potatoes, the crows arrive, pull up the quartered potatoes, throw the potatoes around, eat holes in a few of them, and then leave the garden for the workers to come back, reseed the potato beds, and cover everything a second time. Later she portrays the challenges of dealing with the potato bugs, which infest not only the potatoes but also the eggplants and peppers. She describes grabbing the red-and-black-striped grubs and squeezing them hard enough that their orange guts burst out. Of course, the potato bugs are too numerous, and the farm workers must hope the damage can be sustained, betting the plants will survive long enough to reach maturity and bear fruit.

The book has one notable sex scene, something rarely encountered in garden books. Gaydos describes making love with Graham, her long-term boyfriend/artist, beneath an apple tree, surrounded by small green apples on the ground. “With the sun on our backs, he pulls out and his seed is spilt on our bodies and in the dirt, so that no baby will come of it. Farming is often like this too; most things are picked or culled in first bloom, seldom allowing plants to go to seed, and there is no rooster for the chickens.” Later in their relationship, she describes the deep depression she feels after a miscarriage, an experience that corresponds with her lack of faith that spring will really come—though she continues to create detailed, row-by-row plans for the next year’s crops. Of course, spring does return, and Gaydos’ trust in her vocation and her

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

life with Graham is renewed. While Gaydos does not portray herself as a religious person, she does admire and frequently refers to the Shakers. In one of the book's final passages, she re-creates a day in the life of the Shaker community:

According to their records, one spring the Shakers traversed all their crop fields before planting time to sow the seeds of all the virtues. Brothers and Sisters in equal numbers covered every field with this spiritual "seed," blessing the empty ground before a single plant was grown. On the first of May, a feast was held on top of Mount Lebanon and a table was laid with gifts from the spirit world, including apparitions of wine, manna, grapes, and oranges. The Shakers mimed eating the exotic fruits and loaves and drinking the wine. They spent hours in song and dance before spirits carried them down the mountainside.

In this memoir Gaydos creates an intriguing persona, a blend of a practical, working class laborer attentive to the poetic and spiritual dimensions of her life. I found it an attractive combination.

• **Goodman, Richard.** *French Dirt: The Story of a Garden in the South of France.* I read all but the last 20 pages of this book while on a flight to Paris. I usually enjoy reading books in an airport or on a flight. I like the rhythm of reading a few pages and then spending a few seconds looking around or listening to a PA announcement before sliding back into the text. I had been saving this book for such a trip, speculating it was an easy read and about the right length (203 pages) for a 15-hour trip from Iowa to France. It worked out almost perfectly.

This is a quiet text, a simple tale, told in simple language, about an American from New York City who decides to move with his Scandinavian girlfriend to a remote village in southern France and live for a year while working on a writing project. Once they have established their residence in the village, they discover it is difficult to have any meaningful engagement with the local population. His relationship with the locals begins to improve when he volunteers to work as a hired hand in a neighbor's fields. That experience in turn leads him to acquire a small garden plot (about 30' x 40') on the outskirts of the village. On this plot he plants lettuce, cucumbers, tomatoes, eggplants, zucchini, string beans, basil, parsley, peppers, carrots, radishes, beets, cabbage, chives, melons, and flowers. He expresses some regret about trying to grow too many different vegetables and herbs in his inaugural gardening experiment: "I don't think it's so easy to make a garden too small, but it's very easy to make a garden too big." Despite substantial challenges, he did have some successes before the summer heat and dry weather overwhelmed his garden.

When I finished the book, I did not feel I had really learned much about the village or the people or Goodman's girlfriend. And truth be told, we don't learn much about the garden and its plants. The focus of this book is always on Goodman's feelings—his insecurities,

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

disappointments, joys, surprises, confusions. There were just a few passages when I thought he offered a fresh perspective on his subject. One moment came when he talked about gardening as fundamentally a one-person undertaking. “When you have two or three people working in a garden it starts to become a farm.” I have some sympathy for that perception. On several occasions I’ve entered into joint gardening projects, and I always find such collaborations a challenge. It’s difficult for me not to feel the other person is invading my space, the necessity for shared responsibilities somehow interfering with my personal relationship with the garden. Although it doesn’t become a farm, some aspect of the joy of gardening gets lost. Perhaps it’s relevant that Goodman does not say much about the assistance he received from his girlfriend. At the beginning of a chapter entitled “Instincts,” he advocates the benefits of gardening specifically for single men:

I recommend that all bachelors have a garden. It will give them, in some small way, the experience of being a parent. I make analogies to sex and birth and children when I talk about a garden because they come naturally. In a garden, you put your seeds into the earth, into the mother earth. They germinate, they grow, they flower—like children. After they begin to grow, you worry about them, you tend them constantly, you fret over their maladies. Some are stronger, bigger and healthier than others. That concerns you. And mystifies you.

- **Goulson, Dave. *The Garden Jungle*.** The book’s subtitle is “Gardening to Save the Planet,” and Goulson is a vigorous advocate for the environmental benefits of gardening. A professor of biology at the University of Sussex, Goulson demonstrates an impressive command of the scientific literature combined with a lifelong love affair with British animals and plants, particularly native apple trees. He enthusiastically defends animals that rarely earn much love or respect—such as earwigs, earthworms, and ants. He launches a fierce assault on herbicides and pesticides. In several passages he reminds his readers how little we know about the long-term impact of these chemicals. On the other hand, we do know that nearly all are indiscriminate killers that do more damage to desirable species than to their intended targets. He is also a vigorous critic of commercial farming practices, providing scientific evidence that substantiates similar conclusions reached by the Cumbrian farmer James Rebanks’ *Pastoral Song* (also reviewed in this bibliography).

Goulson emphasizes the benefits of gardens that allow for substantial freedom in their design and plant selections. He cleverly notes that “you can remove all the weeds in your garden in a heartbeat, simply by rebranding them as wild flowers.” One goal of the book is to inspire home owners to dispense with carefully manicured lawns. He can’t pass up the opportunity to criticize suburban ordinances in the U.S. that place obtuse restrictions on what can or cannot be allowed to grow in someone’s front yard. He notes the irony that in the “land

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

of the free,” everyone can purchase a sub-machine gun but they are not free to let the grass grow. Goulson often inserts humorous phrasing into his essays, typically in parenthetical asides. He begins his chapter on ants, for example, by noting that they are perhaps the “most successful creatures on the planet, though they don’t tend to boast about it.”

In the chapter “The Toxic Cocktail,” Goulson offers the commonsense conclusion that if you must frequently use chemical treatments to protect a plant from a pest infestation, “you are trying to grow the wrong plant.” Goulson explains that the issue exists not just with the herbicides, fungicides, and pesticides we use in our gardens; there is also a problem with plants purchased from big-chain retailers. Testing done at the University of Sussex revealed that most of the plants purchased from large garden centers had been treated with fungicides and insecticides: 70% contained at least one neonicotinoid (notorious for their long persistence in the environment), 38% contained two or more insecticides, and one heather contained five insecticides and five fungicides. Although many of these plants were labeled as bee-friendly, the plants were transporting one or more insecticides potentially fatal to bees. Prior to reading this chapter, I had never seriously considered the likelihood that plants purchased at a nursery or garden center might be bringing into the garden chemicals harmful to the bees, butterflies, and other insects I was trying to nurture.

