

READING SEASON

By Gretchen Stark, Master Gardener, FCMGA

Just as a gardener has variety in the well planned herbaceous border, the most satisfying reading list has variety too. Gardeners look for books that inspire, inform, and entertain. Some books need to be “weeded” from the shelves over the seasons, but many continue to be hardy for every reading season. The following list of old and new books have remained perennial favorites in at least one book garden. Let the reading season begin.

Flowers A to Z by Cecelia Heffernan, with photography by T. K. Hill.

This oversized coffee table book has 443 full color photos of flowers. Although this book does contain growing tips for flowers the primary emphasis of the book is on how to keep flowers fresh in arrangements. The book lists 55 flowers from agapanthus to zinnias, giving information on varieties, colors, scent, freshness, vase life, cost, availability, arranging tips and other notes of interest for each one.

The Homeowners Complete Tree and Shrub Handbook by Penelope O’Sullivan.

This is a three part book with the first two sections devoted to the theories of design, plant selection and purchase. The bulk of the book lists 348 trees and shrubs, shows photographs, and gives information about each. Ms O’Sullivan lists landscape use, light requirements, soil requirements, growing sites and preferred landscape cultivars.

An Inordinate Fondness for Beetles by Arthur Evans and Charles Bellamy.

The prologue of this book begins with the anecdote about British scientist, J.B.S. Haldane who, when asked what could be learned about the Creator from the study of His works, replied that the Creator must have “an inordinate fondness for beetles.” This book is packed with information about the fifth largest group of animals in the world. However, it is the dazzling photography of Lisa Charles Watson that makes it clear why the Creator has such a fondness for beetles. You will too.

The Meaning of Herbs by Gretchen Scoble.

This book gives the Latin name, the history and folklore of each of 56 herbs. Chamomile, for example, has been used for thousands of years and there is some evidence that it was used by ancient Egyptians and by Victorians who thought it symbolized patience in adversity. Today it not only makes a great cup of tea, but it can be found in shampoos to bring highlights back to blond hair.

100 Flowers and How They Got Their Names by Diana Wells.

This volume gives information on the history of 100 plants and the back story of their names, both common and scientific. The book reports that Marigolds, for example, were the flowers used to decorate church altars in honor of Mary and the name, “Mary’s Gold.” became marigold. The scientific name, Calendula, is from the Latin, calendae, “the first day of the month.” The European calendula bloomed each month in the monastery gardens and thus supplied the churches with fresh flowers.

Plant This by Ketzal Levine.

This is a laugh out loud and serious book written by NPR correspondent, Ketzal Levine. The book is arranged into four seasons and Levine has organized the one hundred plants she selected into the season which shows off the plants' best assets. Besides the serious information about the basic needs, worst enemy, advice and general facts about each variety, Levine uses humor to leave a lasting impression about each of these plants. She has the habit of making the Latin name accessible by providing a "sounds like" instruction on how to pronounce the name. For example, Levine suggests that the Latin name *Lychnis* sounds like "sickness." She describes this plant as short-lived, self seeding, drought tolerant and preferring full sun, and she goes on to describe the color of rose campion as "a shade of magenta so bright it's been described as floral original sin....If it were a woman, she'd be the type Seinfeld would date for her figure; then once she opened her mouth, he'd run screaming from the room."

Pruning and Training by Christopher Bricknell and David Joyce.

Published by The American Horticultural Society in 1996 this book is a thorough "how to" book for gardeners. It covers the basics of pruning and the tools and equipment needed for the job. This book also gives specific advice for each of 800 different shrubs, trees, vines and roses. For each plant listed, there is a "shape" drawing to show the natural form of the tree, and each plant has a "when to prune" section. The photographs and drawings show where to make cuts and typical problems you might encounter when pruning.

Remarkable Trees of Virginia by Nancy Ross Hugo and Jeff Kirwan with photographs by Robert Llewellyn.

The book is a result of a project started in 2004 by Hugo and Kirwan of Virginia Tech, to celebrate the trees of Virginia. The book highlights not just the biggest trees but the trees with the most remarkable stories. The spectacular photographs show just why the trees were selected, and the book is arranged in chapters of Old Trees, Historic Trees, Champion Trees, Community trees, Unique Trees, Fine specimens, Noteworthy Species, Mighty Oaks and Tree Places. Each tree photo comes with a story that introduces the specimen as if it were an old friend.

River of Doubt by Candice Miller.

While this book is not a coffee table book or a reference book on plants, it is a nonfiction book of high drama which takes place along the Amazon River. The book has passages describing the flora and fauna of the tropical jungle along the shores of the Amazon which Miller describes as "hosting an unremitting and remorseless fight for survival" for plants, animals, and fungus. The main focus of the book however is the incredible journey President Teddy Roosevelt took after his presidential defeat in 1912, to explore the River of Doubt, a tributary of the Amazon which had not been fully explored.

Why I Wake Early by Mary Oliver.

Most of the poems by Mary Oliver reflect her observations of the natural world. In this Pulitzer prize winning book, Oliver writes about beans, trout lilies, wild mustard, goldenrod, lilies, swamps, ocean

shores, bears, deer, snow geese, and the “ah, sweet-smelling glossy and colorful world...” Poetry loving gardeners will be able to immediately connect with these poems.

All of these books, with the exception of **The Meaning of Herbs**, can be found in the stacks of the Fairfax County Public Library. Those of you with a computer and a library card can reserve the books online and have them delivered to your local branch library. The library will send an e-mail when your book has arrived at the branch. The books are also available from internet retail stores, such as www.alibris.com or www.amazon.com, or some of your other favorite sites.