

John Fairey

plantsman extraordinaire

A visionary garden creator and plant explorer, John Fairey has had a significant influence on the plant palette and design aesthetic of southern gardens.

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL NOBLE

IT'S HARD TO pigeonhole John Gaston Fairey. He's probably best known for Peckerwood Garden, the internationally acclaimed oasis he created over the last 40 years on an old farmstead in Hempstead, Texas, some 50 miles northwest of Houston. But over the course of a diverse career, the 84-year-old Fairey has also made a name for himself as an artist, college professor, conservationist, nursery founder, and plant explorer with a particular interest in Mexico's flora.

Through the unique array of trees, shrubs, woody lilies, and perennials from Texas and Mexico trialed at Peckerwood and distributed through public gardens and Yucca Do Nursery—a specialty mail-order nursery Fairey cofounded in the 1980s—Fairey has expanded the palette of plants available to gardeners throughout the American South.

"John has truly been a pioneer in finding and popularizing plants from Mexico," says Tony Avent, proprietor of Plant Delights Nursery in Raleigh, North Carolina. "While John certainly wasn't the first American to botanize Mexico, his broad interest in plants other than cacti, the sheer number of trips, and his mail-order nursery outlet allowed a huge array of John's finds to be distributed far and wide—something that many prior collectors failed to do."

Acknowledgment of Fairey's accomplishments has come in the form of numer-



Over the course of his long career, John Fairey has created a significant legacy in plant exploration, conservation, new plant introduction, and garden design.

ous awards, most recently with the Scott Medal and Award from the Scott Arboretum of Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania in 2013. He has also been recognized for his teaching, earning a National Teacher's Award from the American Institute of Architects. Fairey and his former partner at

Yucca Do Nursery, Carl Schoenfeld, received the American Horticultural Society's Commercial Award in 1996 for their work.

SOUTHERN ROOTS

Fairey's straightforward explanation for his passion is, "I garden because I want someplace wonderful to live." He grew up gardening on his family's farm in rural South Carolina and recalls weeding his mother's garden in the mornings. Visits to Brookgreen Gardens near Murrells Inlet, South Carolina, as a youngster, along with exposure to a lively community of gardeners set him on a course that eventually found its greatest expression in Peckerwood Garden, one of the most ambitious and beautiful gardens and arboreta in Texas.

As a young adult, Fairey moved to Philadelphia to study painting and pursue a career as an artist. Eventually he made his way to central Texas to teach design to architecture students at Texas A&M University in College Station.

It was while exploring the byways of this section of southeast Texas that Fairey's career took a radically different route.

PECKERWOOD'S EARLY DAYS

No one who witnessed Peckerwood's humble beginnings in 1971 could have predicted that the garden would have a far-reaching influence on gardeners and garden designers in Texas and beyond. A realtor showed Fairey the property surrounding a neglected farmhouse in rural Hempstead and he