Other key issues addressed by Goulson include his explanation for why all gardeners should have compost piles, his lamentation on gardeners’ reliance on the peat industry, his celebration of allotments (pointing out their remarkable per acre productivity, far exceeding commercial enterprises), the wasteful system for distribution of food (1/3 of all food is thrown away), and the excessive consumption of meat (U.S. citizens annually consuming a “grotesque 124kg of meat”). He informs us that 75% of all farmland is currently being used for meat production. Goulson concludes his book with chapters extolling his sixteen favorite garden plants for pollinators and his top twelve berry plants for birds. According to my count, ten of the pollinator plants can be found in the Coe garden: catmint, comfrey, Bishop of Llandaff dahlia, cranesbill, giant hyssop, lavender, lungwort, marjoram, sneezewort (*Helenium*), and thyme. For anyone familiar with environmental literature published since Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, there is probably not much that will be surprising in *The Garden Jungle*, but the author knows his stuff, he presents thoughtful and persuasive arguments in support of his positions, and the book is certainly entertaining. It was one of the best gardening books I read in the past twelve months.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. Braiding Sweetgrass (Milkweed Editions, 2013). This is a great book. The front cover’s subtitle, “Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants,” neatly summarizes the way Kimmerer blends different cultures, traditions, and

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

languages to offer readers a convincing, coherent blueprint for how we might re-conceive and resolve our world-wide environmental challenges. In a series of independent but interrelated essays, Kimmerer links together her in-depth scientific knowledge of botany (she is a Distinguished Professor of Environmental Biology at SUNY) with her personal experiences as a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. She frequently reminds her readers that plants are extraordinarily wise, intelligent, and resourceful in their ability to survive and flourish. Plants (and, indeed, all of the natural world) are also superb gift-givers, providing us with everything we need for obtaining a rich and fulfilling life. But this cornucopia of gifts requires that we respond in a reciprocal manner, and humans have often failed to honor this “covenant of reciprocity.” We have not listened to what the plants and animals have been telling us, and the result has been disaster--as exemplified in how Lake Onondaga in upstate New York became so thoroughly polluted.

Although most of this book is not explicitly on the subject of gardening, I was often thinking about the implications of her observations on my own gardening practices. In two essays she does focus on gardening: “Epiphany in the Beans” and “The Three Sisters.” In the former essay, she emphasizes that “a garden is a way that the land says, ‘I love you.’” She draws a parallel between gardening and her efforts to be a good mother, expressing her love by such behaviors as encouraging individual growth, nurturing healthful well-being, and protecting her loved ones from harm.

The exchange between plants and people has shaped the evolutionary history of both. Farms, orchards, and vineyards are stocked with species we have domesticated. Our appetite for their fruits leads us to till, prune, irrigate, fertilize, and weed on their behalf. Perhaps they have domesticated us. Wild plants have changed to stand in well-behaved rows and humans have changed to settle alongside the fields and care for the plants—a kind of mutual taming.

A garden’s success depends on a mutual partnership. Kimmerer can neither create a tomato nor turn lead into gold. The plants’ responsibility is to transform sunshine into beans and tomatoes, which is an incredible gift. In another essay, Kimmerer provides a marvelous description and celebration of photosynthesis—the second time this year I read a beautifully informative passage on that process (the other passage occurring in Sara Stein’s *My Weeds*, also reviewed in this bibliography).

I probably underlined or wrote marginal notes on more than a hundred passages in this inspiring book, in several instances on passages stretching over more than one page. Here is a sample of shorter texts I marked for later retrieval.

—“The more something is shared, the greater the value becomes.”

—“... the power of ceremony: it marries the mundane to the sacred. The water turns to wine, the coffee to a prayer.”

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

–“Bees perceive many flowers differently than humans do due to their perception of additional spectra such as ultraviolet radiation. As it turns out, though, goldenrod and asters appear very similarly to bee eyes and human eyes. We both think they’re beautiful. Their striking contrast when they grow together makes them the most attractive target in the whole meadow, a beacon for bees. Growing together, both receive more pollinator visits than they would if they were growing alone. It’s a testable hypothesis, it’s a question of science, a question of art, and a question of beauty.”

–“Only 30 percent of English words are verbs, but in Potawatomi that proportion is 70 percent.” (Louise Erdrich makes a similar point about the Ojibwe language in her book *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country*.)

–“If a maple is an *it*, we can take up the chain saw. If a maple is a *her*, we think twice.”

–“. . . a garden is a way that the land says, ‘I love you.’”

–End of reflection on a Three Sisters Garden: “We are the planters, the ones who clear the land, pull the weeds, and pick the bugs; we save the seeds over winter and plant them again next spring. We are midwives to their gifts. We cannot live without them, but it’s also true that they cannot live without us. Corn, beans, and squash are fully domesticated; they rely on us to create the conditions under which they can grow. We too are part of the reciprocity. They can’t meet their responsibilities unless we meet ours.”

–“. . . the tradition of the Honorable Harvest: take only what you need and use everything you take.”

–“Experiments are not about discovery but about listening and translating the knowledge of other beings.”

–“Recent research has shown that the smell of humus exerts a physiological effect on humans. Breathing in the scent of Mother Earth stimulates the release of the hormone oxytocin, the same chemical that promotes bonding between mother and child, between lovers. Held in loving arms, no wonder we sing in response.”

–“Potawatomi stories remember that all the plants and animals, including humans, used to speak the same language. We could share with one another what our lives were like. But that gift is gone and we are the poorer for it.”

–In the Haudensaunee language, “. . . words as basic as numbers are imbued with layers of meaning. The numbers we use to count plants in the sweetgrass meadow also recall the Creation Story. *Én:ska*—one. This word invokes the fall of Skywoman from the world above. All alone, *én:ska*, she fell toward the earth. But she was not alone, for in her womb a second life was growing. *Tékeni*—there were two. Skywoman gave birth to a daughter, who bore twin sons and so then there were three—*áhsen*. Every time the Haudensaunee count to three in their own language, they reaffirm their bond to creation.”

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

–From an essay “Witness to the Rain”: “. . . the fall of rain on moss is nearly silent. I kneel among them, sinking into their softness to watch and to listen. The drops are so quick that my eye is always chasing, but not catching, their arrival. At last, by narrowing my gaze to just a single frond, I can see it. The impact bows the shoot downward, but the drop itself vanishes. It is soundless. There is no drip or splash, but I can see the front of water move, darkening the stem as it is drunk in, silently dissipating among the tiny shingled leaves.”

–“If time is measured by the period between events, alder drip time is different from maple drip. The forest is textured with different kinds of time. . . .”

–“Plants are the first restoration ecologists. They are using their gifts for healing the land, showing us the way.”

–“. . . photosynthesis is the link between the inorganic realm and the living world, making the inanimate live.”

–“Respiration—the source of energy that lets us farm and dance and speak. The breath of plants gives life to animals and the breath of animals gives life to plants. My breath is your breath, your breath is mine. It’s the great poem of give and take, of reciprocity that animates the world. Isn’t that a story worth telling?”

–“We may not have wings or leaves, but we humans do have words. Language is our gift and our responsibility. I’ve come to think of writing as an act of reciprocity with the living land. Words to remember old stories, words to tell new ones, stories that bring science and spirit back together to nurture our becoming people made of corn.”

For five decades I have been reading with some attentiveness authors dealing with environmental issues. In the process I have created a pantheon of writers whose work I most cherish. The group is rather small and includes such authors as Henry David Thoreau, Rachel Carson, Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams, William Least-Heat Moon, Wendell Berry, Mary Oliver, Louise Erdrich, Gretel Ehrlich, John McPhee, Rebecca Solnit. This year I added a new member to this club of American writers—Robin Wall Kimmerer.

