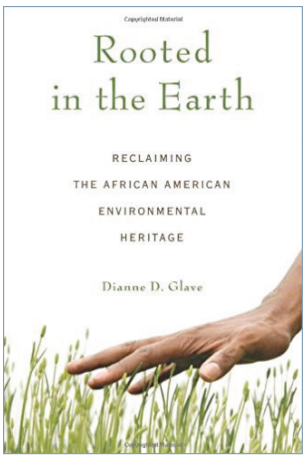
Books by Gardeners of Color

By Brian R. Thompson

For this installment of "In a Garden Library," I am diverging from my usual practice of reviewing new books by Pacific Northwest authors. Instead, I'm selecting a unifying theme amongst authors from a broader geographic range—an approach I plan to use again from time to time.

In this issue, I explore works by people of color. Some of these authors are gardeners or farmers, while others are environmentalists and naturalists, but I think all will broaden our appreciation of our own gardening practices and traditions.

ROOTS



Dianne Glave is very clear about the main argument of her book, "Rooted in the Earth." She writes, "Stereotypes persist that African Americans are physically and spiritually detached from the environment. This wrongheaded notion is so ingrained in our culture that many of us have begun to believe it ourselves. But nothing could be less true."

To illustrate this viewpoint, she begins each chapter with a story. While fictional, these stories weave a convincing portrayal of the history of African Americans, from their roots in Africa up to modern times. All emphasize a strong and vibrant connection to the natural environment as expressed in many ways, including through religion, conservation, nature study and gardening.

I found the chapter entitled "Women and Gardening: A Patch of Her Own" particularly engaging. The focus is on African American women living in the rural southern United States, both before and after the Civil War.

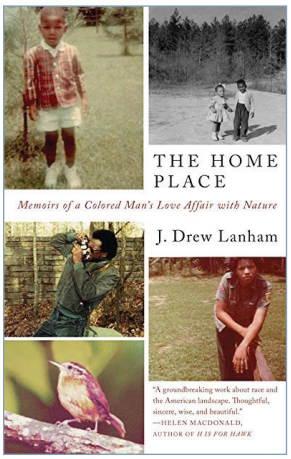
Some used conventional agricultural practices of producing food and other crops in orderly rows. Others embraced a more natural aesthetic that featured a glorious mixture of annuals, perennials and shrubs. While this aesthetic has become popular amongst prominent European and American garden designers in recent years, for African Americans, it's part of an older tradition.

The diversity of the plantings in the natural approach was effective at reducing insect pests and left little room for weeds to thrive. Flowers were grown for their beauty and fragrance, and as ways to entice the neighbors over to visit. In addition, "some gardeners sought ethical, moral, and spiritual enlightenment in these chaotic or wilderness spaces much as their African ancestors had."

BIRDING WHILE BLACK

"The Home Place" is best summarized by its subtitle: "Memoirs of a Colored Man's

Love Affair with Nature." J. Drew Lanham's love for nature, especially of birds, is palpable throughout.



It's a love that was nurtured by Lanham's upbringing in rural, western South Carolina, and began in childhood. "When the chores were finally done, however, I could break free of the house and enter a fantasy world of earth and sky." Despite this desire to escape, he was also a good student and was encouraged to pursue an undergraduate education in engineering. This path would have likely led to a more profitable career, but Lanham realized his heart had a different goal, and he is now a Professor of Wildlife Ecology at Clemson University.

His career choice was not an easy one, and Lanham laments that very few other men of color have pursued the same path. It was also a dangerous choice: Black men heading out to explore natural and rural areas with binoculars may put their lives at risk.

Lanham's advice is simple: "Get more people of color 'out there.'" Echoing the thoughts of Glave, he adds, "As young people of color reconnect with what so many of their ancestors knew—that our connections to the land run deep, like the taproots of mighty oaks; that the land renews and sustains us—maybe things will begin to change."