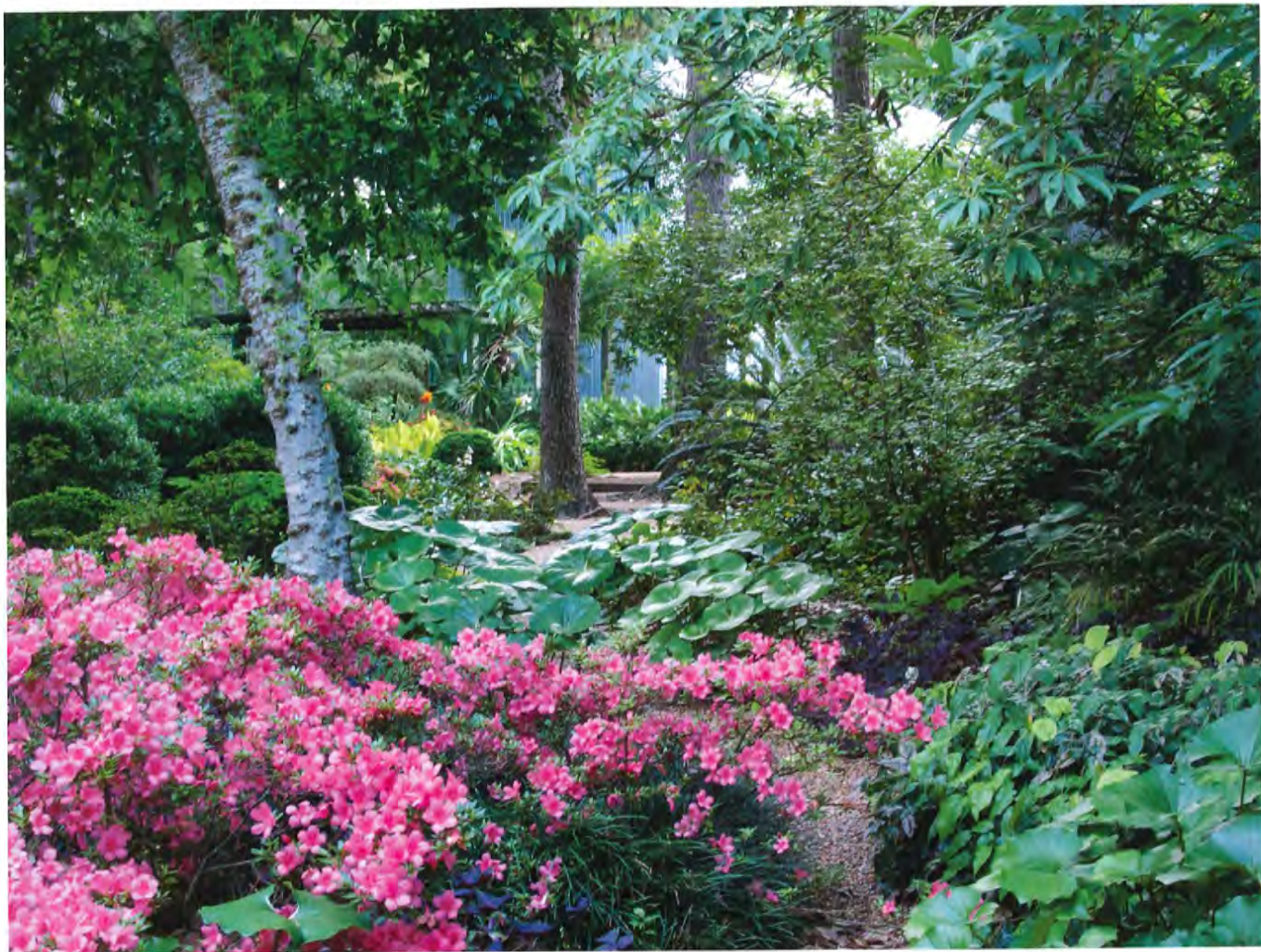


An extended porch roof shades the veranda of Fairey's house in Hempstead, Texas, above, and provides a restful place to listen to the rustling of palm fronds and view the sculptural forms of agaves and related plants in Peckerwood's dry garden, top.

glimpsed its raw potential. "The site with its clear, spring-fed brook reminded me of magical places in South Carolina where I grew up," says Fairey. "What began innocently, as a pursuit of a sense of place, fast evolved into a passion."

After the back-breaking labor of clearing weeds, briars, vines, and broken fences, a characteristically Southern garden gradually emerged, stocked with traditional plants such as camellias, azaleas, and surprise lilies (*Lycoris* spp.). Fairey brought some of these plants back from visits to South Carolina; others were pass-alongs from local gardening friends such as Mary "Mame" Kempner.

The artist in Fairey shaped yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*) and azaleas into cloud shapes floating beneath the high canopy of native pines and oaks. Inspired by Kempner and the companionship of his dog, Beauregard, Fairey dubbed the property Peckerwood after the Georgia plantation



Azaleas and ground-covering herbaceous perennials thrive in the shade of Peckerwood's woodland garden.

in the novel *Auntie Mame*, as well as for the many resident woodpeckers.

In 1983, a tornado destroyed or badly damaged many of the pines that shielded the garden from the Texas sun. Overnight, the garden's aspect changed from protected and shaded to open and sun-drenched.

With the character of the garden radically altered, Fairey was forced to adjust his approach. Needing plants that tolerate the intense heat, he began to seek out regionally native plants, aided by a 25-year friendship with Texas native plant pioneer Lynn Lowrey. According to Fairey, joining Lowrey on a 1988 botanizing trip to northern Mexico was a life-altering experience, opening up a whole new realm of plants and an appreciation for the country's botanical, ecological, and cultural riches.

HUNTING MEXICO'S FLORA

Over the next 25 years, Fairey made nearly 100 trips to Mexico, often teaming up

with horticulturists and botanists from universities, public gardens, and nurseries. During these experiences, he learned how plants adapted to their specific ecological conditions in scrublands, pine-oak forests, rainforests, and alpine meadows. He observed how magnolias could thrive beneath the high canopy of pine-oak forest in one location as well as how agaves could benefit by protection from the hot western sun on the other side of the mountain.

Traveling in isolated mountain areas required a sense of adventure and the ability to overcome obstacles such as broken-

down vehicles, hazardous terrain, and unexpected health issues. Despite these challenges, Fairey relished each trip.

Naturally, the knowledge acquired on these expeditions, along with the plants collected on them, found their way into the newly emerging garden at Peckerwood. As Fairey explained in an article published in *Pacific Horticulture* several years ago, "Because the garden is on the edge of three biogeographic regions, the piney woods, the coastal plains, and the post-oak savannah, geography provides as much variety as weather does for growing conditions. Vital to our mission is a trial garden for plants from areas that share similarly demanding conditions."

