

Lamplighter article for April, 2018

This is the 4th 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 Suzy Askew. She just retired from the Dixon Gallery and Gardens and is the current President of the Memphis Horticultural Society.

Name: Suzy Askew
Email: siaskew@comcast.net



Tell us a little bit about your occupation and background.

I am a teacher and a gardener. I taught for about 10 years, and in the meantime I joined a the Kennedy View Garden Club here in Memphis. I started taking the Flower Show Judges Schools—thinking I would learn more about gardening—wrong-- that would be the Gardening Schools or the Conservation Schools offered by National Garden Clubs, Inc. But I learned a lot about flower arranging in the meantime. I also took every class offered and went to a lot of the Native Plant Conferences and became a member of TN Native Plant Society.

I’ve always loved plants, but was curious about design, so in my 40’s I went back to graduate school and got a degree in Landscape Architecture. I worked with neighborhood design and both public and private gardens. After 9-11, I stopped traveling and got a part time job at Lichterman Nature Center as the Plants Activity Coordinator growing native plants with volunteers. In the afternoon, I taught 12 year old boys to garden at Grizzlies Prep. Later, I took a full time job at Dixon Gallery and Gardens as the Garden’s Education and Volunteer Coordinator. I’m retiring Jan. 31, 2018. I am the 2018 President of Memphis Horticulture Society.

When and why did you become interested in Native Plants?

I grew up going out to the woods and creeks with my parents. We would wander around looking at plants. They both grew up in Houston County, TN way out in the country, so they loved getting back to their childhood places. I grew up in Corinth, MS.

What is your definition of Native Plants?

Any plant growing in the US before 1492, when Christopher Columbus landed. I used to tell my students, as ole Chris stepped off the Santa Maria, everything in from of him was native to U.S. and everything in his pockets or behind him was introduced or non native. You can usually find the date most non-natives were brought in.

How strict are you on the term “Native Plants?”

Native Plants are Non- hybridized species, naturally occurring in a particular place due to soils and weather. Also certain plants that have colonized like Queen Anne’s Lace-*Daucus carota* and are considered naturalized natives. (It all seems to sound like our immigration policy, now, doesn’t it?) I’m not quite that strict; just don’t think hybrids contribute to the insect pollination needs.

Why should homeowners include native plants in their gardens?

Natives give a sense of place. They belong here. They offer pollinators food and habitat. They are just as beautiful and interesting as hybrids. They reflect the seasonality of an area.

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

As much as I love plants, I mix. I try to find a substitute for non-native when possible. *Buxus* Boxwood- *Ilex glabra* Inkberry holly. But I still love Buxus!

What particular native plants stand out as “must haves” for the Midsouth region?
Deciduous shrubs, perennials, small trees.

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

Many of the large trees. I don't like sticker plants that cut and scratch.

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

Most local nurseries have natives mixed in, just ask, once you know what you want. Mail order the rarer items.

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

A garden is designed, green and enclosed. Start with a plan, then start deciding which natives can go into your plan. You'll be surprised how many choices there are-once you have a plan. A garden without a plan is a hot mess. And people who buy plants without a place to put them are plant collectors—trust me, I understand. I, too, collect plants and have lots of dead ones to prove my point.

What else would you like our readers to know?

The Memphis Horticultural Society will be co-hosting a Native Plant Conference Oct. _____. 10 years I have been editing a book with volunteers for Tennessee Federation of Garden Clubs that is about Native Plant Lists for Tennessee. We are going to try to finish it this summer. You will be about to go to a list-there are about 150 lists and 150 landscape worthy natives categorized. i.e. Small Trees for Containers, Bloom Red, Deep Shade, Fragrant, Bullet-Proof, Great for Kids..... Will let you know....