



2022 - 2023

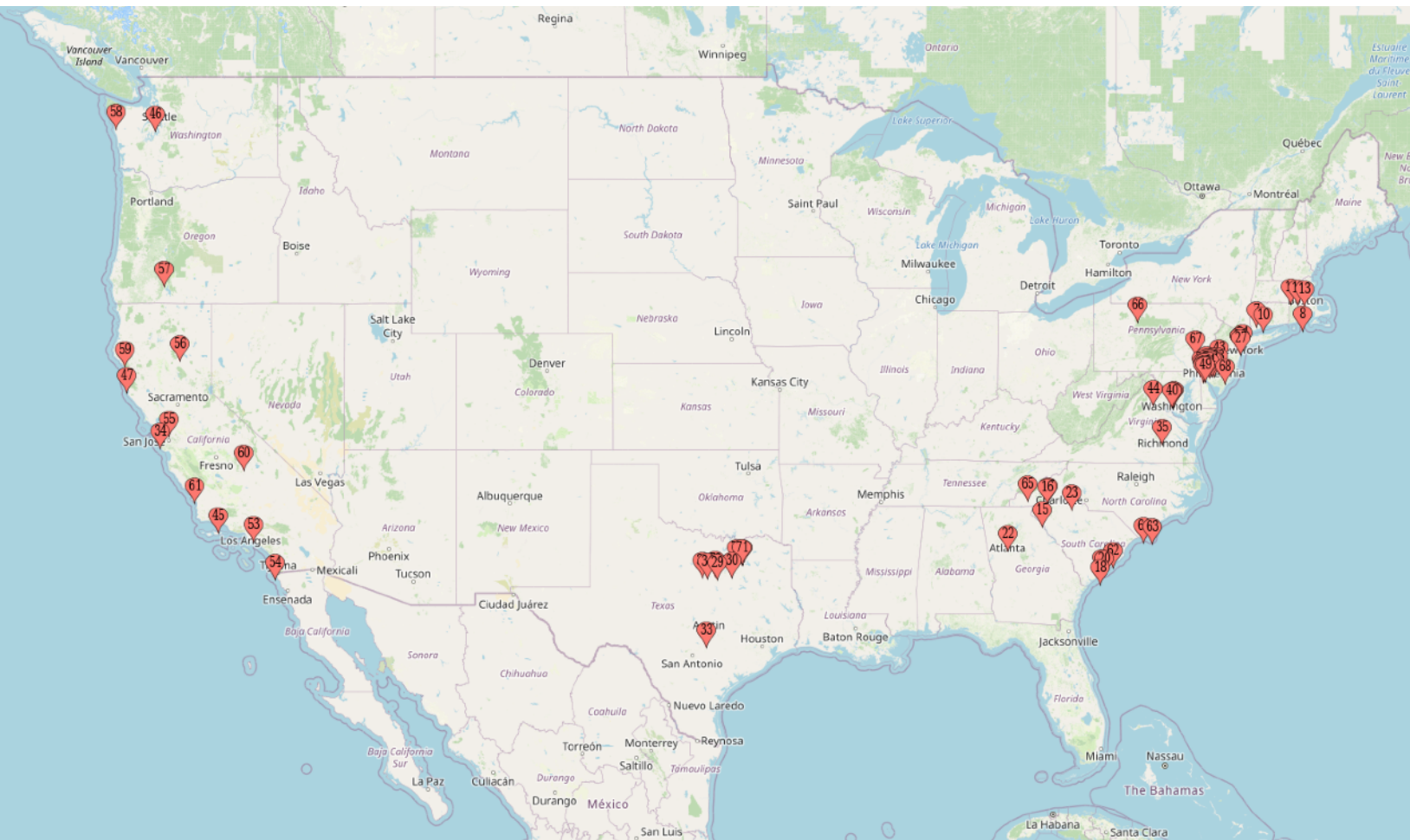
Royal Horticultural Society / Garden Club of America

