

## Recommendations for Your Gardening Library

### Wicked Plants: The Weed That Killed Lincoln's Mother & Other Botanical Atrocities

Amy Stewart. Etchings by Briony Morrow-Cribbs; Illustrations by Jonathon Rosen. Algonquin Books, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2009. 236 pages. Publisher's price, hardcover: \$18.95.

READER BEWARE: This is one scary book! Plants can be dangerous to your health—and some can even kill you.



In the breezy, conversational style of her previous book, *Flower Confidential*, an exposé of the flower biz, Amy Stewart both enchants and enlightens again. This time her focus is the less benign aspects of the plant world—a subject every gardener should pay serious attention to.

Some of the most dangerous plants under scrutiny here are among the most common of garden favorites. There is the hardy aconite (*Aconitum napellus*), for example, whose beautiful blue, helmet-shaped flowers give it its common name, monkshood. “All parts of the plant are extremely toxic. . . gardeners should wear gloves anytime they go near it,” Stewart cautions.

Then there is castor bean (*Ricinus communis*), a glorious tender perennial that can reach 10 feet in a single bound. Ingesting only three or four of its seeds can kill you. Ricin, an extract of its bean, is believed to have done in a Bulgarian communist defector who was stabbed with a poison-tipped umbrella in 1978.

Stewart spins many a fascinating, illuminating, and frightening yarn as she reveals dozens of “wicked species,” both common as well as exotic. It is compelling indeed to read of deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*), for example. Every part is lethally poisonous if ingested and “just rubbing up against it can raise pustules on the skin.” Meanwhile, Jimson weed (*Datura stramonium*) causes hallucinations as well as respiratory failure.

And those innocent-seeming tropicals? All parts of the Sago palm (*Cycas revoluta*), a treasured houseplant in northern climes, contain carcinogens. Its narrow leaves beckon as tasty treats, so parents of young children—as well as dog owners—must beware.

At least the opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*), producer of the infamous, addictive narcotic, yields such medically valuable products as morphine and codeine. Fortunately, Stewart explains, its seeds, used as a popular culinary ingredient, are legal.

It is only a shame that this delightfully written, well researched, and truly invaluable book is missing an index.

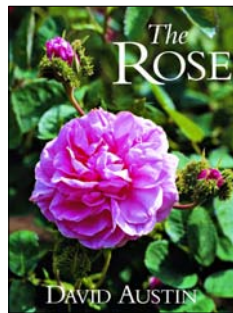
—Linda Yang

Linda Yang, former garden columnist for The New York Times, is author of four books including *The City Gardener's Handbook*.

### The Rose

David Austin. Garden Art Press, Suffolk, England, United Kingdom, 2009. 352 pages. Publisher's price, hardcover: \$85.

THIS SUMPTUOUS BOOK is like a leisurely walk through the world of roses with David Austin, the world's most eminent rosarian, at your side, speaking in fascinating detail about each exquisite rose you come upon. In 12 chapters, he introduces the reader



to more than 900 individual plants, most given gorgeous, full-color, close-up photographs of the flowers. Although its purview is decidedly English, this coffee-table-sized book is a valuable resource on both sides of the Atlantic because most of the roses it includes are available in the United States.

Chapters are organized by rose type, including original old roses—both once-flowering and repeat-flowering; hybrid teas and floribundas; small roses; English roses; shrub roses; climbers; ramblers; and species roses. Austin intimately describes each rose's habit, flower color, fragrance, and other details, including how it got its name and when it was introduced.

At the end of the book, Austin covers the use of roses in the garden, including photos of beautiful plant marriages (think roses and clematis) and perennials that make useful companions for roses (think soft pink roses with silvery-green lamb's ear); using cut roses in arrangements for the house; and a few pages on cultivation, pruning, and pest and disease control.

Who in the world could be more qualified to write this book than David Austin? Since he was 20 years old, this octogenarian has worked as a grower and hybridizer at his nursery in Shropshire, England. Along the way he has created some of the world's finest rose gardens. Among his greatest achievements—one that has literally changed the world of roses for the betterment of us all—is the introduction of hybrids that he calls English roses, but which much of the world knows as Austin roses.

These exceptional plants combine the lovely forms, fragrances, and charm of ancient, out-of-fashion, once-blooming roses such as gallicas, albas, and centifolias with the repeat-flowering habit, wider color range, and hardy disease resistance of modern roses. The result is that Austin has changed the way gardeners around the world think of these cherished plants. This book is the distilled essence of Austin's deep knowledge.

—Jeff Cox

Jeff Cox is a contributing editor of *Horticulture* magazine and the author of *Landscape with Roses* (Taunton Press, 2002).

