Coreopsis verticillata 'Zagreb'

Image by Rick Peterson

Northwest Horticultural Society
SOUTH AMERICAN CACTI FOR PNW GARDENS

Words and Images by Daniel Sparler

Cleistocactus strausii
Hats off to South America for its vast horticultural endowment, from *Alstroemeria* to *Zephyranthes*, that graces gardens all around our Salish Sea. Fuchsias and petunias, brugmansias and nasturtiums, abutilons and salvias: This botanical bonanza bedizens beds and borders in chromatic exuberance that endures for months. And that’s just a portion of our neighboring continent’s vegetative generation: Let’s hear three cheers for Chile’s flowering trees (*Azara*! *Embothrium*! *Eucryphia*!) and belt out bravos for Bolivia’s begonias. Often overlooked among this abundance is an arena no less commendable although rather more prickly: South American cacti, many of which are relatively easy to grow (in containers) and surprisingly eager to reward us with fetching flowers.

A cactus is a curious thing, perhaps earning a gardener’s begrudging respect as a spiny, stalwart, solitary survivor, but rarely engendering the affection or passion of rose enthusiasts, despite the latter’s thorns. In this country, the concept of cactus often conjures images of Arizona, perhaps of soaring saguaros in the Sonoran Desert lifting their strong arms in defiance of the searing summer sky. This was the case for me, if I thought of cacti at all, before the turn of the millennium. But then my terminal case of PAA (Plant Acquisition Addiction) shifted its focus to succulents, and I began to collect agaves and aloes, pachypodiums and cactus. I learned to admire my spiny friends for the austere beauty of their form. When my cacti began to bloom, it dawned on me that the most reliable — which also boasted the flashiest flowers — were those with South American roots.

While today Mexico and adjacent portions of the US Southwest host the highest concentration of endemic cactus species, this wasn’t always the case. The “core cacti,”
members of the botanical family Cactaceae that have strongly succulent stems, are thought to have emerged and evolved in the central Andes of South America (Peru and Bolivia) about 25 million years ago. It would be another 10 million years before they migrated north across the water into what is now Mexico (North and South America were not yet joined by the Central American land bridge).

Before we spotlight my favorite South American cacti for Pacific Northwest gardens, let’s indulge in a brief overview of Cactaceae. Of its approximately 1500 species, about 99% belong to one of two “core” groups mentioned above: subfamily Opuntioideae (opuntias) and subfamily Cactoideae (prototypical cacti, which may be globular, columnar, arborescent or epiphytic). The handful of oddball remainders includes one distinctive, easy-to-grow tropical species that is commercially available, *Pereskia aculeata*, the lemon-vine plant, whose large succulent leaves in various shades of yellow, pink, orange and green don’t give off any sort of cactus vibe — until your fingers find the clustered spines protruding from the stems.

Apropos opuntias, commonly called prickly pears, the enormous genus of around 180 species is the most far-ranging...
and cold hardy of all cacti, endemic to most of the Western hemisphere from the interior of British Columbia down to the southern tip of Patagonia. The rather homely *Opuntia fragilis* is the only cactus native to our wet west side of the Cascades (although several additional species call Eastern Washington home). It can be found on a few sandy bluffs of Whidbey Island, in the San Juans and in several spots near Sequim. I’ve tried growing it and a few other cold-hardy opuntias in the ground on several occasions, but each time they’ve rotted due to winter wet even though I’d given them an elevated bed loaded with gravel and grit. Clearly, container culture is the way to go.