• **Kingsbury, Noël.** *Seedheads in the Garden*. I associate Kingsbury with the New Perennial movement, a gardening style that emphasizes naturalistic plant compositions, striving to create gardens that never have an off season. This book focuses on the role of seedheads in a garden, providing visual interest long after the flowers have faded away. After introductory chapters that discuss the botany of various seedheads, the cultivation of these plants, and how to design gardens utilizing seedheads, Kingsbury provides an excellent directory of 145 plants that are worth considering in a garden because of their attractive seedheads. His commentary provides information on the plants and the form of each plant’s seedhead, an assessment of their toughness and durability on a persistence scale, their preferred hardiness zone in the U.S., and

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

a few sentences suggesting how they can best be used in a garden. In some cases information is provided on commercially available cultivars. The directory includes Jo Whitworth's professional-quality color photographs of each plant's seedhead, usually shown within a garden setting.

By my count, 64 of the plants in Kingsbury's directory can be found in the Coe garden. For me, the biggest surprise was Kingsbury not including in his directory two notable legumes: false indigo (*Baptisia australis*) and a North American native wisteria (either *W. frutescens* or *W. macrostachya*). All produce attractive seedpods that remain through the winter. Despite these minor oversights, I found the book and its directory quite inspiring, and I will certainly be consulting his directory as we consider future additions to the Coe garden.

- **Landsberg, Sylvia. *The Medieval Garden*.** Landsberg provides a knowledgeable introduction to medieval British gardens and their diversity, ranging from small enclosed herbers to royal parks. She presents information on the plants to be found in a 15th-century garden, many of which can be found in a modern garden: violets, lilies, columbine, sage, basil, sorrel, and fruit trees (pear and apple). The author has practical experience in the field, having re-created medieval gardens in Winchester and Shrewsbury. As the flyleaf indicates, she "provides modern gardeners with detailed descriptions of layouts, the measurements of beds and lawns, and the types of tools required." Her final chapter offers specific guidelines and drawings for constructing a trellised herber (with bench and exedra), flower borders and meads (including lists of appropriate plants and diagrams for how they might be arranged), a vine arbor, and a tree seat.

Landsberg notes that many Latin, French, and English words were used in the Middle Ages to denote gardens: hortus, gardenum, herbarium, viridarium, virgultum, vergier, herber, garden, orchard, wyrtyard, vineyard, little park. In England, a small ornamental garden under an acre was often known as a herber. It would typically contain a lawn and herbaceous borders. There would be no trees in the center of the lawn, but shade trees and vines would play an important role around the perimeter. These gardens often contained an impressive diversity of medicinal and scented herbs. The word "herber" also came to identify any small enclosed flower garden, and from the 12th century onwards, small herbers were often placed inside a castle beneath the bed chambers of royalty and nobility. An orchard might be one to four acres, with fruit trees laid out in a regular manner. Since pears and apples do not grow true from pips, grafting played an important role in the development of orchards and the act of grafting was also a rich source of medieval symbolism.

The kitchen or utilitarian garden was a site for raising food, medicinal herbs, and plants used for repelling insects and for household purposes (such as cleaning). Many plants served

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

in multi-purpose ways, and the medieval period did not make a clean distinction between food and medicine. Brassicas (most often colewort, similar to kale) dominated the utilitarian garden. Important perennial plants in the utilitarian garden included savory, sage, pennyroyal, mints, violets, lovage, and fennel. The most important vegetables included leeks, parsley, leafbeet, parsnips, turnips, skirrets, garlic, chives, and onions. Beans and peas were more commonly grown as field crops and consumed after they had been dried. Most seeds were sown early in the spring, but many vegetables were not harvested until the following winter. A common design divided a garden into three plots and the crops were rotated, each year one plot being left to lie fallow.

Although no Monastery garden survived the Reformation, monasteries played a key role in the development of gardening techniques such as soil enrichment, marling, land reclamation, and drainage. "Monasteries were in the forefront of water and woodland management, of the cultivation of vineyards, orchards, and pleasure gardens, and the dissemination of medical and botanical knowledge through the collecting, copying and illustrating of manuscripts." Some cloister garths have survived, but it appears they were lawns and would have no plants other than a symbolic pine or juniper. A green lawn was considered a metaphysical symbol of rebirth and eternity; the "green" was also intended to refresh the eyes.

We have no manuscript description of a peasant's garden, but from archaeology it's evident that peasants lived in clearly defined homesteads and their dwellings often had garden plots around them. Landsberg points out that for taxing purposes, a garden would be defined as a "spade-dug" plot rather than ploughed ground.

Landsberg discusses the importance of fishponds as a form of gardening. Fish played an crucial role in the medieval diet, in part because of a Christian emphasis on fasting. The purpose of fasting was abstinence from anything sinful. Because of their perceived purity, only fish were eaten on the numerous fasting days which amounted to over half the days each year. All Fridays, many Wednesdays and Saturdays, all holy days, six weeks in Lent, and four weeks of Advent were all days of fasting. Dovecotes were also part of gardening. Not only were the birds an important food option, they were also symbols of the Holy Spirit and an important source of manure. As for plants in the medieval period, by 1500 there were about 300 plants grown in northern Europe. It appears that all of those plants are still available today, though some would only be found in their wild form. On pages 79-81, Landsberg reproduces a comprehensive list of plants compiled in 1525.

With regard to the status of gardeners, the occupation had become a virtue in the eyes of the Church, symbolized by the beatification of St. Fiacre, a patron saint of gardeners. Words such as gardener, ortolanus, hortolanus, or gardinariu distinguish the gardener from a common labourer. The primary tools for gardening were the spade, mattock, billhook, sickle,

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

scythe, fork, and rake. The most common medieval weeds were docks, stinking mayweed, cleavers, thistles, knapweed, corncockle, cornflower, and charlock. I wish we had space at Coe to create a small medieval herber, but I've never been able to envision how it might be done.

- **Laws, Bill. *Artists' Gardens*.** Last summer I happened to see a sign for an estate sale at a small home two blocks from where we live. Although I had walked by this house dozens of times, I had no idea who lived there. I was initially attracted to a picnic table for sale in the front yard, but by the time I arrived, it had been sold. Curious about the design of the interior, I decided to go inside. A quick tour of the house and items for sale suggested the person who had been living here was elderly, probably single. The house was constructed in a modest arts & crafts style, perhaps 1920s, with lovely hard wood trim. The biggest surprise was a table piled with 20 or more over-sized garden books. All the books appeared in pristine condition, no evidence any had been read. In exchange for a \$10 bill, I left the sale with five new additions to my garden library.

The first of these books I chose to read was Laws' *Artists' Gardens*. Twenty artists are portrayed, each receiving 8-10 pages of commentary and excellent color photographs. With the exception of Peter Paul Rubens and his garden in Antwerp, Belgium, all the artists are European or North American from the 19th & 20th century. The North Americans are Jennifer Bartlett, Isamu Noguchi, Kim Ondaatje, Frida Kahlo, Claude Hassam, and one real surprise for me—John James Audubon. As for the Europeans, they could be divided into the Brits (Henry Moore, William Morris, Patrick Heron, Gertrude Jekyll, Barbara Hepworth), the French Impressionists and post-Impressionists (Renoir, Monet, Caillebotte, Cezanne, and the American ex-patriot Frederick Frieseke, who lived and painted in Giverny), and the rest of Europe (Joaquin Sorolla in Spain, Carl Milles in Sweden, Frederick Frieseke in France, and Emil Nolde in Germany). The great strength of this book is the juxtaposition of the garden photos (which come from diverse sources) with the artists' paintings and sculptures inspired by those gardens (for example, a photo of the court yard in Sorolla's home in Madrid with a painting of the same scene). Here are several artist-garden connections that I found most interesting:

- Renoir was inspired by roses and how they conveyed "the light and tones he needed for the flesh colours of his nudes."
- Moore and his large garden at Hoglands, an example of a garden as an art gallery. Unlike a Japanese garden, the British landscape garden eschews trim neatness and celebrates seasonal surges of growth. It was amusing to see a photo of Moore's large bronze "Sheep Piece" with the sheep rubbing against the bronze, burnishing the band of gold around the base of the sculpture.
- Noguchi quote: "I like to think of gardens as sculpturing of space."

