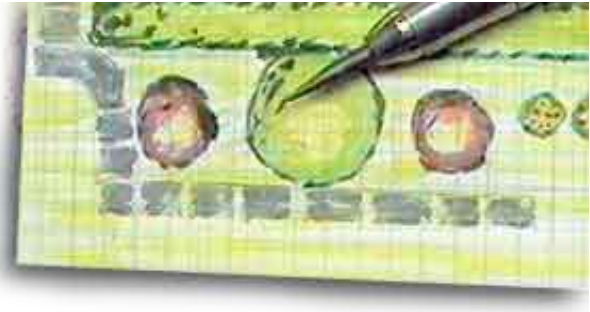


# Bobbie's Green Thumb



## **The Fireside Reader, 2007**

by Bobbie Schwartz, APLD

Plant Personalities: Choosing and Growing Plants by Character, by Carol Klein, presents a novel, yet poetic, approach to plants and is accompanied by the stunning photographs of Jonathan Buckley. Klein is the winner of six gold medals at the Chelsea Flower Show for her naturalistic plant displays. She is a passionate plantswoman and owner of Glebe Cottage Plants, pre-eminent nursery in England.

I loved the designations that Klein gives to types of plants. The Cinderellas are ephemerals and should be marked in such a way as to prevent being dug up by mistake. The bread and butters are those stalwarts that contribute to the garden for months either by their foliage or long flowering. Then there are the shooting stars that lend fleeting excitement to the garden. Other designations are the will-o-the-wisps and wafty whisperers (those that bring rustling sounds and changing light plus a touch of frivolity), prickly customers and soft touches that initiate feelings (both physical and emotional), seductive sophisticates that quietly attract attention, the dainty and detailed that are best appreciated on hands and knees, the gatecrushers (self-seeders) that can become weeds without some maintenance, and lastly, the drama queens that demand undivided attention by their color, leaf, or height.

You need to read this book to learn which plants fit each category. Looking at the photographs will create an urge to enter the garden so that you can look closely at each plant in order to fully appreciate its unique details. This is a book for thorough enjoyment as well as edification and is an excellent supplement to the books of Piet Oudolf and Michael King that were reviewed in December.

I was hoping that Nigel Colborn's Plant Solutions for Every Garden would be a book that would never leave my drawing board. Organized by type of plant, i.e. annuals, biennials, bedding, bulb, alpine, perennial, groundcover, grass, fern, climber, shrub, tree, and water plant, it is then subdivided into site or function. It is not meant to be formulaic but to stimulate planting ideas. Thus, if you need a medium sized shrub for a partial shade site, you will find a range of choices with descriptions as well as a list of suggested companion plants. All choices are accompanied by excellent photographs. The biggest problem is that the author's definition of hardy is based on the English climate, not ours. Many of the plants may be useful in other parts of the country but all too many will not be hardy in Ohio. The other problem is that the offered choices for a specific situation are not comprehensive; of course, if they were, the book would be enormous. I have my own lists, developed over the years, but I'm always looking for more alternatives. But therein lies the dilemma of trying to include every type of plant and situation.

There are also special sections on selected plant combinations to help further develop design creativity of the reader. It is the author's hope that those who read his book will understand that plants are as crucial an element of garden design as is the hardscaping and that the plants should be sympathetic to the hardscaping. In many instances, plants will help to soften what may otherwise be bright, harsh hardscaping. While trees and shrubs form the backbone of a landscape, "fillers" play an important role by creating a mood, usually through color or texture. Colborn also believes that designers frequently forget to appeal to the senses and the emotions. While these reminders are important, I believe that the book fails to fulfill its ambition. It would, perhaps, have worked better as a series of books with each one being more comprehensive.

You may love native American plants but are you a purist who wants to see them only in their native habitats or would you like to be able to integrate them into your gardens and landscapes? If you belong to the latter group, Allan Armitage's new book, Armitage's Native Plants for North American Gardens, is for you. It is also a book for those perennial, biennial and annual lovers who may not be aware that many of their beloved plants are natives. While the list of natives is extremely long, this book encompasses only those that are available, either locally or on the internet and that will grow well in gardens. Be aware that Armitage includes cultivars of native plants although purists will disagree with that inclusion. He also incorporates some of the herbal history of many of these plants but cautions against relying on them rather than modern pharmaceuticals.

Never one to keep silent in the face of zealotry, Armitage speaks out against didacticism in the landscape. He firmly rebuts the notions that natives cannot be invasive and that "exotics" are bad guys. Some people see life and its issues in terms of black and white but neither Allan nor I do; we see it as many shades of gray.

Maintenance of native plants is an issue that must be addressed. Many of these plants will suffer from too much TLC (tender, loving care) because of their evolution. Therefore, be prepared to plant them in poor soils or droughty sites and prune hard when they start to look weedy. Armitage's definition of a native is a plant that was here when the Europeans first arrived but those who wish to restrict the definition to their region may do so by reading the information provided under habitat.