South American cacti abound in nearly all habitats of their native continent except the wetter portions of southern Chile and parts of the Amazon basin. Of potential interest to Pacific Northwest gardeners are plants from three distinct climate zones: 1) chilly Andean slopes of Peru, Bolivia and Argentina; 2) hot, rocky outcrops on winter-dry plains of northern Argentina and Paraguay; and 3) humid tropical coastal areas from Brazil north to the Caribbean. Let’s explore examples from each zone, all of which adapt well to container culture and provide many years of pleasure if their basic needs are met: Keep them dry in winter and water liberally in summer.
1) Two cold-hardy genera worth seeking out are *Cleistocactus* and *Oreocereus*. Both are reported to endure temperatures down to -10°C (14° F), although I schlep mine inside an unheated garage during a protracted deep freeze. My favorites here are *C. strausii*, commonly called “silver torch”, which sends up several architecturally handsome, tall and slender columns, and two *Oreocereus* species, *O. celsianus* and *O. trolli*, both of which are aptly called “old man of the mountains” due to the thick white wool that covers their stout, 15-inch frames.

2) Tolerant of light frosts (high 20’s F) are species and their many hybrids in the generously blooming genera *Echinopsis* and *Parodia*. The former, commonly called “hedgehog cacti” (the botanical name is composed of Greek elements meaning “like a hedgehog”), produce lusciously large blossoms on compact bodies. *E. spachiana* graces me in July with several showy snow-white flowers atop a 20-inch column, while *E. huascha* hybrids (usually marketed as *Trichocereus grandiflorus*) produce on their squat columnar bodies a bevy of enormous blossoms in a zany array of hot colors. In contrast, the compact and globose *Parodia* species (often marketed as *Notocactus* or *Wigginsia*) generate more demure but equally attractive funnel-shaped, satiny yellow or pinkish flowers that frequently sport a tiny red button (the stigma) in the center.

3) From the humid tropics come the most flamboyant flowers of all: the epiphytic (growing on trees) orchid cacti, usually marketed as “epiphyllums” even though they bear little if any heritage from the genus *Epiphyllum*. The scores of named cultivars in circulation today are hybrids so complex their parentage is lost in the mists of time but most likely hail from species of *Disocactus* and *Selenicereus*. These stunning beauties, which throw out gargantuan blossoms in a dizzying range of hues, require regular water, rich soil that is freely draining, and protection from full-on summer sun. Bright, indirect light is ideal. Although I’ve found they tolerate an occasional light frost, it’s best to overwinter them in a cool, sunny room.

*Epiphyllum with white flowers*

Daniel Sparler creates the Horticulturally Yours column (www.northwesthort.org/horticulture) and serves on the NHS board.
When I think of the Pacific Northwest, I think of fern gully. Big leaves, mossy trees, ferns, iridescent shades of green. It is our iconic look. But really, that’s a very specific part of Washington. Much of Washington, including the Puget Sound, is quite dry in the summer. I think our collective knowledge of native plants is skewed towards these moist woodland settings, and we need better working knowledge of native plants that thrive in the summer-dry. I’ll share a bit of what I’ve learned here.
Spring presents verdancy that looks like it will stretch on forever. Lawns are green and everything is flowering at once. I’m out weeding in early May and big clods of soil come up, rather than just the weed roots. April had record-breaking rainfall this year. The lushness is confusing. This long period of relative wetness lulls us into a false sense of “We are in England,” and we often end up planting gardens that are too thirsty. Or we plant gardens that look great in spring but turn lifeless in summer. Or some of our gardens do look good in summer but require major irrigation to prop them up.

Plants that wear summer well
Out of ecological values, practicality, and laziness, I aim to design gardens that require little to no supplemental summer irrigation. Native plants can help us here. They know the Pacific Northwest better than anyone else. And some of them wear all the seasons well — shrugging off both hot dry summers and long wet winters.

Incorporating a large proportion of native plants into gardens is a win-win. Native plants are adapted for here and thrive with little to no care. They aesthetically connect our gardens to this region. If you choose a lot of native plants, the garden will look more like it belongs here. There is an inherent homey feeling in this. And native plants, having co-evolved with pollinators and wildlife here, are the best servants and hosts for PNW fauna. I typically try to incorporate 50% or more native plants in a design. Win for us, win for other creatures.

Evergreen native plants do the work
But before I start, I’m dialing in the specificity further to evergreen or nearly evergreen native plants. These plants hold weeds back, cover the ground (to keep water in), and require less cutback, all while providing wildlife habitat. A matrix of evergreen grasses, perennials and shrubs can hold together...
your garden. This allows you to be more adventurous with flowers and ephemerals, not depending on them for structure or to cover the ground.