Interchange Fellowship

Final Report

Sam Fry

Oak Spring Garden Foundation · Townsends · Arnold Arboretum · Andalusia · Mt Diablo Native Garden · North Carolina Arboretum · Clark Garden · Mendocino Coast Botanical Garden · Kinzua Bridge State Park · Longwood Gardens · Filoli · The Laurels Preserve · Broken Arrow · Nemours · Sakonnett · US National Arboretum · Stiff Chapel Cemetery · South Carolina Botanical Garden · Brandywine Creek State Park · Bartram's Garden · Chandor Garden · Middleton Place · Great Smoky Mountains NP · Magnolia House and Plantation · Tandy Hill · Harpers Topiary Garden · Philadelphia Flower Show · US Botanic Garden · Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Centre · Bowmans Hill · Atlanta Botanical Garden · Little Island · Francis Marion National Forest ·



Smithsonian Gardens · Dallas Arboretum · Sequoia NP · Winterthur · The Highline · New York Botanical Garden · New England Botanic Garden · Brandywine Cottage · Mt. Cuba · Edgewood Gardens · Brandywine Museum · Chanticleer · Hollister House · Olympic National Park · The Biltmore · Scott Arboretum · Connemara Meadow · Parkhill Prairie · Brooklyn Botanic Garden · Morris Arboretum · Crater Lake · Santa Barbara Botanical Garden · The Old Mill · Lassen Volcanic NP · Fort Worth Botanical Garden · Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens · Haverford College · Central Park · GCA Grove · Stoneleigh · Jenkins Arboretum · Kings Canyon NP · Garden in the Woods · Windcliff · Mt Hood ·

Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

The Summer Day

Mary Oliver

Ask me about any of these photos and I'll do my best to tell you
a little story.

I am tired and happy. Life is full.

Rowan Nygard

I acknowledge that the land I have lived on, worked on, and explored once was and continues to be the cultural home of countless communities who have been removed, dispossessed, and unrecognised. I lived and worked on land that once was the home of the Lenape, a nation of communities that was Lenapehoking, present day New Jersey, Delaware, New York, Eastern Pennsylvania, before being near extirpated to Oklahoma, Wisconsin, and Ontario. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania does not recognise the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania, despite their residence in the state for over 10,000 years.

Throughout my travels and my year in America, Indigenous groups across the country were ever present yet absent. Place names and roads bore their ancestral names, but the people were not there. Destinations held plaques detailing the people who lived there and their ways of life, but were placed in lands not in the possession of those very people.



Thanks

-

Introduction

-

Longwood Gardens

-

American Horticulture

-

Landscapes

I am incredibly fortunate to have had bottomless kindness, guidance, and support from so many people prior to, during, and after the Fellowship. Without each and every one of them, I would not have had the year that I am so lucky to have experienced.

Caroline Colino, Liz Gilfillan, Grant Hughes, Siphesihle S'biya, Brandon Jones, Sophie Tatzkow, Paige Leven, Ashley Edwards, Morgan Russell, Kristin Biddle, Jocelyn Kline, Alex Correia, Meredith Mitchell, Longwood Education Department, Kieren Avis, Dan Hinkley, Eloise Gayer, Faith Redcay, Percy DuPont, Rowan Nygard, Anton Ginella, Fred and Nancy Blackley, Helen Wagner, Dave and Fiona Fry, Alexandra Chamberlain, Rowena Wilson, The Royal Horticultural Society, Mary Frediani, Michael Alderfer, Heather Nicholas, Emily Blackmore, The Diggers of Pasadena, Avery Haislip, Bill Thomas, Sean Harkin, Betsy McCoy, Margo Rabb, Allison Edmonds, The Garden Club of America, Longwood Gardens, Liz Ciskanik, Kyle Post, Matt Burgesser, David Culp, Joyce Rondinella, Sarah Hunt, Coleman and Susy Townsend, Kinga Obartuch, Sue Watts, Stephen Crisp, Jeff Lynch, Mike and Barb Speer, Charli Klein, Sam Greenberg

Thank you for all your generosity, kindness, and friendship.



Introduction

It feels almost impossible to distil the last year, not least into something that might truly represent my time in America and the profound impact it had on me. I had the time of my life; seeing all that I could of what America had to offer, meeting so many wonderful people who I am so fortunate to now call friends, and exploring a new world of ecosystems, plants, and wildlife.

The RHS / GCA Interchange Fellowship has run for 75 years, starting in 1948 to bolster British – American relations whilst sharing horticultural knowledge between the two countries. It is a unique program that has changed over the years, and continues to change to fit the current Fellows, allowing a distinctive experience for every participant. My year was based at Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania, a goliath of the American horticultural world. Longwood is at the forefront of horticultural training, offering its Professional Horticulture program, alongside domestic and international internships. These programs have held a significant place in the American horticulture industry, as well as the global horticultural community, and I had the opportunity to experience them firsthand.