## The Perennial Care Manual

Nancy J. Ondra. Storey Publishing, North Adams, Massachusetts, 2009. 384 pages. Publisher's price, softcover: \$24.95.

NEW GARDENERS dazzled by flowers don't often make the best decisions, so a guide that advises on choosing and caring for perennials from the first step of garden-making fills many needs.

In *The Perennial Care Manual*, Nancy Ondra takes the reader by the hand and walks through the steps necessary for making a beautiful garden. In "Perennial Care Basics," the first part of the book, planning and preparation are balanced with maintenance and troubleshooting various problems. Tasks such as taking cuttings, checking soil moisture, and cutting plants back get full treatment, always with a positive approach. Even in a discussion of earwigs, Ondra's easy-going attitude and can-do spirit reassure the reader that a few nibbled dahlias are by no means the end of the world.

Part Two, "Plant-by-Plant Perennial Guide," lists 125 herbaceous perennials, their merits and shortcomings, and just what to do with them through the year. The plants are listed alphabetically by botanical name, and there is a handy cross-reference with common names at the beginning of the section. Ondra also includes general entries on bulbs, ferns, and grasses, which briefly cover their main characteristics and growing tips along with a few suggestions for species that play well with other perennials. My only disappointment is that the book did not provide noteworthy cultivars, other than occasionally listing one or two in the general description of the species.

Tips on growing each species include propagation through division, cutting, or seed, as well as cultural requirements. Potential problems are dealt with by offering uncomplicated organic solutions that begin, for example, by urging the gardener to start with mechanical control of insects before stepping up to insecticidal soaps.

Ondra points out possible problems in growing particular plants and then offers ways around the difficulty. Her advice on Japanese anemones, for example, suggests growing these beautiful thugs as a groundcover around trees instead of trying to fit them into a mixed planting, where they would eventually muscle out their neighbors.

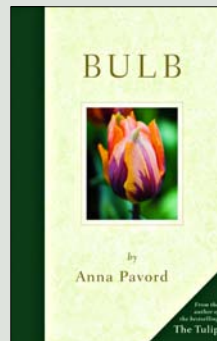
Rob Cardillo's rich photographs throughout the book showcase the beauty of the flowers. They also provide clear visual depictions of the tasks and techniques—from digging and staking to dividing and deadheading—about which Ondra writes. With Ondra's knowledge and presentation and Cardillo's lovely photographs, *The Perennial Care Manual* should be one of the first books for any beginning gardener and is certainly a worthwhile reference for more advanced gardeners, too. 🍷

—Marty Wingate

*Marty Wingate is currently working on her fourth gardening book. Based in Seattle, Washington, she writes about gardening and travel at [www.martywingate.com](http://www.martywingate.com).*

## BULBS GALORE

If you're looking for some inspiration and guidance for which bulbs to plant this fall—or any time of year for that matter—



look no further than *Bulb* by Anna Pavord (Mitchell Beazley, 2009, \$39.99). This weighty reference covers some 600 species and varieties of bulbous plants ranging from the common to the curious. The great diversity of the geophyte world may be a taxonomist's nightmare, opines Pavord, "but for gardeners it is pure joy." This joy shines through in her detailed descriptions of the alphabetically arranged bulbs and the plentiful color photographs by Andrew Lawson. Each entry also lists the season of bloom, hardiness range, and height, though Pavord cautions that these should be used as general guidelines since they can be skewed by any number of factors such as weather patterns or region. For further guidance, a section at the end of the book contains lists of bulbs by their expected season of bloom. A final section on growing bulbs offers tips, tricks, and other helpful things to keep in mind for the most successful experience.

—Viveka Neveln, Associate Editor

## A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

The word "shed" conjures images of gardening tools and workbenches more readily than leather couches and chandeliers, but Debra Prinzing, author of *Stylish Sheds and Elegant Hideaways* (Crown Publishing Group, 2008, \$30), encourages us to venture outside the box when thinking about sheds. She re-defines a shed as "a small structure designed and built for one's personal enjoyment." A far cry from musty storage closets, the modern-day sheds in this book are just as appealing



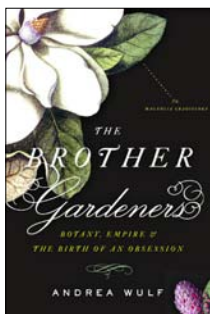
as the homes they sit next to, and many are nestled in colorful, lush gardens. Prinzing's book explores 28 sheds from across the country that run the gamut from modern, sophisticated workspaces to rustic outdoor cabins. Each shed has a highly personalized style and story behind it, and Prinzing addresses everything from the conception and "must-haves" of the shed's design to the architectural challenges of making it a reality. The book captures the spaces of artists, landscape designers, and the everyday recluse with the help of William Wright's intimate photographs. *Stylish Sheds* demonstrates that, in favor of utilitarianism, a little imagination goes a long way in creating an alluring, private retreat closer to home.