Succession planting is another approach for keeping the ground covered with a series of flowering and leafing plants. It is a relay race of plants trading off roles that can be amazing but is also hard to get just right. For most people, an evergreen matrix of planting with seasonal bursts coming out of it is easier to achieve and is also very rewarding.

**Native plants for sun**

I look to the mountains and prairies as the most analogous to our urban summer – dry situations. Native grasses are stars in this regard. Most of these, with a bit of summer irrigation, will stay green. Or they will turn golden if left fully unirrigated in the summer. They will keep a structural presence, hold back weeds, and resume growing in the wet season.

The grasses I’ll mention in this paragraph are all cool season, meaning they grow and flower before the hotter summer temperatures. They are also clump-forming, meaning they grow where you put them and don’t run like lawn grasses do. *Festuca roemeri* (Roemer’s fescue), a blue-green airy grass, is a staple of our Puget Sound prairies. *Carex pachystachya* (Chamisso sedge) is another great performer, being somewhat evergreen with bright yellow-green tufts to about 16”. Cut back in fall and it will grow back for an almost year-round presence. *Carex tumulicola* (foothill sedge), makes a fountain of dark green to about 18” wide. *Koeleria macrantha* (prairie Junegrass) grows upright to 24” tall and 12” wide with fluffy flowers around June.

If you’d like a lawn that stays green with much less water, look to *Carex pansa* (sand dune sedge). This sedge can be mowed to be turf-like or left unmowed for a low meadowy effect. Northwest Meadowscapes and Pro Time Lawn Seed, a
couple of our wonderful native meadow seed providers, can give you more information on native meadow grass species to replace a lawn.

Let us not forget about the native evergreen herbaceous perennials. *Erigeron glaucus* (seaside daisy) forms a blue-green mat with fairly continuous purple blooms over summer. *Eriophyllum lanatum* (wooly sunflower) carpets a space in silver, with yellow daisy blooms through summer. *Epilobium* sp. (California fuchsia, synonomous *Zauschneria* sp.), an honorary native, flowers exuberantly into late fall when most other plants are getting tired. In part sun, *Iris douglasiana* (Douglas iris) performs reliably, creating a coarse evergreen grassy tuft about 24” tall and wide; the texture makes a nice foil to finer grasses.

For sculpture in a dry, sunny, well-drained spot, look to *Arctostaphylos* (manzanitas). *Arctostaphylos* ‘Pacific Mist’ is a silvery spreading groundcover, up to 3’ tall by 6’ wide. *Arctostaphylos × media* (media manzanita), a tidy groundcover, is a cross between our natives *A. uva-ursi* (kinnikinick or bear berry) and *A. columbiana* (hairy manzanita). California’s sculptural *Arctostaphylos* shrubs or (in time) small trees, are so beautiful. Oregon State University has a helpful study on which cope best with our winters. *Arctostaphylos* ‘Howard McMinn’ is a good choice and readily available, more spreading than tall.

**Native plants for shade**

In shady areas that dry out in summer, many native plants are summer deciduous, preferring to conserve energy when
water is scarce. But a number of plants keep their leaves during the hot dry time. *Mahonia* (now *Berberis*) *nervosa* (creeping Oregon grape) grows up to a couple feet tall, and spreads well. It’s a bit scratchy along a narrow path. The driest/hottest tolerant *Mahonia* is *M. aquifolium* (tall Oregon grape, now *Berberis aquifolium*), growing 5 – 15’ tall. The compact selection, *Mahonia aquifolium* ‘Compacta’, maxes out at around 3’ tall. *Carex obnupta* (slough sedge), a large 3’ × 3’ evergreen sedge, prefers wetness but wears summer drought without apparent complaint. *Asarum caudatum* (wild ginger) carpets the ground with dark glossy green leaves, holding a lush look through relative drought.