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

- Laws notes that Monet's garden inspired over 500 paintings. He quotes a painter friend who said that when Monet and Caillebotte visited, "We'll talk gardening since Art and Literature are nonsense. Earth is the only things that matters."
 - Two Barbara Hepworth quotes. "My left hand is my thinking hand. The right is only a motor hand. This holds the hammer. The left hand, the thinking hand, must be relaxed, sensitive. The rhythms of thought pass through the fingers . . . into the stone. It is also a listening hand. It listens for basic weaknesses of flaws in the stone; for the possibility of imminence of fractures." And the second quote: "Perhaps what one wants to say is formed in childhood and the rest of one's life is spent in trying to say it." Of the gardens introduced in this book, Hepworth's garden in Cornwall is the only one I've ever visited; it's a small garden but contains great works of art—plus it's a wonderful experience to step inside her studio.
 - Frieseke: "My one idea is to reproduce flowers in sunlight . . . to produce the effect of vibration."
 - A friend told Nolde that the flowers in his painting were too intense, the colours too vivid. Nolde responded that his finished canvases paled in comparison with the flowers themselves. "We have no idea how jaded our eyes have become."
- This book was well worth the \$10, and I still have four more books to read.

• **Lees-Milne, Alvilde and Rosemary Verey, editors. *The Englishwoman's Garden*.** I discovered the existence of this book as I was trying to track down a reference to a text written by the British gardener/writer Mea Allan. I eventually discovered that the text I was seeking was Allan's contribution to this collection of 36 articles (with accompanying color photographs) by 36 English female gardeners. Each gardener has contributed an introduction to her garden, the introductions ranging from one paragraph to ten-page essays. Most of the authors provide information on the garden's design, its history, their favorite flowers/trees/shrubs, and their gardening practices. A high percentage of the women are members of the British aristocracy: Lady Caroline Somerset, Dowager Countess of Westmoreland, Viscountess Ashbrook, the Marchioness of Salisbury, the Duchess of Westminster, the Honorable Mrs Brudenell, etc. In most instances the women are identified by the husband's name. So in this collection, the eminent gardener Rosemary Verey is introduced as Mrs. David Verey and Beth Chatto is Mrs. Andrew Chatto. It was a different era.

Since these 36 pieces were composed by 36 different authors, one would expect dramatic differences in the quality of the texts. But as I was reading through the collection, I was impressed by how the writing was consistently clean, clear, and expertly composed. Although some contributions may have benefitted from substantial editing, one gets the impression that these are well-educated women who know how to say what they want to say. In many

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

instances the authors indicate they began their gardens without much prior knowledge. While several describe themselves as self-taught, learning by trial and error, others hired a professional garden designer or became avid readers of books on gardening. There are multiple references to Margery Fish, Gertrude Jekyll, Russell Page, and Vita Sackville-West.

One notable theme running through these pieces is the challenges many of them experienced in maintaining their gardens, often of several acres, with a minimal staff. While one of the authors began her gardening in the 1920s, most of these women started gardening after World War II, a period when few people could employ a large staff. Several women refer to one or two professionals who assist with their gardens, but several assure readers they do most of their own physical labor (on occasion assisted by a husband). In just a couple of instances do the authors note that most of the day-to-day gardening is attended to by their staff. Several admit the difficulty of finding sufficient funds to maintain their garden. In several instances, they have transformed their property into nurseries and sell plants to garden visitors.

This was one of my favorite garden books read in 2022. The texts are easy reading, and it was evident these women love their gardens and the beauty these gardens bring into their lives. These are all labors of love stories. Here are a few of my favorite passages from the book:

–“Give away a good plant, throw away a bad one.” ~Lady Serena James

–“I cannot grow plants as collections, even ferns and grasses must fit into the general scheme. I sometimes think of the garden as a layer-cake—each part providing interest at several times of the year.” ~Philippe Rakusen

–“I can’t bear modern roses, and I dislike the trend of enlarging flowers that are already large enough. This is usually done at the expense of their smell, or making a stem so big and brittle it breaks in the first summer storm.” ~Anne Tree

Lees-Milne, Alvilde and Rosemary Verey, editors. *The New Englishwoman’s Garden*. Five years after *The Englishwoman’s Garden*, this second volume appeared, though from a different publishing firm. The second volume is virtually identical in its format, style of photographs, length and focus of commentaries. Perhaps not quite as many Marchionesses and Duchesses, but the style and tone remain much the same. With one exception (Anne Dexter’s small backyard garden in the city of Oxford), all the gardens are on rural country estates, and the current owners are operating within garden designs that date back to a previous century. There is no indication any of these women were attempting to preserve or recreate an older garden. They are all seeking gardens that mix a traditional structure with mostly contemporary plants.

In reading the second volume, I was struck by how uniformly the women focus on the plants in their gardens. These people love plants. The richness of the flowers and foliage is

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

what absorbs their primary interest. For example, the Hon. Miriam Rothschild (whose garden is in Peterborough, Northamptonshire) portrays herself as a bulb-and-grass gardener: “all I want is a flowering hayfield, rich in fritillaria, merging into a medieval Botticelli or pre-Raphaelite lawn, covered with all the starry, low-growing flowers, from vim violets to buttercups and daisies.” Most of the gardens tend to be more formal, with well-groomed lawns, carefully chosen lawn ornaments, tasteful sundials, well-trimmed hedges, and impressive herbaceous flowering borders.

In most instances these women began developing these gardens after the second World War, and they recall the challenges of gardening after the two World Wars, when these gardens received minimal attention. There were few nurseries where you could purchase plants, and garden staffs were greatly reduced in size. Mrs. John Makepeace notes that for her garden in Beaminster, Dorset at the turn of the century there would have been 19 gardeners. Now her 14-acre garden is maintained by 2-3 people. With just a couple exceptions, I had the impression these gardens had at least one full-time gardener helping the lady of the house, but most of these women are hands-on gardeners. Several explicitly remark on how much they enjoy the physical labor of gardening.

• **Norris, Kelly D.** *New Naturalism: Designing and Planting a Resilient, Ecologically Vibrant Home Garden.* For a few minutes in December I owned two copies of this book. Prior to our family opening Christmas presents, my son saw me reading this book, and when he handed me a beautifully wrapped Christmas present, he claimed he was certain I would like his present. By a remarkable coincidence, his Christmas present was the book I was reading. At least his choice demonstrates he knows me well enough to recognize I have an interest in low maintenance landscape gardening with native plants. A few days after he had returned the book to the book store, I received a lovely Amazon Gift card, enabling me to choose a garden book I did not already own.

Norris stresses that in creating an ecologically diverse garden, it's important to understand that a garden will be constantly changing and your plants can do quite well without your interventions. You want to view the garden as a dynamic, evolving system and not a “static assemblage of plants that require individual care as if they were patients in a hospital ward.” Norris recognizes that most gardeners are collectors, bringing together plants they find attractive. In adopting a New Naturalism approach, plant collecting should be informed by a commitment to “curating plants that support biodiversity and thrive in place.”