—Amanda Griesser, Editorial Intern

## Horticultural History

**I**N ORDER TO predict and plan for the future, it is essential to understand the past. When it comes to American horticulture, there is indeed a rich past to explore. While U. P. Hedrick's *A History of Horticulture in America*, published in 1950, will always remain a classic, several recently released books offer intriguing perspectives into the early days and people that still influence gardening today. The following titles cover important events in American Colonial gardening, specific events in American horticultural history, regional challenges, the personal landscape, and the far-reaching influence one plant breeder still projects decades after his death.

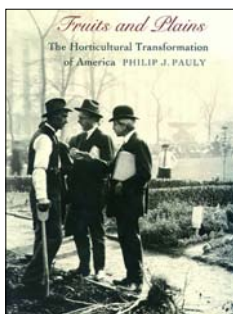
Few gardeners are aware of the excitement American plants engendered in England and Europe in the eighteenth century.



Whole estates were planted with American natives as described in *The Brother Gardeners* (Knopf, 2009, \$35). Andrea Wulf brings this formative period of plant history to life in her detailed research of John Bartram and Peter Collinson and their obsession with new plants from America and around the world. Collinson, a London merchant, required the most unique plant specimens, and Bartram, an American farmer and botanist, sowed the seeds of the

first American scientific society. This well-written history illustrates how these two men—along with a few other passionate plantsmen of the time, including Carolus Linnaeus—laid the groundwork for modern botanical science.

**Fruits and Plains: The Horticultural Transformation of America** (Harvard University Press, 2009, \$42) by Philip J. Pauly



focuses on how plant science has impacted and continues to influence daily life in the United States. Among the horticultural milestones explored are innovative Colonial practices, the rise of landscape architecture, and the initial efforts to tame Florida's unique flora. Each chapter covers a specific issue or event and the impacts these had on horticultural developments. For example, Pauly examines 19th- and early 20th-century

politics and the people involved in dealing with invasive species—both introduced and indigenous—many of which are still problems today. Especially interesting is the creation of an American Landscape ideal through the interactions of visionaries such as Frederick Law Olmsted, Jens Jensen, and Aldo Leopold. The notes offer a wealth of references for further reading.

**High Plains Horticulture** (University Press of Colorado, 2008, \$34.95) explores the tenacious plant cultivation efforts oc-

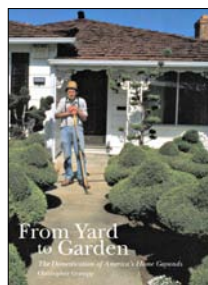
casioned by the westward migration into the water-starved Central Plains of these United States. John Freeman tells a story of



hope and resilience as the military, early settlers, and eventually land grant university Extension agencies developed the means for growing both ornamental and esculent plants in lands with limited precipitation. Long overdue for credit for their horticultural contributions are Charles Bessey and Aven Nelson, economic botanists responsible for the eventual success of cultivated plants in a

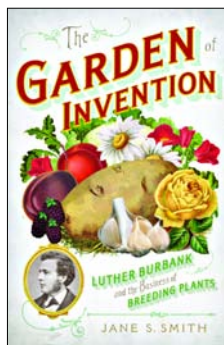
difficult landscape. The black-and-white photographs in the book attest to the inhospitable conditions faced by the early inhabitants.

**From Yard to Garden** (The Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, 2008, \$32.50) by Christopher



Grapp is a fascinating account of how the present day home garden evolved from its rude beginnings in the early 1800s. The book chronicles how American urban yards transformed from agricultural and utilitarian spaces—areas to dump waste, throw laundry water, and raise food—to the horticultural havens we are familiar with today. One of the critical points is the burgeoning suburban growth after World War II and the rise of foundation plantings. The idea of landscape as conformity in the developing suburbs offers an interesting view of American culture.

Luther Burbank was the most revered plant breeder of his time, thanks to the numerous improved varieties he introduced



from 1873 to 1925. While his extraordinary life and work are central to *The Garden of Invention* (The Penguin Press, 2009, \$25.95) by Jane Smith, this book is also the story of “how an earlier generation responded to the unprecedented idea that the vegetable kingdom could be mastered, directed, and even claimed as private property.” Not only did Burbank expand the range of plants used for food or beautification, but his death set in motion

the development of plant patents and genetic modification research, important topics in the world of plants today.

—Keith Crotz

Keith Crotz is the owner of American Botanist, Booksellers (www.amerbot.com) in Chillicothe, Illinois.