This is just the start
Look on your hikes and in gardens and parks for native plants that might have a place in your garden, especially look in the summer and winter. Where are they growing? How do they look during these stressful times?

This is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of native plants for sunny and dry gardens. Working with native plants need not be limiting. And for the old staples (lookin’ at you, sword fern) it can be a fun challenge — how can we use the same frequently used plants in a new way? Or if not in a new way, we can aim to plant in such a seamless way that nobody knows where the garden ends and where the wider world continues. 🌿

*Jonathan Hallet is a Seattle-based landscape architect, and his practice, Beautifier, aims to make ecologically-beneficial gardens with feelings. www.beautifier.us*
I find summer to be a great time to catch up on my garden reading, heading for a comfortable chair in my cool basement or the air-conditioned Miller Library. My attention span is short this time of year, so articles from my favorite gardening magazines are the perfect fit.

At the top of that list is *Hortus*, a Welsh quarterly magazine with the appropriate sub-title: *A Gardening Journal*. This is a magazine for “lively-minded” (according to hortus.co.uk) gardeners who are keen on good writing. Illustrations are few. Photographs are rare and always in black and white.

Like most horticulture publications, there are articles about specific plants or gardens. What makes *Hortus* different are the engaging biographies, histories and even works of fiction, poetry, and humor. As a librarian, I especially appreciate the in-depth book reviews, including those of older books, an important guide for additions to the Miller Library.

David Wheeler is the founder (in 1987), proprietor, and publisher of this successful publication, well-respected and enjoyed around the English-speaking world. He is also the editor and has been very successful at getting some of the best writers in Britain, North America, and elsewhere to contribute over the years, including such horticultural stars as Beth Chatto, Penelope Hobhouse, and Noel Kingsbury.

Simon Dorrell is the art editor, and creator of most of the simple yet elegant drawings. Together with Wheeler, they spent nearly 30 years revitalizing the Arts and Crafts garden at Bryan’s Ground, just across the border in England, before moving to southwest Wales last year. These efforts are chronicled in each issue. They also offer a small number of select garden tours, this year to Morocco and southwest Scotland.

While the magazine is available to read at the Miller Library, for something to borrow, I recommend *Hortus Revisited: A Twenty-first Birthday Anthology*, published in 2008, which includes nearly 50 favorite articles from the early years of the publication. Wheeler sums up why he began *Hortus* in the introduction: “There seemed no natural home for the well-turned garden essay, writing that favoured aesthetics over practicalities, and was a pleasure to read for its own sake.”

Brian Thompson is the manager and curator of horticultural literature for the Elisabeth C. Miller Library.
Thank you to our Patrons!

The Lecture Program would not be possible without the tremendous support of our Patrons. Their generosity helps NHS provide an outstanding educational program for Northwest gardeners. With the great success of webinar lectures over the past two years, which has reached an even wider audience than in the past, NHS will continue to provide fine speakers online as our organization opens for in-person classes and lectures on a limited basis.

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ELISABETH C. MILLER MEMORIAL LECTURE:
27 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE

By Richie Steffen

When Elisabeth Miller founded NHS in 1966, the seeds of environmental awareness were already developing in her mind. As she grew as a gardener, the value of western North American native plants became apparent and essential in the development of her own garden. In her many civic beautification projects around Seattle, she was instrumental in advocating for plants that tolerated our climate as well as the vulgarities of urban areas. Experience taught her that plants were only part of the answer to successful urban landscapes. Soil conditions, drainage issues and future maintenance could make or break the good efforts of any project. One lesson well learned was that gardening is not static. There is always something new to learn and it was important to be open to new ideas. With this in mind, the Elisabeth Carey Miller Memorial Lecture was created in 1995 to continue Mrs. Miller's vision of horticultural education and serve as a long-lasting gift to the horticultural community to share information and inspire the gardening community.

Run by the Elisabeth C. Miller Botanical Garden and co-sponsored by the Northwest Horticultural Society and the Elisabeth C. Miller Library, this free lecture will be an online presentation which will be available through Zoom on September 28th, 2022 and feature the remarkable work of Rebecca McMackin.