The bulk of the book is an encyclopedia of native plants from A to Z, starting with Aconitum and ending with Zizia. Each entry, frequently interspersed with snippets of dry humor, includes a general description, native habitat, hardiness, and cultural and maintenance needs and some also include recommended propagation and an etymology. Most of the entries are accompanied by his excellent photographs. You may be amazed, as I was, to learn that so many of the plants in your garden are natives. The back of the book includes a lengthy list of sources and resources, a list of plant societies, some internet sites that offer useful information concerning native plants, a short bibliography, and some lists of native plants to fulfill specific needs. Like all of Armitage's books, this one is thorough and worth putting on the bookshelf.

If I could only own one *Hydrangea* book, it would be the one by Michael Dirr that was published and reviewed by me in 2004 but another handy reference with a different emphasis would be Hydrangeas: A Gardener's Guide, written by Toni Lawson-Hall and Brian Rothera. The authors are English *Hydrangea* enthusiasts who built a collection for their horticultural society in Cumbria; therefore, they discuss many species that are not hardy for anyone in zone 6 or colder.

The chapter on the use of *Hydrangea* in the garden, whether large or small, is very useful, specifically the discussion of siting and where to use specific species and cultivars. However, we Americans should read carefully because our cold winds are westerly, not easterly. There is also an extensive discussion of pH and fertilizer as to their affect on color. The authors maintain that all *Hydrangea* should be fertilized twice a year. Especially helpful is their discussion with illustrations about pruning and there is a whole chapter on propagation.

This book also touches on other aspects of *Hydrangea* culture and use, i.e. as potted plants, as cut flowers with several suggestions for prolonging their cut life, and for drying them to be used in arrangements or wreaths.

One of the most useful aspects of the book is its comparative photographs of the same cultivar in acid and alkaline soil because many of our clients will not want to go to the trouble of amending the soil in order to change the pH. Add [Hydrangeas: A Gardener's Guide](#) to your list of possible purchases.

Try as we might to keep abreast of the numerous possibilities available to us to control weeds, diseases, and pests, there is so much information out there that it is difficult to assimilate it all. In addition, there are innumerable folk remedies in circulation. Finally, Jeff Gillman, a professor and horticulture extension agent, has written a book, [The Truth about Garden Remedies](#), that will help us distinguish between hyperbole, false advertising, and the truth. All claims were investigated, sometimes with the author's original research if there were no scholarly articles in the literature.

In addition to the articles and research, Gillman gives readers knowledge of the underlying principles behind each remedy's success or failure, thus preparing us for future claims. All gardeners and landscapers want to improve plant development, but we must first start with the basic elements that affect plant growth and development and understand how they relate to each other. Gillman begins his book with a discussion of these elements and then breaks each of the elements down into sub-elements or products thusly: what it is, how it is used, the theory, the real story, and what it means to us.

Just as an example, Gillman debunks the following notions: that phosphorus promotes flowering (unless the soil is extremely deficient), that antitranspirants are long lasting (so much for defeating winter desiccation), and that hydrogels supply water as the soil dries out. I highly recommend that you buy this easy-to-read and somewhat humorous book for your reference shelf so that you can learn about the efficacy or uselessness of many common garden remedies.

The aim of [Creative Garden Lighting](#), by Michele Osborne, is demonstrating that well-designed lighting is the finishing touch for any garden and the beautiful photographs of Steven Wooster illustrate the ability of such lighting to create magical effects. The book is divided into three sections that show how lighting transforms and prolongs the use of gardens, what to highlight, and supposedly which fittings to use to achieve the desired result.

I was frustrated, however, that there were no supplementary sketches or data to amplify the text as to exactly which fixtures were used and how they were positioned. One can only guess from looking at the photographs. Osborne refers to the use of spike lights and twig lights but does not define them. These may be common terms in England but I don't think they are here in the States. This is a book that whetted my appetite to learn more about lighting but it didn't satisfy my thirst for knowledge.

Armitage, Allan, [Armitage's Native Plants for North American Gardens](#), Timber Press, Portland,

2006. Colborn, Nigel, [Plant Solutions for Every Garden](#), Timber Press, Portland, 2006.

Gillman, Jeff, [The Truth about Garden Remedies](#), Timber Press, Portland, 2006.

Klein, Carol, [Plant Personalities: Choosing and Growing Plants by Character](#), Timber Press, Portland, 2005.

Lawson-Hall, Toni and Rothera, Brian, [Hydrangeas: A Gardener's Guide](#), Timber Press, Portland, 2005.

Osborne, Michele, [Creative Garden Lighting](#), Timber Press, Portland, 2005.