Better Look South: Why the Future of Eastern American Forests Depends on Places Like Alabama

William Finch, Finch Conservation, 9:00AM-9:50AM

E.O. Wilson, the great evolutionary biologist and the “father of biodiversity,” called Alabama North America’s Amazon. Alabama is the most biologically diverse state east of the Mississippi River. It’s the national center of native tree diversity. Seriously. Alabama has 40 species of oaks. A single 100-acre hillside in the Red Hills of South Alabama may have 25 or more. Alabama is the national center of magnolia, buckeye and likely ash and maple diversity. It’s the global center of hickory diversity. Alabama and Georgia together represent the center of azalea diversity. It’s the national center of woody vine diversity.

And not just the forests. A few hundred acres of Alabama longleaf pine forest has more grass diversity than the entirety of the Kansas Flint Hills. Alabama is the global center of sunflower diversity, and northeast Alabama likely has the greatest concentration of trillium species in the world. Not to mention carnivorous plants, but you’re getting the picture. Understanding why Alabama and the southeast are so biodiverse will be critical for the future of more northern areas of the country because Alabama’s climate is heading north. This will be a fascinating talk of past climate change and current and a look at what we can expect in the decades to come.

William Finch is the Founding Director of Paint Rock Forest Research Center as well as a writer, conservationist and environmental consultant. He’s also been conservation director for the The Nature Conservancy in Alabama, and was director of Mobile Botanical Gardens. With his deep knowledge of natural history and ecosystems, Bill weaves solutions for complex and challenging projects with a long vision to the future. His consulting projects range from small conservation easements to corridor planning along the nation’s most biologically diverse rivers. All are taken on with a deep love and enthusiasm for conservation possibilities.

His award-winning garden column is one of the longest running in the country and he has a two-hour live radio show every Sunday morning from 9:00 to 11:00 central on 106.5 FM (streaming at FMTALK1065.com). He has appeared in numerous documentaries.

Native Plants: The Weird, the Wild, and the Wonderful!

Greg Tepper, Laurel Hill Cemetery, 9:50AM-10:40PM

This talk highlights the native plants’ broad spectrum of uniqueness from the macabre insect-eating pitcher plants to the enchanting pink lady’s slipper orchids. Packed with intriguing facts and delightful gardening anecdotes, you’ll learn about the WEIRDEST, WILDEST, and MOST WONDERFUL native plants!
Gregg Tepper is a professional horticulturist, lecturer, consultant, and life-long native plant enthusiast. He has been in the public horticulture industry for over 30 years and has helped steward, guide, and promote various public gardens including Mt. Cuba Center and Delaware Botanic Gardens at Pepper Creek.

He is the Senior Horticulturist at the Arboretum at Laurel Hill in Philadelphia, PA, comprised of two historic cemetery properties totaling 265 acres, where he co-manages the horticulture interns and staff. His primary focus is on creating and stewarding multiple ecologically-sound display garden areas at both properties including the Rock Garden, the historic Medallion Garden, the award-winning Chapel Gardens and Nature’s Sanctuary, a multiple-award-winning SITES Gold certified green burial landscape. His work brings him much joy through the many opportunities to educate the public, collaborate with fellow public gardens and work closely with specialty nurseries to custom grow vast collections of unique and garden-worthy plants that, through the building of diverse plant communities, create what he calls “gardens to feel good about”.

Gregg has lectured extensively in the United States as well as the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew and Wisley in Great Britain. He is co-author of the popular book “Deer-Resistant Native Plants for the Northeast” and is currently working on two new books, “Mirabelle visits a Garden: A Native Plant Garden Adventure”, a co-authored book for children about native plants and their many wildlife benefits and “The Sensory Appeal of Native Plants: A Wildflower Celebration”. His happiest pastimes are discovering new plants, scouring on-line plant, shrub, and tree catalogs, stewarding his own city garden, and reading about his favorite subject, Horticulture.

The Genus Formerly Known as Aster

Mark Wessel, Gardens Alive, 11:10AM-12:00PM

Asters are workhorses in the Autumn Garden. They require minimal effort and provide maximum color and beauty. They are also great nectar and pollen sources for native and non-native bees, wasps, butterflies, flies and other insects. We will explore the genus Aster with an emphasis on species that occur in the Ohio Valley and include some of the common cultivars available to the home gardener. We will also discuss how the genus was recently divided and touch on key characteristics that will help you identify them in the wild.

