Edibles

Bill Thorness kindly acknowledges the contributions of the staff and collections of the Miller Library in his introduction, so I can’t claim complete objectivity in reviewing his new book “Edible Heirlooms.” But this is a great little book! Little only in dimensions and number of pages, as the author carefully defines his purpose and limits his scope, but within those parameters shows you how to grow an outstanding vegetable garden in the maritime Pacific Northwest.

Most importantly, he sees this endeavor as part of a larger picture. “The challenge for me is to somehow integrate my vegetable-growing practices into a diverse ecosystem and, if possible, enhance biodiversity.” The key for this is to use heirloom varieties that can be re-grown from collected seeds. Besides the mouth-watering descriptions, you will also get an excellent history lesson.

For a more encyclopedic approach to vegetable gardening, consider the “Sunset Western Garden Book of Edibles.” Like most Sunset books, this encompasses the entire West in its scope, so ignore the entry on macadamia nuts, but with the fine-tuning that the Sunset zones allow, you can zero in on what will grow for you, including fruits, nuts, berries and herbs.

Ornamentals

I have long enjoyed the folksy but information-packed annual catalogs from Gossler Farms Nursery in Springfield, Oregon. It is a great pleasure to now have the first book by the family (mom Marjory and sons Roger and Eric Gossler), “The Gossler Guide to the Best Hardy Shrubs.” Here the very practical, learned-by-experience descriptions of the catalog are expanded to include 350 of their favorites shrubs, all of which would make good choices for local gardens.

The highlight of the introductory chapters is “How Not to Kill Your Plants,” with lots of advice on how to select, buy, plant and nurture your new shrubby children. “Consider it an open adoption: You want to know about the birth parents, what neighborhood the plant...
came from, whether drugs were involved, and so on.” This same professional insider’s advice continues in the A-Z listings, where I learned that a favorite of mine, Enkianthus perulatus, is rarely found in nurseries “…because it grows too slowly to be profitable.”

On a much narrower subject, Bill Terry, from the Sunshine coast of British Columbia, has filled a small book (“Blue Heaven”) with an ode of praise to Meconopsis grandis, the Himalayan blue poppy. His cultural advice encourages the favored few who live in a climate that will nurture this hard-to-please jewel, to grow it—along with some more easily managed companions, such as candelabra primulas and other poppies. Anyone living in any climate, however, can enjoy this display of plant passion at its highest level.

From Oregon, Timber Press editor-in-chief Tom Fischer has created his own book, “Perennial Companions,” that demonstrates 100 design combinations using herbaceous perennials and ornamental grasses. I found it best to look at the right-hand, full-page photographs first (almost like a flip book), then stop at my favorites to read the interpretive material on the matching left-hand page.

The delightful “In Love with a Hillside Garden” has already been excerpted in the Winter 2010 issue of the “Bulletin.” Reading that chapter will convince you to buy the book; and by doing so, you’ll be supporting the Arboretum Foundation.

**Garden methods**

Enjoy it. These final two words of the subtitle to Valerie Easton’s new book, “The NEW Low-Maintenance Garden” are the key to her message. Other low-maintenance manuals treat the garden as a bothersome necessity to having a house; here the emphasis is on the joy of the garden, without it taking over your life.

Organized by broad themes, including “Design with Maintenance in Mind” and “Nature’s Rhythms,” Easton augments her points with interviews of an impressive list of designers, gardeners and home owners who have created a successful outdoor space. She completes each chapter with a list of books and other resources (once a librarian…) and provides, throughout the text, oodles of tips for simplification. Best of all, Easton gives the “Type A” gardener permission to relax, and to find the pleasure of it all again.

Linda Chalker-Scott debunks many gardening practices that don’t work in “The Informed Gardener Blooms Again,” a sequel to her excellent “The Informed Gardener,” published in 2008. The format is very similar to the first book, built around a series of short chapters with Sherlock Holmesian titles (such as “The Myth of the Magic Bullet” and “The Myth of Nitrogen-nabbing Wood Chips”) that analyze horticultural fads and home remedies from an applied, scientific perspective. After a thorough discussion of the research, a helpful summary (“The Bottom Line”) follows, along with references to support her conclusions.

