The Summer Garden

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› The simple beauty of daisies
› Be bold: plant magenta flowers
› Create your own meadow
The late great J.C. Raulston was fond of saying there is an indirect relationship between plentitudes of financial resources and inspiring horticultural practice. I reflect on his observations frequently while having a garden walkabout, domestically and internationally, and find it to be a truth that holds steady.

Although I have no insight as to the financial integrity of the Atlanta Botanical Garden (atlantabotanicalgarden.org), it is a given that public horticulture has sadly taken it on the shins during the past four years of a bruising recession. Relying again on a quip to make a point—this one from my father, who farmed in northern Michigan for a significant portion of his life—smooth seas do not make skillful sailors. Those institutions with purpose, plan and, above all, talent will always rise above any challenges of budgetary restraints. One need not go beyond the Atlanta Botanical Garden to see this actualized. It is currently one of the most vibrant horticultural institutions in North America.

The Atlanta Botanical Garden (ABG) was founded in 1976, in a corner of Piedmont Park in the heart of midtown. Many Atlanta citizens can remember these 30 acres as prior home to the municipal greenhouse range. What has risen from that mélange of structures is remarkable and highly indicative of the staff and leadership as well as community involvement and support. Also obvious is a continual revisiting of their mission statement: “To develop and maintain plant collections for the purposes of display, education, conservation, research and enjoyment.”

The concept of “display” at any public garden is always a balancing act, with a color quotient meant to appease the lay visitor often usurping horticultural integrity. Throughout the ABG, one can see that serious plantsmanship and the flamboyance requisite to drive admissions are given equal footing.

The Dorothy Chapman Fuqua Conservatory is the quintessential tropical experience complete with a self-sustaining population of free-range birds, which assist in pest control. The rightfully popular displays of colorful frogs from Central and South America speak to the garden’s resolute commitment to amphibian research and conservation. The adjoining Fuqua Orchid Center is home to the largest assemblage of orchid species in North America; in adjacent tissue-culture labs, botanical techies can be glimpsed carrying on with plant conservation via test-tube procreativity.

The Desert Room, highlighting the flora of Madagascar, transitions into perhaps one of the most remarkable conservatory displays in existence anywhere. The Tropical High Elevation House maintains the climatic conditions of the equatorial highlands at elevations between 6,000 and 10,000 feet. Here vining carnivorous plants, tropical members of the Ericaceae and rare montane orchids are impeccably grown, while evoking more mystery and magic than James Cameron’s Avatar.

The engineer and mastermind of all of ABG’s interior spaces is Ron
Determann, as brilliant in horticultural application as he is encyclopedic in worldwide botany. Ron grew up in the Netherlands, where some consider understanding plant growth under glass a genetic trait linked to human survival. If that is indeed true, then Determann is a bona fide tetraploid. From the soils used in containers and interior planting beds, to air space and light for optimum and long-term survival of his subjects, he has an opinion that has proven to be dead on.

Determann’s understated talents don’t end with simply knowing how to successfully cultivate the plants. Throughout the garden spaces are displayed an enormous assortment of plants from his collection work abroad and instate. One of the most extensive collections of rare conifers in the world are grown here, representing his numerous expeditions to New Caledonia, an island nation off the eastern coast of Australia.

Ron Determann is not a one-man show. Director of Horticulture Mildred Pinnell Fockele—a passionate plant person in her own right—has amassed a talent of horticulturists throughout the garden. Jamie Blackburn’s Storza Woods not only showcases hardy native and exotic woodlanders appropriate for the Southeast, but for me personally it’s always a walk down memory lane. There exists at ABG a substantial number of plants that I have collected over the years, often while in company with two Georgians, Ozzie Johnson and Scott McMahan.

Opposite page: The Dorothy Chapman Fuqua Conservatory houses plants from tropical and desert environs, with rare and endangered species a priority. Top left: The Fuqua Orchid Center showcases the ABG’s distinguished orchid collection. Top right: Pitcher plants bloom in the Native Bog Garden. Above: Ron Determann, Conservatory and Conservation Director, has brought countless exciting species to the garden.
Both have substantial ties to the garden. Ozzie's support and generosity is legendary, with many of the plants in the tropical house and the conifer collection having come from seeds and cuttings he collected throughout Asia. Scott McMahan was for many years the propagator for the garden and he knows the collection intimately.

Scott has now moved on, owning his own nursery in Atlanta and an adjunct site an hour's drive north. Garden*Hood (gardenhodatlanta.com), his enterprise in the city, has become the perfect follow-up destination for the horticulturally inclined who leave the botanical garden with a shopping list in hand. Hands down, it is one of the most innovative and plant-savvy garden centers in North America, and it is obviously influenced by Scott's prior association with a well-run, passion-driven public garden.

It is impossible to fully articulate the range of experiences and emotions a visitor to the Atlanta Botanical Garden will garner. But it is not impossible to simply state my appreciation for an institution that works so well, not only for the inhabitants of a sultry city in the Southeast, but for the collective horticultural identity of this country. 🌿

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