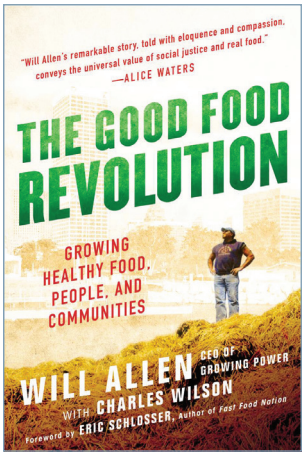
ADDRESSING URBAN DESERTS

Will Allen was raised on a small farm in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D. C. His parents grew up as sharecroppers in western South Carolina, very close to the home of J. Drew Lanham. As a young man, Allen was embarrassed by his agricultural heritage, and he hoped instead to make it as a basketball player.

A talented competitor in both high school and college, he had a limited career as a professional, primarily playing in Belgium. While in Europe, he had time to observe the local agricultural customs, including the many small farms using traditional, organic practices. This reawakened his interest in growing food. After starting a successful corporate career in metropolitan Milwaukee, he began farming as a hobby.

In 1993, by chance, he discovered the last agriculturally zoned property in the poor, mostly black northern part of the city. At the time, he was in his forties, doing well in his career, but feeling unfulfilled. He decided to purchase the property, leave his safe job, and open a vegetable stand because he "wanted to try to heal the broken food system in the inner-city community where my market operated."

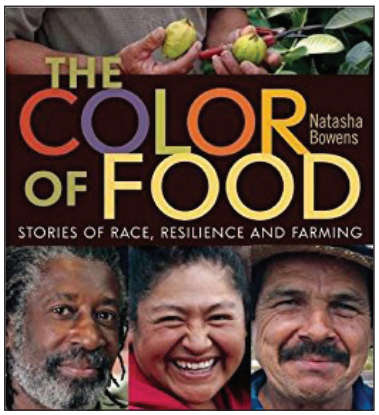
He also wanted to connect Wisconsin farmers to African American communities, especially as Milwaukee is one of the most segregated cities in the country. "But on our small piece of earth, we struggled and celebrated together—black and white, Hispanic and Hmong, young and old—as we worked to produce healthy food."



This hasn't been easy, and much of Allen's "The Good Food Revolution" (co-authored by Charles Wilson) is the story of the last 20 years of building what is now a very successful urban farming non-profit organization that not only serves its home community but has fostered similar programs in many other cities. Allen is a good storyteller, praising the many individuals who contributed to his work, so that they become your heroes, too. While this work is not a panacea to all of the troubles of racism and poverty, it has led to many happy endings.

FARMING ACROSS AMERICA

In describing her book, "The Color of Food," Natasha Bowens explains, "I never would have imagined that my desire to dig in the dirt would lead me here, digging instead into the stories of farmers of color across America—Black, Latina, Native, and Asian farmers and food activists." Initially, Bowens' interest in improving food and agriculture systems led her to working on organic farms, but often as the only "brown person" there. Through her blog (Brown.Girl.Farming), she discovered others like her and decided their stories needed telling.



At the same time, she was learning about her heritage, including the uneasy discovery that her white mother's ancestors owned her black father's ancestors. "I'm literally the product of ownership and oppression reuniting, as if to rewrite the story."

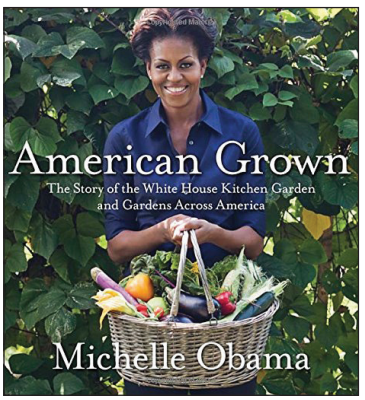
Her trip takes her across the country. For the purposes of this review, I'll concentrate on stories she found amongst farmers on the West Coast. These include Menkir Tamrat, who came to the United States from Ethiopia for college in the 1970s and now lives in Fremont, California. Missing the special ingredients of the favorite dishes of his native land, Tamrat recognized that he would need to grow his own. And this is what he does, but he also enjoys preparing traditional dishes and some of the intermediate ingredients to sell to regional Ethiopian markets and restaurants.