For me, the most valuable chapter in the book introduced a three-layer model for integrating plant “guilds” into a natural, attractive, self-sustaining community. This model advocates sorting plants into one of three layers: a “matrix layer,” a “structure layer,” and a

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

“vignette layer.” The matrix layer is the foundation of the planting scheme, the critical ground cover that will comprise the majority of vegetation. These plants, both herbaceous and woody, have low habits and serve to protect and enhance the soil while preventing erosion. They typically spread by self-sowing, stolons, or rhizomes. In a native temperate grassland, the matrix layer would typically comprise up to 75% of the overall vegetation. In a New Naturalism garden, the goal will probably be 40-50%. The second tier is the “structure layer,” the trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants that frame the garden. These are usually older and larger plants, typically 5-10% of the total planting. The plants in the “vignette layer” provide the garden’s pretty pictures. The borders celebrated in classic gardening books are dominated by the vignettes. The vignette layer will occupy 30-50% of the total design. The challenge is to transform these soloists into a harmonious choir as members of a resilient plant community.

One fundamental principle for ensuring the successful community of resilient plants is to “plant redundantly.” The lack of abundance in many traditional gardens means that a gardener must spend substantial time and energy removing weeds while artificially filling in the void with temporary substitutions. According to Norris, the greater diversity of plants in your garden, the more likely the garden will become a functional, resilient, self-perpetuating community. This means that garden spaces need to be filled horizontally and vertically. No gaps. Norris advocates relying on competition between individuals in the same species. “I call this power of 10 planting. If you think 10 of something is a sound number, scale it up by a factor of 10 and you might ultimately get closer to the dream you have in your head.” He notes this is especially true of bulbs. My experience planting bulbs in the Coe garden confirms that it takes remarkably high numbers of bulbs to fill the available spaces.

One point that really caught my attention is when Norris refers to the research of ecologist Peter Grubb, who introduced the concept of the “regeneration niche.” A plant species will not be successful if the site will only nurture adults: “. . . if a site doesn’t allow the reproduction and the success of seedlings, a species won’t persist.” This means that gardeners need to be wary of sterile cultivars and plants that don’t readily produce seeds. It also means that a garden needs active pollinators to ensure successful seed production. The plants in the Coe garden that have had the most dramatic impact on the perennial flower beds in the last ten years have nearly all been self-sustaining seed producers: New England asters, Joe Pye weed, purple coneflowers, ox-eye daisies, black-eyed Susans, blazing stars, obedient plants, river oats, tall verbenas.

The second half of the book presents “planting palettes” for four common gardening environments: open landscape, planting close to home, softening the hardscape, and green shade and dappled edges. Each chapter discusses the primary matrix/structure/vignette layer issues and provides a list of plants worth serious consideration for each layer. The book

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

includes many informative photos demonstrating gardens following the New Naturalism principles and how these plants can be combined. Many of the photos show flowers mixed together, jostling in close proximity with each other, quite different from the distinct masses of plants and flowers we might associate with a Jekyll-inspired flower border. Although the New Naturalism is not a garden esthetic that matches perfectly with the Alumni House Garden space, Norris offers many ideas for nudging the garden in that naturalistic direction.

- **Phillips, Roger & Martyn Rix. *Vegetables*.** This is the most informative and expertly designed reference book on vegetables I've ever encountered, covering over 650 different vegetables. The text includes detailed information on the history of each vegetable, its native growing conditions, recommended gardening practices, disease and pest issues, and noteworthy varieties. The text is accompanied by excellent color photographs showing the plants in garden settings as well as photos that illustrate the flowers, roots, and leaves. The text includes many of the authors' personal references, periodically describing instances when the vegetables have been observed in their native habitat; the authors also acknowledge issues on which they have no personal observations. The book does have two notable limitations, at least for a gardener in North America in 2023: (1) the text is written for a British audience and focuses on vegetables best suited for the climate and soil of the British Isles; (2) the text was originally published in 1993 and thus its information on available varieties for the home gardener is often dated, describing varieties no longer available while lacking references to varieties that have entered the market in the past 30 years. Despite these caveats, this is a wonderful resource and introduces many vegetables for which I have no experience growing (e.g., Swedes, Seakale, Anu, Oca, Houlttuynia). Phillips and Rix have also rendered excellent descriptions of many common vegetables. For example, they have ten pages on over 60 different varieties of potatoes (e.g., Pentland Beauty, Mein's Early, Cavalier Red, Ulster Ensign, Mona Lisa, Edgecote Purple)—only two of which have I ever seen or grown (German Lady's Finger and Burbank Russet).

- **Potter, Jennifer. *Strange Blooms*.** In November my wife and I were in Paris for two days. During the obligatory pilgrimage to Notre Dame, we walked through a small garden square not far from the cathedral and saw a false acacia (black locust), possibly the oldest tree in Paris. The tree was planted by the 17th-century French gardener Jean Robin—and the scientific name for the tree, *Robinia pseudoacacia*, is in honor of Robin. After returning from the trip, I resumed reading this biography of the John Tradescants, father and son, and discovered that the elder Tradescant visited Robin in France and perhaps saw the same tree that we walked around four centuries later. Tradescant received many plants from Ribon, including a chequered snake's

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

head fritillary (what Tradescant called a Ginny hen flower)—a flower that we grow in the Coe garden.

This duo biography is full of wonderful details on 17th-century flower, fruit, herbal, and vegetable gardens, including information on British gardening tools and techniques. Porter skillfully blends the two Tradescant biographies with an informative portrait of 17th-century natural sciences. The Tradescants' gardening was an impressive blend of the theoretical, exploratory, and practical. The elder Tradescant was involved in many aspects of British culture and politics; his success as a gardener required skills in many different fields. The younger Tradescant, inevitably living in the shadow of his remarkable father, appears to have been less ambitious, content to spend his life primarily as a gardener. He was not a scholar, and he lacked his father's astute political instincts, which enabled the elder Tradescant to obtain wealthy patrons who provided him with substantial financial support and unique gardening opportunities. The son, however, acquired notable success in his travels (including his historically important trip to America), bringing back to England many plants new to European gardens.

One of the Tradescants' most enduring contributions is the result of their planting in their garden an oriental plane tree (*Platanus orientalis*) which came in contact with the occidental plane tree brought back from Virginia by the younger Tradescant. The mating of the two plane trees resulted in the London plane tree, *Platanus x hispanica*, a tree now found throughout the city of London. Other plants imported to England by the Tradescants included the foam flower, Canada goldenrod, Atamoxco lily, primrose-yellow coneflower, Virginia snakeroot, American sycamore, Carolina jessamine, red columbine, carnivorous pitcher plant (*Sarracenia purpurea*), red maple (*Acer rubrum*), tulip tree, and poison ivy (*Rhus radicans*).

Porter believes the diverging careers of the two Tradescants represent a shift in gardening ideals between the first half and the second half of the 17th century. The father concentrated his efforts on rarities, introducing plants new to Europeans. For the son, coming to prominence in the 1640s, the emphasis shifted to utility, gravitating toward plants that have a practical value (for example, medicinal plants useful for physicians and apothecaries). Porter fills her book with rich details on gardening ideals and practices in 17th-century England, and this is surely one of the best introductions available to English gardens during that period.

• **Powers, Richard.** *The Overstory*. This past year I read what I consider two great novels: *Horse* by Geraldine Brooks and *The Overstory* by Richard Powers. I found the Powers novel so powerful (pardon the pun) in the summer of 2021 that I stopped after having read about 1/3 of the novel. The richness and the complexity of the story lines convinced me I needed to start over from the beginning when I could give the book the concentration it deserved. As it turned

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

out, it would be 18 months before I would start over again. I relished the anticipation of returning to what I thought would be an incredible reading experience. I was not disappointed.

Of course, this is not really a gardening book, and it is misleading to classify it with the other books reviewed in this blog post. I would feel more comfortable categorizing it as an environmentalist text, and in my collection of environmentalist novels, it certainly replaces Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* as the best novel I've ever read in this category. But this novel easily transcends any limited genre category, just as William Least-Heat Moon's *Prairie-Erth* is so much more than a book about Chase County, Kansas.