Plants and seeds from the expeditions also were shared with a wide array of public gardens, including the University of California–Berkeley, Harvard University and Smith College in Massachusetts, North Carolina State University (NCSU) in Ra-

Visiting Peckerwood

Currently the garden is open to the public for select spring and fall open days, or by appointment for groups. For information, visit www.peckerwoodgarden.org or call (979) 826-3232.



During nearly 100 plant-hunting expeditions to Mexico, Fairey collected cuttings and seeds from many promising garden plants, including Chihuahuan orchid tree (*Bauhinia macranthera*), top, blooming at high altitude in the mountains. Above: In the evenings, Fairey and fellow travelers such as Mark Bronstad of Doremus Wholesale Nursery in Warren, Texas, took inventory of each day's finds and bagged them for later propagation.

leigh, the University of California–Santa Cruz, the Chollipo Arboretum Foundation in Korea, and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in the United Kingdom.

In the early 1990s, NCSU horticulturist J.C. Raulston distributed more than 7,000 plants grown from seed collected on Fairey's Mexico expeditions. Marco Stufano, former director of horticulture for Wave Hill in New York recalls the "golden years" of these distributions to public gardens. "We at Wave Hill were fortunate to receive many of his introductions through the legendary generosity of the late J.C. Raulston, who accompanied John on many of his expeditions," says Stufano. "Those were heady moments when we unpacked John's latest finds."

Fairey put his plant-hunting skills to work for the American Cancer Society (ACS) in 1991, when he and Schoenfeld were asked to lead a Harvard University expedition to locate *Taxus globosa*, a rare form of yew native to Mexico. The ACS was interested in extracting a compound called taxol from the plant to test it for effectiveness in treatment of ovarian cancer.

In 1987, Fairey founded Yucca Do Nursery in partnership with Schoenfeld, a former Texas A&M student who had helped with the restoration of Peckerwood following the tornado. The mail-order nursery, originally located next to Peckerwood, served as a means to propagate and share some of the more promising discoveries from the trips (for more on plant introductions, see sidebar, page 26) with gardeners. Schoenfeld later became sole owner of Yucca Do and has since moved the nursery to Giddings, Texas.

THE ART OF THE GARDEN

Peckerwood has been likened to painting and to sculpture. Fairey approaches the making of the garden with equal parts intuition and practicality. "The constant pursuit of new plants for the garden design has kept us aware of the need to evolve the garden continuously. With each addition and change, new problems arise to be solved, resulting in the evolution of the garden both visually and conceptually."

Along the way, Fairey observed that some plants from northern Mexico were actually better suited to cultivation in Texas gardens than their native Texas relatives. For instance, in a planting of syc-

JOHN FAIREY'S PLANT INTRODUCTIONS

John Fairey's expeditions to Mexico have yielded scores of plants that over time have become garden standards in the South and beyond. Many were originally released through Yucca Do Nursery, but others have been selected, trialed, and introduced through public gardens and other nurseries.

Among them are many agaves and related plants such as yuccas, dasylirions, Mexican lilies (*Beschorneria* spp.), and hesperaloes. Fairey's introductions include *Beschorneria septentrionalis* (USDA Hardiness Zones 7–10, AHS Heat Zones 10–7), which bears drooping clusters of pinkish-red flowers with green tips on a four-foot flower

spike, and *Agave gentryi* 'Jaws', a four-foot-tall agave named for the sharktoothlike spines on its leaves.

Fairey has a soft spot for rain lilies (*Zephyranthes* spp.), a genus of bulbous plants with grasslike evergreen foliage that bloom in response to seasonal rainfall. He has collected and grown dozens of selections, but a pink-and-white-flowered one with variable patterning, called LaBufa Rosa Group, is probably the most prominent of these introductions.

Among Fairey's tree finds is an unusual and rather tender magnolia called *Magnolia tamaulipana* 'Bronze Sentinel' (Zones 8–9, 9–7) that grows to 30 or 40 feet tall and bears creamy-white flowers in spring. Its new foliage has a purple-bronze hue that matures to deep green.

Peckerwood has instituted a seed distribution program to ensure that the rare and worthy plants growing in the garden continue to be available to researchers and gardeners. Plants are also sold at the garden's onsite nursery.

—B.N.



Zephyranthes LaBufa Rosa Group



Magnolia tamaulipana

moors that were subjected to a deep freeze, only the one from the Mexican state of Nuevo Leon survived.

Fairey also developed specific planting techniques to cultivate plants capable of withstanding the assaults of excessive moisture, drought, heat, cold, and rapid swings in temperature, all of which are characteristic of the continental Texas climate.

