

The Turning Tide

AMERICA'S BEST GARDENING BOOKS
PUBLISHED IN THE LAST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS

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Twenty-five years of reviewing books sent me scurrying back through ninety-nine issues of HORTUS to refresh my memory. It was not an unpleasant task and I was quite pleased to find that I still concurred with most of what I had written. In some cases, however, the flavour had gone off and a quick browse through my library shelves revealed a number of noteworthy books that had escaped notice. In 1986, when HORTUS was gestating, American gardens were not as appreciated as they are today. People had heard of Winterthur and Monticello, but little else and books providing insight into the larger picture of American gardens and their history were scarce. Americans at that time were swept up in the fascination for English gardens and the reigning gurus at the time: Rosemary Verey, Penelope Hobhouse and Beth Chatto. Now the tide has turned, with a bounty of good books on American gardens, including Tim Richardson's *Great Gardens of America* (2009) eloquently explains to British gardeners what makes American gardens 'American' through a well-honed selection of about twenty examples.

One of the first books to turn things around in the early 1990s was *The Golden Age of American Gardens: Proud Owners, Private Estates, 1890–1940* (1992) by Mac Griswold and Eleanor Weller. Not exactly bedside reading, this four-hundred-page tome provides the full panoply of gardens during the bountiful years when wealth could buy almost anything. 'The book is a pleasure to look at, and an education to read.' *Grandmother's Garden: The Old-Fashioned American Garden 1865–1915* (1995) by May Brawley Hill provides a narrower slice of history by focusing on the impact of the flower-filled American country gardens that were favoured by American Impressionist painters. Another notable book, *Keeping Eden: A*

History of Gardening in America (1992), covers gardening from the pioneer settlers to public horticulture. Published by the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, it emphasises the horticultural history of American gardens and is lavishly illustrated with artwork from their library. Denise Otis's *Grounds for Pleasure: Four Centuries of the American Garden* (2002) admirably covers more than four hundred years of gardens of every conceivable variety in countless climates, reflecting the melting-pot of cultures that have brought their individual stamps to America. 'It will bring years of pleasure to designers, historians, and armchair travellers.' In addition to general histories, there are a number of books that focus on the rich diversity of regional gardens. Two of the best are Alan Emmet's *So Fine a Prospect: Historic New England Gardens* (1996) and David Streatfield's *California Gardens: Creating a New Eden* (1994).

America has also produced a fair share of memoirs by writers and artists about their own gardens and at the top of the list is Elizabeth Lawrence, who is considered America's equivalent of Gertrude Jekyll for her writing and gardening skills. Emily Wilson's *Two Gardeners: A Friendship in Letters* (2002) presents the correspondence between Lawrence and Katharine White [see also Michael Cunningham's article in *HORTUS* 65], the formidable garden writer and editor who worked for *The New Yorker*, while *No One Gardens Alone* (2004) reveals Lawrence's somewhat elusive personal life. Wilson deftly weaves together Lawrence's passions – her gardens, family circle, and friends – in a compelling narrative. More recently, *One Writer's Garden: Eudora Welty's Home Place* (2011) by Susan Haltom and Jane Roy Brown (reviewed in *HORTUS* 99) paints an engaging picture of one writer's passion for her gardens in the torrid Mississippi Delta. Robert Dash's *Notes from Madoo: Making a Garden in the Hamptons* (2000) is filled with opinions and wisdom about the making of his legendary garden on Long Island. 'People who are capable gardeners, artists and writers are a rarity.' The same can be said of Joe Eck and the late Wayne Winterrowd, who wrote about the life and garden they shared in Vermont. *A Year at North Hill* (1996) and *Our Life in Gardens* (2009) represents some of the best garden writing today.

Page Dickey is a gardener, designer, and writer whose books never fail to enchant and inspire. In 1997 she wrote *Breaking Ground*, which introduced many gardeners to the work of some of America's top young designers, such as Nancy Goslee Power, Patrick Chassé, and Madison Cox. Dickey's *Gardens in the Spirit of Place* (2005) continues the theme with a selection of gardens by Edwina von Gal, Bernard Trainor, and other 'hot' American designers whose work ranges from serene woodlands to crisp hardscaping. As Wayne Winterrowd wrote in the foreword, 'Page's energy and personal charm gain her entry into places where other garden writers and photographers have not ventured. We, her readers, are fortunate to tag along with her.' One book that has emerged as an all-time classic on American garden design is *Bold Romantic Gardens: The New World Landscapes of Oehme and van Sweden* (1990). It continues to be a source of inspiration to budding designers as well as seasoned gardeners. The partnership of plantsman Wolfgang Oehme and landscape architect James van Sweden produced some of America's most seminal landscapes, from the Federal Reserve Garden in Washington DC to rural landscapes with striking plantings.

Few gardens are complete without plants and fortunately the renowned American publisher, Timber Press, has specialized in solid reference books on every conceivable plant in the kingdom. One of my most trusted resources is Michael Dirr's *Dirr's Hardy Trees and Shrubs* (1997) that is within reach of my gardens on Martha's Vineyard and in Waban. Another outstanding Timber Press publication is *Restoring American Gardens: An Encyclopedia of Heirloom Ornamental Plants 1640-1940* (2004) by Denise Wiles Adams, a keen horticulturist and one-time nursery owner. The title is a bit misleading, since the book is about historic plants and not about garden restoration. It focuses primarily on how ornamental plants were used in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. James Cothran's award-winning book, *Gardens and Historic Plants of the Antebellum South* (2004), rolls everything together in one book: garden history, tantalizing visuals, horticulture, solid research, and excellent writing. Of particular interest is the extensive list of ornamentals, including American natives, which

were hallmarks of antebellum gardens and remain the mainstay of southern gardens today.