I was motivated to include *The Overstory* in this bibliography because while reading it, I was frequently reflecting on how this portrait of the natural world (and especially of the trees as participants in remarkably sophisticated and intelligent communities) matched with my perceptions of the different gardens I take care of and the days and nights I spend reading and writing about them. Late in the novel Powers notes that the fastest way to create a self-sustaining forest is simply to do nothing. Nature does not need our assistance. Indeed, almost everything we do interferes with the natural world. That is frequently an issue that I reflect on while gardening—which is by definition a human effort to control and redirect natural processes. On p. 435 appears this great quote: “The gardener sees only the gardener’s garden.” One of the challenges of gardening is to discover ways to see the garden from multiple perspectives, but it’s incredibly difficult to see your garden independently of your history with the garden.

- **Raver, Anne, *Deep in the Green: An Exploration of Country Pleasures*.** Raver is a delightful writer, offering beautiful observations on the country pleasures of gardening. This is not a “how-to-do” book. She occasionally introduces a specific gardening technique (for example, a borax and Epsom recipe for protecting melons), but most of the book addresses larger issues. Perhaps she comes closest to expressing her thesis when she discusses the importance of gardeners learning how to notice things, to pay careful attention to the natural world and how different phenomena are interrelated. While reading the book, I felt like Raver and I were engaged in a friendly conversation, Raver offering diverse observations as we meandered from topic to topic. Raver uses the word “meander” to describe how gardening typically operates: “. . . this meandering—a kind of free association between earth, tools, body and mind—is the essence of gardening.” While gardening often needs to be goal-oriented, it is really “an act of meditation.” Raver is a skilled mediator, and this was one of the most pleasant gardening books I read this past year. Here are a few of my favorite passages:

- “The best part about writing about the garden is that it’s so big. You can write about love, as sphinx moths visit the evening primroses opening up at dusk and bats swoop in to sip nectar

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

from the saguaro cactus. You can write about death as the soldier bug prongs a Mexican bean beetle lunching on a leaf—or your own father’s failing heart, as the Japanese beetles move in to devour his rosebushes.”

- The poppies “seem to float in the wind for days. Then the petals drift to the ground, exposing the pale green vaselike seed capsules. In the late summer, the pods turn brown, and they are as eloquent as African sculptures, with tiny holes in their crowned tops, for the spilling of ripe seed. Nature thought of the saltshaker long before we ever did. I shake the seeds out in the fall, and pass them on to renegade friends. It is an ancient ritual.”
- “Have you ever had a steaming bowl of leek and potato soup on a cold December evening, made from home-grown potatoes and leeks dug that very day from the frozen ground? Leeks are milder than onions, and they sweeten in the icy earth. And a potato has an earthy, primeval flavor that’s hard to describe to the supermarket palate. Eating a garden-grown potato is like stuffing a piece of earth in your mouth. It’s as if you can taste the minerals and nutrients the plump little tuber has taken from the soil. Eating a potato is as close as you can get to the land. I lay there, having a soup vision. Leeks and potatoes, combined in a homemade chicken stock, blended to a creamy mixture, but not too creamy. It’s important to have just enough lumps to recall the potato, so that a big spoonful makes you feel humble, peasantlike, close to the gods.”
- “Throughout the ebullient sparring that evening, it was clear the two gardeners agreed on one thing: Gardening is self-expression. ‘Please remember that gardening is an art form, and unless you approach it that way, you might as well not do it at all,’ [Robert] Dash said. ‘You have to experiment. The zing in a garden comes when you decide to break the rules. It’s all in the act of the wrist—just like a painter.’ The English had the basics down all right, said the painter, but his tone suggested they could let themselves go a bit: ‘The English have two ideas. Manure, manure, manure. And prune, prune, prune. They say you should prune a bush until you can stick your head through.’ [Rosemary] Verey rolled her eyes heavenward, as if thinking of England. ‘No, Robert, it’s so a bird can fly through.’”
- “An iris likes to sit on the ground the way a duck sits on water: half in, half out. ‘That’s what the old-timers say,’ Cousin Bobby said. ‘Irises like sun on their rhizomes, so set them so they show through the soil.’”
- “A garden is like the self. It has so many layers and winding paths, real or imagined, that it can never be known, completely, even by the most intimate of friends.”

• **Rebanks, James.** *Pastoral Song: A Farmer’s Journey.* I read Rebanks first book a couple years ago, really enjoyed it, and was looking forward to this second memoir describing his life as a sheep farmer in Cumbria. One attraction is his insider knowledge of a world where I have spent hundreds of hours hiking. I’ve enjoyed far more days traipsing across the fells in the

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

Lake District than in corn and soybean fields in Iowa. It's a countryside that I love, and I'm thrilled to learn how a local farmer perceives this rural landscape. There were many passages in *Pastoral Song* when I felt like I was reading Wendell Berry depicting his life on a small tobacco farm in Kentucky. Rebanks briefly discusses a trip he made to America, which included time spent on Iowa farms, and I was not surprised when at the end of the book he expresses his "thanks and respect to my friend Wendell Berry, who lit a way in the dark, long ago, for us all to follow."

In the early chapters of the book, Rebanks celebrates the wholesome life and wisdom of his grandfather, who farmed this same land (composed of about 40 small fields and pastures) that Rebanks has inherited from his father. When he was growing up, Rebanks felt distant from his father, who was often angry and cursing the farm. His father was frustrated with his inability to make a decent living, despite all his hard work. In some ways Rebanks' description of his father reminded me of my own father, who never cursed and rarely admitted his disappointments in life, but there was a similar depression simmering below the surface, frustrated by a failure to achieve any notable success on his small Kansas farm. One notable contrast in our situations is that while my father did everything he could to make sure I never became a farmer, Rebanks grew up in a family assuming he would become a farmer, and as a young man Rebanks became deeply attached to his grandfather's old-style farming techniques. His grandfather told him that "the farm dances around the plow. . . . the plow was king. . . . the plow was the key tool for 'improving'" the land and the farm. Because of many years plowing these fields behind a horse, his grandfather knew every inch of the property: he had seen, heard, smell, and touched it all. I'm again reminded of my father, who for two decades did all his field work with a team of horses. He once told me the greatest mistake he ever made was selling Bert & Jim so he could buy a Case tractor.

For a time Rebanks and his father tried to adopt modern farming techniques and equipment to their small fields, but they discovered they still could not make a profit. Rebanks came to understand that Cumbrian farmers' dependence on expensive farm equipment and modern fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides was destroying the natural world that he loved. He eventually realized that his grandfather's plow was the enemy, and that to protect the Cumbrian wildlife, farmers such as himself would need to adopt a new set of strategies. Ironically, these new strategies did involve a partial return to a diversified farming style dominant when his grandfather was a young man, balancing the raising of livestock with field crops. Even with the successful adoption of these updated strategies, the low prices for high quality meats and grains make it impossible for a farmer to earn a profit. Rebanks' only solution has been to seek income from non-farming sources so he can sustain the healthy

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

landscape that he and Wendell Berry advocate. Both men have resorted to writing and publishing books.

Although this book rarely comments on gardening, Rebanks' reflections on the soil and native wildlife and his farming practices provided many opportunities for me to reflect on the commonalities between his sheep farm and my rural vegetable garden. I would relish having his ample supply of manure so near at hand. The one passage when the family's garden is the center of attention occurs in a moment when Rebanks recalls how much his father hated gardening. Each spring his father would cart barrow-loads of well-rotted muck from the calf pens. After his father had dug a long, straight trench for the potatoes, he would throw into the trench a load of muck and then James would place the seed potatoes on top of the muck and cover them with soil. One year the father asked his wife how much a bag of potatoes cost in the supermarket. After further grumbling and calculations of the labor required for planting the potatoes, he declared that growing potatoes was a waste of time. Despite the wife extolling the virtues of fresh potatoes, that was the end of raising their own potatoes.