Raised on a small farm near New Richmond Ohio, Mark Wessel grew up surrounded by farms, fields and wilderness. His parents, both lovers of the outdoors cultivated Mark’s interest in nature. Soon after college, Mark started a decades long career of finer gardening on private estates in Cincinnati. This led to many opportunities to garden in various parts of the country and Italy.

Ten years ago, Mark started working for the Gardens Alive family of brands, first as the Research Farm manager, then transitioning to the Director of Horticulture Research. Much of his time is spent meeting with plant breeders from around the world looking for new fruits, vegetables and ornamental plants that the Gardens Alive customers can grow successfully. In his spare time, Mark gardens with wife in Madeira, enjoys birdwatching and wandering the fields and forest observing nature. He is a participating member in various organizations including the International Plant Propagators Association, Perennial Plant Association, North American Fruit Explorers, North American Rock Gardening Association and several others.
Understanding Cultivated Native Selections

Ryan McEnaney, Bailey Nurseries, 1:00PM – 1:50PM
This session explores the phenomenon of cultivated native plants, their benefits, and the ecological impact on the surrounding habitat. By reviewing a combination of scientific research and anecdotal narrative, Ryan will provide a look at how native selections fit into a modern landscape and what data shows about their comparison to the species. In addition to the background on native selections, we will look at a selection of exceptional varieties available in the marketplace and how to use them in the landscape.

Ryan McEnaney is a garden designer, author, and fifth-generation horticulturist at Bailey, his family’s nursery. He also serves as spokesperson for their company’s consumer brands: Endless Summer® Hydrangeas, First Editions® Shrubs & Trees, and Easy Elegance® Roses. Ryan is passionate about connecting people to nature and encouraging home gardeners to enjoy digging in the dirt. He travels the country educating homeowners on how to be successful in the garden and has been featured in publications such as Better Homes & Gardens, HGTV Magazine, Martha Stewart Living, Real Simple, and more. Ryan’s approach revolves around making gardening fun, breaking down barriers, and creating a welcoming space to collaborate. His first book, “Field Guide to Outside Style,” helps home gardeners discover their own style for designing their outdoor space.

The Secret of Light in the Forest

William Finch, Finch Conservation, 1:40PM – 2:40PM
Light (in ways you never imagined) is the foundation of forests and gardens. Here’s what forests, savannas and meadows can teach us about how to better live with and use sunlight.

Mysterious Moths; Growing for the Darker Side of Butterflies

Jim McCormac, Botanist, Author, 3:10PM – 4:00PM
Our enchantment with butterflies isn’t surprising. These daytime flyers are easily observed and collectively encompass a rainbow palette of colors punctuated with ornate patterns. However, their close relatives the moths overwhelm butterflies in species diversity and sheer numbers. Most moths are nocturnal and largely out of sight and mind. Nonetheless, they are one of the most important animal groups. Moths are inextricably intertwined with native plants, bats, birds, and the whole of the eastern deciduous forest ecosystem. They play an enormous role in the pollination of native plants and over the eons have spurred the evolution of myriad defensive plant compounds to ward off caterpillar herbivory. In addition, they are often far more interesting than butterflies, both visually and behaviorally. This talk will be a pictorial journey into an intriguing and little-known world that unfolds all around us. We can greatly benefit the ecosystem around us by “moth-gardening” in our yards.

Jim McCormac Jim worked for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources for 31 years as a botanist, and later specializing in wildlife diversity projects for the Division of Wildlife. He has authored or coauthored six books, including Birds of Ohio (Lone Pine 2004); and Wild Ohio: The Best of Our Natural Heritage (Kent State University Press 2009). The latter won the 2010 Ohioana Book award. He is a coauthor of the Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas II book. His book, Gardening for Moths, in collaboration with Chelsea Gottfried, was released in February 2023. Jim writes a column, Nature, for the Columbus Dispatch, and regularly publishes a natural history blog. He has written numerous articles in a variety of publications and has delivered hundreds of presentations throughout the eastern United States. He was named 2015 Conservation Communicator of the Year by the Ohio League of Sportsmen. Jim is an avid photographer, shooting a range of natural history subjects. He has had hundreds of photos published in various forums, including the TV show Jeopardy!