In the Skagit Valley of our state, Nelida Martinez is a Mixteca native—from the state of Oaxaca in Mexico—who now has her own organic farm focusing on raspberries, blackberries and various vegetables. She made this bold move after her son sickened with leukemia, possibly from exposure to pesticides at the conventional farm where his mother once worked. She describes the experience of Latino farm workers as "a lot of humiliation for us, and many of us never think about having our own farm because we feel degraded by the work." Now, she is very pleased to not be working "for anyone else!"

Valerie Segrest is not a farmer in the traditional sense, but rather an advocate for the foraging traditions of her people, the Muckleshoot tribe based in Auburn, Washington. These traditions include harvesting, cooking and eating wild foods in season, a practice that now requires compromise because dams and pollution—or what Segrest calls "European land management styles"—have reduced or contaminated many long-established sources. While she appreciates the role of conservation, she argues that foraging and harvesting by native peoples ensures "a balance with nature where you're working together and not having dominion over that space. Even as foragers, we use harvesting techniques that make it look like we've never even been there while also actually benefitting the plant."

GARDENING ACROSS AMERICA

Michelle Obama needs no introduction, and her book "American Grown," describing the White House Kitchen Garden she started, is already well known. For some, the book may be easy to dismiss as a public service announcement—or worse, a political statement. That is unfortunate because it is a good gardening book, both for the techniques it teaches and



as a model of how gardening improves people's lives in many ways.

This book has many authors. The White House gardening staff share their experiences and appreciation of the garden, along with basic cultural advice geared to both the new gardener and to those unfamiliar with the wide range of delicious foods they can easily grow. White House chefs share tips on harvesting and preserving and provide recipes that make it simple to add more fruits and vegetables to your diet.

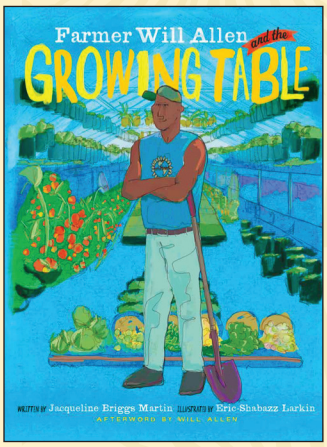
Equity and diversity are quiet background themes in "American Grown," but it is clear that in this garden "equality is a key part of the message of planting day. We are all down in the dirt. Anyone present can help dig. There is no hierarchy, no boss, and no winner."

Obama also reaches out to those involved with community gardens, school gardens and food resources across the country (including Will Allen), and with other programs that encourage exercise for youth and healthy school lunch choices.

One such garden is the New Roots Community Farm in San Diego, where gardeners from Uganda, Kenya, Vietnam, Mexico and Guatemala began working together. "At first, they weren't sure how people from so many different countries would get along—especially since the garden had only two hoses to share and the farmers often didn't speak the same language. But their enthusiasm and determination drew them together."

INSPIRING KIDS

The Will Allen story has also inspired a book found in the children's section of the Miller Library. "Farmer Will Allen and the Growing Table," written by Jacqueline Briggs Martin and illustrated by Eric-Shabazz Larkin, focuses on the role neighborhood children played in helping Allen's enterprise succeed.



In vivid colors, this book captures the diversity of food produced in these greenhouses, including the pools for tilapia, chickens for eggs, sprouts for quick greens, and hives for honey. The people are colorful, too, and of many ethnicities and ages.

The children were especially eager to help bring food waste, and to come back every day to watch the red wiggler worms turn these scraps into compost. There is tragedy in this story though, as some of the worms died before the kids discovered the proper care and feeding they required. But, in the end, "the squirmy crew has stayed hard at work."

Brian R. Thompson is the manager and curator of the Elisabeth C. Miller Library of the University of Washington Botanic Gardens. He is also a member of the "Bulletin" Editorial Board.

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