Richards, Gareth. *Weeds: The Beauty and Uses of 50 Vagabond Plants*. I must say that the RHS publications in my library are consistently beautiful books to the eye, and this one is no exception. A well-bound volume with a lovely design, beautiful drawings of each plant, attractive fonts (though the font in this edition is a bit small for these old eyes). As one would expect with an RHS publication, this book focuses on weeds to be found in British gardens, but I counted 28 of Richards' "vagabond" plants that I would likely find in one or more of my gardens, including *Achillea millefolium* (yarrow), *Artemisia vulgaris* (mugwort), *Calystegia sepium* (bindweed), *Cirsium* (sow thistle), *Elymus repens* (quackgrass), *Equisetum arvense* (horsetail), *Galium aparine* (bedstraw), *Malva sylvestris* (mallow), *Matricaria discoidea* (pineapple weed), *Plantago major* (broadleaf plantain), *Ranunculus acris* (meadow buttercup), *Rubus fruticosus* (blackberry), *Rumex obtusifolius* (broad-leaf dock), *Senecio vulgaris* (groundsel), *Solanum nigrum* (black nightshade), *Taraxacum officinale* (dandelion), *Urtica dioica* (stinging nettle), and members of the *Vicia* genus (vetch). Each plant has a one-page botanical illustration (this book has no photos) and one or two pages with scientific name(s), common names, basic information (annual or perennial, botanical family, uses, poisonous or nonpoisonous), and miscellaneous details that amateur gardeners might find interesting or useful.

Richards does not deny the plants he has chosen are often unwelcome in a garden, but he's hoping his commentary can enable gardeners to appreciate their potential value and be less obsessed with doing whatever they can to exterminate them. As Richard Mabey pointed out in *The Unofficial Countryside*, "The notion that a plant is a weed is the most effective barrier for stopping us looking at it closely." In many instances these weeds' only offense is that they are

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

adept at growing without anyone's assistance. To classify a plant as a weed is an issue of perception, not definition. A lawn, for example, is much healthier and more disease resistant if it is full of clover and dandelions.

• **Rose, Stephanie.** *The Regenerative Garden: 80 Practical Projects for Creating a Self-sustaining Garden Ecosystem*. The subtitle provides a good introduction to this collection of DIY projects for the home gardener, in many instances re-using materials originally intended for other purposes. Rose introduces projects that rely on simple equipment and don't require much expertise or sophisticated mechanical skills. The directions, accompanied by photos, are neatly organized and should be easy to follow. I had no problem skimming over projects that had no appeal and reading with more care the projects that I either found "creative" (for example, constructing a miniature greenhouse with a clear umbrella as a cloche over a half-barrel planter) or I thought were serious possibilities. One project that sparked my interest was her instructions for constructing an olla, an irrigation system using unglazed terracotta pots buried in the ground and filled with water. Rose briefly explains the history and practical benefits of an olla and describes the steps for constructing an olla using two unglazed terracotta flowerpots. I've long wanted to experiment with ollas in my round, steel-encased vegetable beds, but I've been deterred by the high price of the ones I've seen advertised. Given the price of terracotta pots, I'm not sure I'll opt for constructing my own version, but I appreciate having Rose's directions. On the other hand, I do plan to follow her guidelines in experimenting with a hugelkultur--a slow/cool compost pile buried under a garden bed. I was also intrigued by her suggestions for creating a seed-sharing library for a community, comparable in operation to a Little Free Library.

• **Rushing, Felder.** *Maverick Gardeners: Dr. Dirt and Other Determined Independent Gardeners*. This book celebrates gardeners Rushing has known (including himself) who love plants, love to play in the dirt, and demonstrate an ornery, unconventional, independent mindedness in their gardening. These mavericks do things their own way. Rushing lives in Mississippi and most of the gardeners he introduces have gardens within a short driving distance from his home in Jackson. The primary figure is a man who went by the name "Dr. Dirt." He and Rushing did an NPR garden show for many years, and 40 pages of the book are dedicated to Dr. Dirt and his gardening principles. Rushing provides many photographs of Dr. Dirt's garden, including his favorite plants, crazy yard art, brightly colored signs, and "Bokays" (which might include fresh flowers mixed with spray-panted stems, artificial flowers, dried flower heads, etc). We are also given the recipe for Dr. Dirt's home-made fig pie. Rushing provides a list of the plants that were in Dirt's garden, emphasizing plants that cost little or nothing. Rushing and Dr. Dirt are advocates for plant and seed sharing to support their goal of

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

cramming into one space as many different kinds of plants as possible. Rushing advocates a willingness to keep experimenting and keep your eye peeled for wood, rusty metal, and any other materials that can be used in a garden. Other DIGr gardeners introduced in this book demonstrate what can be done with personalized art work, found objects (e.g., shoes and old tires as flower pots), and bottle trees (Rushing loves these). One gardener has created a vegetable and flower garden on a street corner property that he doesn't own. He never asked permission to use the corner. He just started putting plants there and has kept at it.

When I ordered this book, it never occurred to me that Rushing might describe the gardening ethos I've adopted for my gardens at home. Rushing quotes his book *Slow Gardening*, which offers a set of DIGr gardening principles. Here is a portion of his list, all of which would apply to my gardens on Elmhurst Drive:

- Seemingly random design as seen from the street.
- A clearly designed small lawn (if any grass at all).
- Meandering walks and paths, paved with bricks, flagstone, or broken concrete or just mulch.
- Walks and beds edged with stones, bricks, pottery shards, wood boards, or upended wine bottles. [I'm not a fan of upended wine bottles but all the other materials can be found in flower borders in my back garden.]
- Hodgepodge of plants of all types, sizes, and seasons, and an old queue of pots of stuff waiting to be planted (often in vain).
- Tolerance and appreciation of native or aggressive plants that more conventional gardeners call "weeds."
- Provisions for or benign acceptance of all sorts of wildlife.
- Compost and mulch piles, open sacks of potting soil, and pots, and other "useful someday" stuff they can't bear to throw away.
- Hoses, water buckets, and well-used tools and equipment kept in the open and close at hand.
- Assorted garden art, both classic and whimsical, sometimes store-bought but often homemade from found objects.

I'm guilty on all counts. Much to my surprise (but perhaps not to people who walk by our house), I must be a maverick gardener.

• **Stein, Sara B.** *My Weeds: A Gardener's Botany*. The premise of this book is that if you are going to be a successful gardener, you need to know as much about the weeds in your garden as you know about the flowers. The detailed plans of garden designers typically ignore the inevitable fact that gardens are quite effective at attracting weeds. It's likely a gardener will

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

spend as much time killing weeds as growing food and flowers. As Stein notes, “weeds coerce my attention as tenaciously as a toddler hanging on my knees.” Stein believe it makes sense to know your adversaries, which will decrease the likelihood they will ruin your garden.

Stein emphasizes that most weeds are adapted to thrive in conditions created in gardens, and some weeds, such as bindweed, no longer exist in the wild. They depend on cultivated soil. She also notes that almost every noxious weed is a polyploid. The presence of four sets of chromosomes tends to exaggerate a plant’s genetic characteristics. While discussing the reasons why weeds are so successful, Stein takes the time to explain how most plants function. For example, Stein clearly explains how plant roots and leaves accomplish their assigned tasks. She has a marvelous passage on photosynthesis and an equally enlightening discussion of asexual reproduction in flowering plants. She does an excellent job explaining the problems with cultivated plants: in our efforts to enhance their attractiveness and/or “edibility,” we have made them incapable of protecting themselves from diseases and pests. They have become dependent on our continued care. “From the biologist’s point of view cultivated plants are degenerate, pathological carriers of hereditary disease. . . . Weeds are genetically diverse; crops are not.” Needless to say, insects prefer to attack defenseless garden plants rather than the “bad-tasting, hard-to-chew, and often poisonous weeds.”

