

Garden Conservancy salutes 25th anniversary with gorgeous book of gardens



A new book, 'Outstanding American Gardens,' celebrates the Garden Conservancy and its Open Days program: Check out some of the magnificent private gardens.

Teresa Woodard, Chicago Tribune

When garden writer Page Dickey opened her private New York garden and coaxed 110 others to do the same for the [Garden Conservancy's](#) first Open Days event — which allows visitors access to some of the finest private gardens across the country — little did she know that 20 years later she would be editing "Outstanding American Gardens" (Stewart, Tabori & Chang), a lavish volume showcasing many favorites among the 3,000 participating gardens. The book celebrates the garden preservation group's 25th anniversary and its Open Days program.

"The whole idea of sharing a garden is magical," says Dickey, who co-founded Open Days in 1995 with gardening friend Penelope Maynard.

"Being a gardener myself and working very hard on my garden to make it beautiful, there's something thrilling about sharing it — especially with like-minded people," says Dickey, whose Duck Hill garden in North Salem, N.Y. (which she has since sold) is featured among the collection and includes design elements adopted from her own tours of notable American gardens.

"I've been a visitor for many, many years, and there is rarely a garden where you don't learn something," says Dickey. "By going around and seeing other gardens, it broadens your knowledge and vision."



Susan Burke garden in Nantucket, Mass. Burke adopted an idea from fellow master gardener George Schoellkopf to dig a "ha-ha," or trench, beneath the porch to not obstruct the view of Nantucket harbor. Here, she filled this hidden space with a double-border of roses, poppies, mallows, gaura, Joe-pye weed and hydrangea. From "Outstanding American Gardens." (Marion Brenner / Stewart, Tabori & Chang)

Inspired by England's [National Gardens Scheme charity garden tours](#), Dickey and Maynard organized the first Open Days tour as a fundraiser for the conservancy's garden preservation projects.

"It was a smashing success," says Dickey, "and went on to become a national program." Thanks to hundreds of volunteers, the Garden Conservancy now has expanded Open Days to 20 states, stretched the schedule from March to November, and welcomed 75,000 guests. In "Outstanding American Gardens," Dickey showcases 50 diverse gardens, including eight of the conservancy's own preservation gardens. The coffee-table book is filled with spectacular photographs by Marion Brenner that let armchair gardeners experience their magnificence.

"That's the beauty of American gardens — that there's so much diversity," she says. Diversity indeed. The gardens profiled in the book range in style from traditional — like the historic Charleston, S.C., garden of Chicagoans Cindy and Ben Lenhardt to contemporary desert ones like Ellen and John Stiteler's colorful courtyard gardens in Phoenix; and vary in size from landscape architect Joseph Marek's jewel box garden in Santa Monica, Calif., to sweeping estate gardens including three Chicago-area greats: Camp Rosemary in Lake Forest, John and Neville Bryan's Crab Tree Farm in Lake Bluff, and Peggy and Jack Crowe's walled garden in Lake Forest.

At Camp Rosemary, a passionate hands-on gardener (who wishes to remain anonymous) never tires of visitors as she annually opens her garden and its 21 garden rooms for the Open Days program.



The Gardens at Digging Dog Nursery in Albion, Calif.: Brie, a member of this nursery's welcoming committee, poses in front of a perennial bed designed by husband-and-wife owners Gary Ratway and Deborah Whigham. From "Outstanding American Gardens." (Krause, Johansen / Stewart, Tabori & Chang)

"What's the point of having all of this," she tells Dickey in the book, "if you can't share it?" According to Dickey, Camp Rosemary is one of the country's great estate gardens and offers plenty of inspiration, including its green allee of linden trees and the "to die for" pots interspersed throughout the property.

Crab Tree Farm is another true creation of its owners, according to Dickey. Neville Bryan tends the boxwood-lined vegetable and cutting garden, while her husband, John, plays with vistas and follies on the 100-acre property overlooking Lake Michigan.

Besides diversity, Dickey says American gardens embrace a "spirit of originality" that's not hampered by tradition and rules. Their creators find inspiration from others' gardens, their native surroundings and their own imaginations.

At Hollister House in Washington, Conn., creator George Schoellkopf borrowed a hedge-rooms concept from his tours of England's famed Sissinghurst gardens. He surrounds his 1760 farmhouse with varying rectangular spaces and exuberantly fills them with colorful American plants.

In Hempstead, Texas, at Peckerwood Garden, painter and architecture professor John Fairey draws on his artistic background and his 100 botanizing trips to Mexico to inspire the naturalistic plantings of his extraordinary plant collection.



"John is quite a modernist who not only has a fascinating collection of preserved plants but also places them in stunning ways with art and architecture," says Dickey.

At the Pearl Fryar Topiary Garden in Bishopville, S.C., Dickey says artist Fryar used a chain saw and his extraordinary imagination to create Seussical-shaped topiaries from discarded shrubs. She says his goal was to "show that an African-American man could win the Yard-of-the-Month award from the Bishopville Iris Garden Club." Today, the garden, featured on the book's cover, has far surpassed its original goal — not only spurring neighbors to create their own topiaries but also inspiring visitors from around the world.

"If you drive down the street to Pearl Fryar's, every house now has a topiary," says Dickey. "Everybody got the bug watching Pearl Fryar."

Dickey says some ideas are born from natural disasters. When [Hurricane Sandy](#) brought down 50 trees on Ed and Vivian Merrin's seven-acre garden in Cortlandt Manor, N.Y., she says Ed admired the beautiful roots of one of the big oak trees and said, "Let's make lemonade out of lemons." Thus, the stumpery of artfully arranged tree stumps was born.

Dickey says another distinctive trait of American gardens is their creators' increasing consciousness for native landscapes.

"Americans are embracing plants that do well in their specific habitats rather than plants that take an enormous amount of coddling," says Dickey. One Midwestern example is the Milwaukee garden of Hattie and Ted Purtell, who restored a prairie with native plants including asters, rudbeckia, echinacea and goldenrod.

Open Days 2016: Check out the Garden Conservancy's 2016 Open Days schedule on its [website](#).

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