Chalker-Scott clearly has a passion for bringing science-based best practices to both home gardens and professional landscapes, as she also has edited and published “Sustainable Landscapes & Gardens: Good Science-Practical Application.” Divided into five separately bound units—all housed in a three-ring binder—this work has contributors from major universities throughout the Pacific Northwest.

The audience here could be either the home gardener or the professional who
designs, installs or maintains landscape plantings. The writing, while technical, is well edited for readability of the non-academic reader and teaches not only better horticulture, but also about the research process that generates this advice. The format is designed for easily added updates and additions, so this is likely to be an important reference for our region for a long time.

Several of the principals in the Chalker-Scott books are the core themes in “The Climate Conscious Gardener,” the latest in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden Guides for a Greener Planet. While most of the contributing authors live in the Northeast, one of the five chapters, “Turning Your Landscape into a Carbon Sink,” was written by Arboretum Foundation staff member Niall Dunne. To give an objective perspective, I’ll quote from a review in HortIdeas (published by Greg and Pat Williams in Gravel Switch, Kentucky—so no regional bias here): “Dunne’s chapter alone is worth getting the book…with valuable information on numerous techniques for sequestering carbon in backyard gardens. Wouldn’t it be great if amateurs throughout the U.S. could keep a really huge amount of carbon out of the atmosphere?”

“Greening Cities, Growing Communities” is a case study of community gardens in Seattle. Written by landscape architects, this book is an excellent tool for community garden supporters to use in making their case in a language that is understandable to urban planners and policy makers. For those of us already convinced, the breadth of activities at the profiled gardens will be surprising, and we could use this book as a unique travel guide to the Emerald City.

Field Guides for Specialists

“Mushrooms of the Pacific Northwest” is another in the fine series of Timber Press Field Guides. Like earlier works on wildflowers and insects, it’s well designed to be a good field companion with a coated cover, a ruler on the back, and frequently needed facts easily found on the inside covers.

Particularly good is the long introduction, which addresses subjects from the ecology of mushroom-fungi and the hazards of hunting in the Pacific Northwest, to “how to avoid becoming a poisoning statistic.” Unlike many field guides, the text in the descriptive encyclopedia is in narrative form, rather than having set descriptive elements for each species. Not being a mushroom hunter, I can’t vouch for the effectiveness of identification by this approach, but I found it enjoyable reading.

While there have been earlier guides to our regional mushrooms, “Sedges of the Pacific Northwest” is breaking new ground as “an illustrated guide to all 163 species, subspecies, and varieties in the genus Carex that occur in Oregon and Washington.” According to Katie Murphy, manager of the Otis Douglas Hyde Herbarium of the University of Washington Botanic Gardens, this book is far better than other floras at distinguishing between these often very similar species and fills a much-needed gap in the botanist’s reference shelf.

History

For a total change of pace, pick up Jack Nisbet’s “The Collector.” Although written in the third person, the storytelling is so good that it reads like a memoir by one of the most influential of the early plant explorers to our region. David Douglas was a keen observer of all things in the natural world, but especially the plant kingdom, and had a natural talent for the recording, collecting and preserving what he found. And what energy! From 1823 until his tragic death in 1834, Scotsman Douglas was almost constantly exploring the new world, risking many hazards of travels and meeting many interesting people in both academic and frontier life.

Briefly mentioned

“Pacific Northwest Native Plant Habitat Garden Manual” is a short, loose-leaf bound
notebook intended to give the basics for teachers and students establishing school gardens using natives. “Living With Bugs” concentrates on the critters that find their way into your house, but there are valuable tips on co-existing for gardeners, too. “In My Nature: A Birder’s Year at the Montlake Fill” describes the wonderful bird life of the area also known as the Union Bay Natural Area at the Center for Urban Horticulture.

Finally, there have been new editions of important classics by Northwest authors, including “Macrolichens of the Pacific Northwest” and “Japanese Maples,” the latter by the late J. D. Vertrees of southern Oregon, now updated by the English chairman of the International Maple Society. To be complete, I will also include “The North American Guide to Common Poisonous Plants and Mushrooms” which—while intended for a continent-wide audience—was both written in 1991 and now updated by faculty at the University of Victoria.

Brian R. Thompson is the manager and curator of the Elisabeth C. Miller Library, University of Washington Botanic Gardens and a member of the “Bulletin” Editorial Board.

**Bibliography**


