

## Lamplighter article for Feb. 2018

This is the 1st in a series of interviews on using “Native Plants” in our Midtown Gardens. Perfect for getting ready for this year’s garden walk, whose theme is “**Cooper Young Goes Native**”. This month’s expert is Carol Reese, a Research Horticulture Specialist at UT’s West Tennessee AgResearch and Education Center. She is a nationally-known speaker, blending equal parts gardening knowledge, homespun wisdom and humor. Carol is the gardening and nature columnist for the *Jackson Sun*, as well as a contributor to *Horticulture Magazine*, *Tennessee Gardener*, and other publications.



### 1 **Tell us a little bit about your occupation and background.**

I have a long fancy title. I’m the UT Extension Ornamental Horticulture Specialist for west TN. It’s like having a county agent that addresses only issues of ornamental plants and I cover 31 counties instead of one, though I do a lot of state-wide things as well. My primary charge is to assist the green industry, but also to help county agents with any of their horticulture questions or programming, like teaching some of the Master Gardener classes. I do a good bit of photography, writing and editing for UT Extension communications as well, and just recently was co-chair on a new Master Gardener handbook that will be introduced statewide in 2018. I was raised on a farm near Starkville MS, which was a dairy, but is now an orchard, with its main crop being the large and tasty Asian persimmon. I managed that orchard when I went back to school in my thirties to get my horticulture degrees, so that was a lot of my dirty hands education, putting in irrigation, driving tractors, calibrating sprayers and grafting trees. I also worked at a retail garden center through those years, selling plants to customers and propagated a lot of plants from cuttings and seed.

### 2 **When and why did you become interested in Native Plants?**

From the time my mother could trust me to find my way back to the house, she turned me loose to roam the farm. Her father had been a veterinarian, and we called him Doc, but gardening was his other passion. An early memory is Doc taking me and my brothers and sisters to pick up buckeyes in the woods. When I turned 10, I got the black mare I’d been begging for, and every day I climbed on Diamond’s bare back and rode all over the farm and neighboring

farms “exploring”. I brought back flowers, nuts, pretty fungi to show my mother. One day I filled my coat pockets with soft ripe persimmons and rode home at full gallop to share, not realizing that they were liquefying with every stride. Mama just laughed, when other mothers might have spanked.

**3 How strict are you on the term “Native Plants”. What is your definition of Native Plants?**

I don't think you can know if they are native. We have this arrogant idea that we brought in all these “exotics”. If birds or hurricanes brought seeds before recorded history, are they exotics, or are they exotic only if they came in after the first Europeans? How do you take a tiny slice of time, that is, the moment the “first” European set boot on the continent as the “correct” plant palette. Did some of these plants arrive earlier over the land bridge from Asia with the first Americans? Since there was a land bridge, and now it is gone, when do we realize that the Asian plants and the American plants stemmed from the same populations and have evolved differently, but that even today, many are not all that different. It seems to me the story of the planet is told in time, and not so much in geography.

**4 Why should homeowners include native plants in their gardens?**

I'd say because many native plants are beautiful, many are useful to wildlife and many can be low maintenance. I could say the same about many plants considered to be “exotic”.

**5 How do you feel about mixing both natives and showy non-native ornamentals in a garden?**

Sure, yes, why not? I know that it has been said that insects will not feed on foliage of non-native plants. I say bogus. Many non-native plants are so closely related to our natives, that on a molecular basis they are of equal value. The Asclepias relative Gomphocarpus physocarpus (balloon plant) from South Africa is a fantastic plant for monarch butterfly caterpillar forage, as it is a large fast-growing annual easily grown from seed. On the other hand, I know of no insect that will feed on the foliage of some native plants, such as our native anisetree, *Illicium parviflorum*. You hear people bash butterfly bush, a great plant for nectaring insects and hummingbirds, because “nothing eats the foliage”. Same could be said for many native plants. Those plants can still provide cover, seeds, nectar, and anchor our

soils. I would avoid butterfly bush that is known to reseed vigorously, but many of today's offerings are bred to be sterile. Avoiding aggressive plants is advised, especially the non-native.

**6 What particular native plants stand out as “must haves” for the Midsouth region?**

Oakleaf and smooth hydrangea, anisetree, redbud, pawpaw, dogwood, coral honeysuckle, eastern red cedar, sassafras, deciduous holly, Virginia sweepspire, rabbiteye blueberry, coneflower, any and all phlox, asters, mannerly goldenrods, swamp sunflower, Texas star hibiscus, sumac, oaks, common bald cypress, little bluestem.

**7 What native plants are not recommended for small urban gardens and why?**

Some like to fill up lots of space! Sumac, sassafras and pawpaw like to form colonies, as does Virginia sweetspire. Blackeyed Susans reseed like mad. Dogwood is very picky about site, needs cool root zone and good air exchange. Sourwood is very finicky about site. Southern magnolias need to leave their “skirts down” so choose dwarf forms and place accordingly. Sweetbay drops leaves year-round.

**8 So many people want to grow natives but don't know where to buy them. What do you recommend?**

You could walk into any decent garden center and find good native plants. It is a myth that they are hard to find. Of the ones I listed above, only a few would be difficult. I'm not sure why people say they are difficult to find, I struggle to understand their motives for saying this, unless they want to convince gardeners that it is only their native plant nursery that carries them. I hope that is not the case. It is true that some of the more rare natives can only be found at the native plant nurseries.

**9 Is there anything else you would like to say about Native Plants?**

I'd like to say that there is much myth perpetuated about them. Some are easy to grow, some are not. Some are drought tolerant, some are not. Some are pest resistant, some are not. I love any mannerly, non-aggressive plant that provides beauty and wildlife benefit with low input. Some of those are native and some are not.

10 **What is the best way for interested gardeners to reach you?**

I hope you will forgive me for saying that is not information I want to share. It is not my job to offer information directly to consumers, as I already have too much to do with my current duties. You can imagine trying to answer questions to all the gardeners in the 31 counties. I do teach the Landscape Design and the Woody Plant classes for Shelby County master gardeners, and usually speak at the Spring Fling, and sometimes at the Memphis Botanic Garden. I'll be glad to talk to people one on one at these events. I also encourage them to like UT Gardens Jackson Facebook page and see when we have educational events here at West Tennessee Research and Education Center, especially our big horticulture field day Summer Celebration on the second Thursday each July. I also post my columns and gardening tidbits on my personal facebook page, but I do ask people not to use that for answering their horticultural questions. I'd have little time to garden! <https://www.facebook.com/carol.reese.376>