It is at this point in the book that Stein presents an environmental argument that I did not expect. While admitting that Rachel Carson’s case against DDT was well-founded, she is highly critical of Carson and later environmentalists for their over-reaction to the use of herbicides and insecticides in gardening and agriculture. She offers, for example, an unequivocal endorsement of Roundup and explains that if she had a vegetable garden she would have no reservation in using Sevin (choosing it over malathion because it smells less offensive). Part of her defense of these chemicals is based on the fact that many plants have developed their own systemic chemicals in self-defense. Plants in the aster family, for example, produce a group of particularly sinister toxins. “What I think Carson didn’t see about nature is that the whole chain is regulated by poisons.” In all my years of reading books on gardening, this is the first author I’ve encountered who is so unsympathetic to Carson’s contributions to our environment. Stein offers a striking contrast to how Carson is perceived by such authors as Kimmerer and Rebanks.

In her final chapter Stein states that in her own gardening practice she seeks flowers that do quite well without any assistance from a gardener. She is attracted, for example, to flowers that linger in abandoned gardens or are found in a roadside ditch. She admits she has no use for houseplants because they are so weak and unable to care for themselves. “It’s the weeds whose peremptory statements are commanding enough to make the gardener, gritty from his struggles, wonder if maybe plants are more than the dumb greens they appear to be.” Her

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

struggle with weeds has created an intimacy with the plants that she cherishes, an intimacy that has taught her how to become a gardener.

• **Von Arnim, Elizabeth.** *Elizabeth and Her German Garden.* Elizabeth von Arnim was an Australian, born in Sydney in 1866, and raised in England. In 1894 she moved to Nassenheide in Pomerania with her husband, Count von Arnim. Four years later she published her most famous novel, *Elizabeth and Her German Garden.* I must say that after I finished reading this book, I had no idea how to describe it. Although labeled as a novel, I felt I was reading diary entries that had received a thin fictional veneer. We don't learn much about the narrator's husband or her children or the friends that visit her home. We learn almost nothing about the garden, and the narrator admits that she knows little about gardens. There is no discernible plot. There are passages that include some clever, witty dialogue. It did help me appreciate von Arnim's conversational dialogues when I remembered that Oscar Wilde would have been one of her contemporaries—and perhaps a possible model.

Although it was a chore finishing this book, I did find a few themes of interest. The author appreciates the importance of her garden as an escape from domestic responsibilities, for which she has no real interest. The garden is a space where she can feel free of the restraints her culture imposes on women. The garden is a refuge and shelter where “every flower and weed is a friend and every tree a lover.” Elizabeth yearns for a garden that blended cultivation with the wild, comparable to what William Robinson's books on gardening were advocating in the late 19th century. For me the most effective passages came when the narrator expressed her frustration with being a woman—and thus not allowed to do any gardening.

I wish with all my heart I were a man, for of course the first thing I should do would be to buy a spade and go and garden, and then I should have the delight of doing everything for my flowers with my own hands, and need not waste time explaining what I want done to somebody else.

The narrator had a difficult relationship with her hired gardener, who disliked her ideas about gardening because she preferred “plants in groups rather than plants in lines.” Later in the novel she states:

In the first ecstasy of having a garden all my own, and in my burning impatience to make the waste places blossom like a rose, I did one warm Sunday in last year's April during the servants' dinner hour, double secure from the gardener by the day and the dinner, slink out with a spade and a rake and feverishly dig a little piece of ground and break it up and sow surreptitious ipomaea and run back very hot and guilty into the house and get into a chair and behind a book and look languid just in time to save my reputation. And why not? It is not graceful, and it makes one hot; but it is a blessed sort of work, and if Eve had had a spade in Paradise and known what to do with it, we should not have had all that sad business with the apple.

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

Unfortunately, many of the later entries in this novel come across as superficial conversations among people who are not very interesting and don't have much to say. As Elizabeth notes, few people that she knows (including her husband, whose name in the novel is simply the "Man of Wrath") have any serious interest in gardens.

- **Wareham, Anne.** *The Deckchair Gardener: An Improper Gardening Manual.* Wareham has written a book for people who have a garden but don't want to spend much time working in the garden. She assumes her readers would prefer sitting in the shade, perhaps reading a good book while enjoying a nice cold drink. An essential message in this book is to disregard most of the advice amateur gardeners receive about the multitude of garden tasks they should be doing. She notes, for example, the pressure to remove from a garden all those plants labeled as weeds. The solution is simply to re-classify them as wild flowers and enjoy them for the many benefits they can bring to your garden (such as protecting the soil so it does not dry out in the summer). She warns us to resist the temptation of hanging baskets. Keeping flowers alive in these contraptions is inevitably time-consuming and futile. You are better off enjoying the hanging baskets while relishing a beer at your local pub. She offers a similar warning about the problems with growing flowers in pots. If you are still determined to have flowers in pots, please don't waste your time washing the pots. Wareham informs us she has been using dirty pots for years and her plants have done fine. All of this advice is given in a breezy, conversational style that is intended to be amusing and light-hearted. The book is a quick, easy read. I'm not sure I learned anything new, but I did appreciate coming across several instances where her advice matched with my own inclinations.

- **Wright, Richardson.** *The Gardener's Bed-Book.* This is a collection of about 375 short essays, many just a paragraph in length, one essay for each day of the year and one longer essay for each month. The topics cover diverse topics (Christmas gifts, antique collecting, sermon texts, rural life, raising hogs, architecture), but a substantial plurality deal in some manner with gardening. Each essay is accompanied by a one sentence reminder of a gardening task at this time of the year. On June 4, for example, Wright tells us that "the leaves of Narcissi planted in grass are dried and the grass can be cut."

Wright was the editor-in-chief of *House & Garden* for more than 35 years, and he has a relaxed, breezy journalistic writing style appropriate for such a publication. My Modern Library edition assures me that Wright writes in a "language that is as timeless as it is seductive." While I did find several entries entertaining, Wright's efforts to be humorous frequently struck me as rather dated. Part of the problem is that Wright assumes his readers are similar to himself: white males living a comfortable life style, with a cook preparing the

Garden Books Annotated Bibliography for 2022

meals and a gardener taking care of the primary gardening chores. Given this profile, perhaps the occasional racism should not be unexpected. The September 17 entry on Gaillardia notes that “between us, Gaillardia is known as Nigger Flower,” and later he tells us his “next ambition is to own a Nigger Boy hitching post.”

Fortunately, there are entries where his observations and humor hold up reasonably well. Here, for example, are his reflections on “Single-Track Gardening”:

Gardening should really be done in blinders. Its distractions are tempting and persistent, and only by stern exercise of will do I ever finish one job without being lured off to another. I am setting annuals into the empty spaces of a border, for example. Midway between cold frame and border an unweeded Iris bed catches my eye. Down goes the flat of seedlings and, before I’m aware of it, I’m engrossed in the weed-choked Iris.

All too accurately, Wright has described my own gardening habits. Regrettably such passages were in the minority, and most of the time I was reading these short texts with a “ho-hum” attitude. While this book does give us a glimpse into a gentleman gardener’s New England culture in the late 1920s, I have no plans to read any more books by Mr. Wright.