A good example of this is his dry gardens, which are mounded and mulched with gravel—a trick Fairey learned from Lowrey—to get the plants above the difficult native soil and to provide excellent drainage. Agaves, beschornerias, dasylirions, yuccas, palms, and other plants from arid regions thrive in these beds, which also provide protection from the region's

temperature extremes. These techniques have informed gardeners in similar situations throughout the South.

Fairey tells his art students that light "is a free commodity and should be used all the time," and he has adapted that advice for his placement of plants in the landscape. In northern Mexico, he observed agaves and other woody lilies thriving under oaks, so at Peckerwood, accordingly, direct light is filtered through the highest canopy of oaks and pines to become dappled light playing off horizontal branches and vertical shafts of the understory trees and shrubs such as magnolias and summersweets (*Clethra* spp.). Light ricochets off the swirling fronds of palms and spherical spikes of yuccas and agaves before finally being absorbed by the more saturated colors of perennial foliage and flowers near ground level.

Many shades of blue pervade the garden, in its palms, agaves, yuccas, nolinias, and dasylirions, providing a cooling respite in sunny dry areas as well as in the woodland. Fairey reminds his visitors that blue is psychologically cooling and that the movement of leaves is equally soothing to the soul.

Fairey also pays particular attention to space, placing plants so they form a series of intimate areas, some created with undulating forms, others with abstracted divides, each a part of a series of experiences. Plants are shaped to frame a vista or left protruding beyond the frame, requiring the visitor to slow down and gently pull the branches apart in order to proceed. "I think of gardening as an aesthetic experience involving all the senses," says Fairey. "You are forced in this garden to touch and feel and smell, whether you want to or not."

Visitors also note the contrasting areas of the garden, with the north side of the house wooded and dark and the south side dry and sparse, with a minimum of easy-to-maintain plants. Three *Nolina nelsonii* are lined up by the pump house with their slender spiky leaves playing off the vertical ribbing on the Galvalume siding, inspired by vernacular buildings fast disappearing from the rural Texas landscape. The house, designed by architect Gerald Maffei, one of Fairey's colleagues at Texas A&M, faces south to catch the winter sun and features a deep porch roof that shields the house and veranda in the summer.

The view from the veranda features palms constantly in motion from the prevailing Gulf breezes, the rustle of their leaves, helping to screen the house and garden from the sounds of the nearby road.

A SOLID FOUNDATION

The original seven-acre property has grown to 19 acres and the nonprofit Peckerwood Garden Foundation, which Fairey established in 1999, has acquired another 20 acres that was formerly the site of the nursery. The added acreage will be crucial to the garden's future for a number of reasons, including as the site of an arboretum

Sources

Plant Delights Nursery, Raleigh, NC. (919) 772-4794.

www.plantdelights.com.

Woodlanders, Inc., Aiken, SC. (803) 648-7522. www.woodlanders.net.

Yucca Do Nursery, Giddings, TX. (979) 542-8811. www.yuccado.com.

tween Mexico and the United States and to raise awareness on both sides of the border about the richness of the flora of northeastern Mexico. He also wants to

It is the art and science, as much as the beauty and conservation value of Peckerwood that has encouraged organizations like the Garden Conservancy to take an interest in the garden's long-term preservation. The Peckerwood Garden Foundation is helping plan for a future that will not only share Fairey's artistic vision but develop research and education programs to introduce plants that can enrich gardens and public landscapes in the region as a changing climate and diminishing resources intensify the challenges for people and plants.

"Peckerwood is a laboratory garden testing a wide range of 'new' plants," says



The gap created by a large oak felled by a tornado in 1983 made an opening for Peckerwood's first dry garden. A slashing blue wall, inspired by the hues of painter Frida Kahlo's house in Mexico City, created a backdrop for a garden that features the plants and stimulating visual culture of Mexico.

for its expanding collection of oaks. Mexico is the epicenter for oak distribution in the world and about half of the 230 oaks in the garden are Mexican species. The garden's staff has grown along with the garden, rising to four full-time employees and aided by scores of dedicated, enthusiastic volunteers.

One of Fairey's goals with Peckerwood is to provide a cultural bridge be-

draw attention to overgrazing and other economic pressures that are threatening the already fragile ecosystems.

Fairey's horticultural legacy encompasses plant exploration, conservation, garden design, and the introduction of a new palette of plants for American gardeners, yet for him the culmination of all these activities are reflected in his vision for Peckerwood.

Fairey. "It is a garden with a mission to encourage other gardeners to see a beauty in landscape that is consistent with our plants and climate. It is a garden that looks to the future, not to the past." 🌿

Formerly director of preservation with the non-profit Garden Conservancy, Bill Noble is a garden designer, consultant, and freelance writer based in Norwich, Vermont.