Rebecca McMackin is an ecologically obsessed horticulturist and garden designer. She has spent the last decade as Director of Horticulture of Brooklyn Bridge Park where she manages 85 acres of diverse parkland organically and with an eye towards habitat creation for birds, butterflies, and soil microorganisms. The park was created in 2010 and is on the shoreline of Brooklyn, New York overlooking the Lower Manhattan skyline. The Park has become a haven not only for Brooklyn Heights residents but also an oasis for nesting migratory birds and pollinator insects. Rebecca's efforts have been a driving force for the continued development of the land from an industrial site to a vibrant urban habitat for all living organisms.

The Miller Garden is pleased to have Rebecca speak for this lecture. She represents how younger horticulturists are implementing progressive ideas into public landscapes and will be the youngest person to have lectured for this prestigious event. In Mrs. Miller's day, urban horticulture was a new and exciting idea — a way to transform how we interact in our cities. Rebecca McMackin shows us how these past ideas have grown and what can be done to make our urban spaces beautiful and alive.

An email will be sent on September 28th containing the link to this lecture. This lecture is free with the costs underwritten entirely by the Pendleton and Elisabeth Carey Miller Charitable Foundation as a lasting gift to the horticultural community.
PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

Dear NHS Members,

The support and increased participation of NHS members over the last few years has been a source of inspiration for me during these years of figuring out how we continue through the pandemic. This year, as we moved cautiously toward a hybrid program, I appreciate the enthusiasm from the membership to come to in-person classes and participate in garden tours. These have always been popular, and I am glad to see they will continue to be so. What truly pleases me is the tremendous participation in our webinar program. Already this year people have signed up in the thousands to watch a wide variety of lectures present on an equally diverse range of topics. This continued strong support shows that webinars must remain a strong focus well into the future. The ability to have so many people from all over the region as well as other states and Canada enjoy quality lectures is a surprising gift that has come from a dark and, at times, frightening disease.

This amazing participation in the webinars has also led NHS to expand its ability to give back to the community. Our scholarship and grants programs have long been a tradition and we are in the delightful position to increase this giving. Earlier this year, NHS provided the Elisabeth C. Miller Library, a valuable source of horticultural knowledge to the Pacific Northwest, a gift of $10,000. NHS has always valued the library and has provided support since the creation of this institution. Another incredible result of the increased revenue of NHS is the development of a partnership between NHS and the Pendleton and Elisabeth Carey Miller Charitable Foundation to create a new scholarship program for students studying horticulture in the regional community colleges. We hope that this scholarship program can lead to a new generation of inspired horticulturists for the PNW.

Since Mrs. Elisabeth Miller founded the organization over 50 years ago, NHS has often worked closely with the Miller Botanical Garden and the Miller Charitable Foundation. We are pleased to continue this tradition by co-sponsoring with the Miller Library, the Elisabeth C. Miller Memorial Lecture which will be presented as a recorded Zoom lecture (link to be sent on September 28th). This year’s lecturer will be Rebecca McMackin. Rebecca is an ecologically focused horticulturalist and garden designer who has a dynamic approach to how our landscapes should be developed.

Another incredible webinar, lined up by NHS board member Linda McDonald, is a Saturday morning with Sue and Thomas Stuart-Smith on October 1st. They will each be presenting a lecture followed by a joint Q & A session. This event will be recorded and available for two weeks. Sue is the author of *The Well-Gardened Mind* and her husband, Thomas, is a celebrated garden designer. These lectures are not to be missed. Thank you, Linda, for making this exceptional webinar possible.

I hope you will join us for these webinars as well as the rest of our fall webinar programing, and I am looking forward to seeing you, if not in person, then through our on-line programs.

All the best,

Richie Steffen
NHS President
“Everything that slows us down and forces patience, everything that sets us back into the slow circles of nature, is a help. Gardening is an instrument of grace.”

—May Sarton

_Heliopsis helianthoides var. scabra_
‘Bleeding Hearts’
Image by Richie Steffen