While New Jersey is the Garden State, Philadelphia is the garden capital. Longwood is one of 38 gardens, arboretums, and historic landscapes all within 30 miles of the old American capital city. It is the horticulturalist's haven where some of the nation's best gardens all occupy the same region, all part of the mid-Atlantic community that is impossibly tightly woven. Dancing to the rhythm of the seasons, gardeners move from garden to garden, bringing pieces of one to another and leaving parts behind. Common threads emerge. Longwood may impart their style of globular hanging basket to students in their greenhouses, but they reappear stylised at Chanticleer, or with previously untried plants at the US Botanic Garden.

I approached the Fellowship with preformed intentions; to see American plants in their native habitats, to experience American horticulture and all that it had to offer, and to share my experiences of British Horticulture. After one year, 18 states, and more than 50 gardens, what I brought back with me was community. I was so incredibly fortunate to find community constantly, from Longwood and the wider mid-Atlantic horticultural community, to the GCA, to strangers in the Smokies.



Longwood Gardens

Most of my time in America was spent living and working at Longwood Gardens. One thousand acres nestled into the rolling hills of Chester Country, it's an area not remarkably dissimilar to the verdant rural patchwork of Wiltshire where I grew up. Place names carried across the sea by early colonialists can be found throughout, although slightly altered to the then newly claimed environment. For example, Kennet Square in East Marlborough township near Longwood is derived from the Kennet River, which flows through the town of Marlborough. These slightly bowed reflections of home were ever present, street trees of London abundant on roadsides and in fields. *Liriodendrons*, *Gleditsia*, *Juglans*, *Liquidamber* all familiar staples of the London street tree scene, but native to the northeast.



Longwood was to be my staging ground for my immersion into American horticulture, the foundation upon which to delve deeper and explore its incredible spectrum of specialisms. I would have the time and opportunity to be exposed to areas of horticulture I could never dream of experiencing in the UK. Rotating through the various departments of the Horticulture section at Longwood, I was to be totally immersed in their day-to-day work, planning, and learning firsthand from their experts. Outside of work I remained on site, living in a pastel painted house along Red Lion Row, the home of students and staff for decades. Quiet single-tracked roads flanked the covered porches looking out towards the gardens; a vista of Americana.

A garden unrivalled in scale, Longwood is brimming with ambition. Almost two million visitors pass through the visitors center every year, exposed to permanently vibrant displays of colour throughout the seasons at a scale few institutions in the world could match. It plays a significant role in introducing the American public to horticulture, from conservation and land management to floral arrangements and bedding out, you can see it all at Longwood, at any time of year. While it plays an important part in public education, Longwood Gardens contributes significantly to the local area, and the larger American horticultural industry. The Professional Horticulture program at the forefront of educational programs in the country, resulting in a significant portion of American horticulturalists being under the Longwood umbrella at some point in their career. Their research and





conservation department has continuously introduced new plants both to the market, and back into the wild.

Finding my feet in a new country, I started in the familiar. My first department at Longwood was Outdoor Horticulture, divided into the East, Central, and West sections, I joined the team in the West of the garden. The Idea Garden comprised several spaces, annual beds, perennial and mixed borders, an ornamental kitchen garden, and a children's garden. Arriving in September meant that the growing season was drawing to a close. The late summer perennials were at their peak. *Symphyotrichum*, *Solidago*, *Hibiscus*, *Salvias* all flowering profusely through the beds and borders, alongside a bounty of heritage and culturally significant Chilis and Tomatoes harvested daily in the kitchen garden. I settled into the routine of regular maintenance and amongst deeply kind and generous people. Although my stay in the west was only supposed to be for a few weeks, some unforeseen circumstances left the team a member down, and I was

able to stay significantly longer. As Autumn fell into Winter, I helped bring about the seasonal changes in the garden where putting the garden to bed culminated in the removal of the last tender annuals and the final harvests.

Thanksgiving came and went, and I rotated to my next department, the Conservatory, coinciding with the transition from the Chrysanthemum Festival to the Christmas Display. Christmas is the pinnacle of the Longwood year with the bulk of visitation taking place within the month of December and the garden during this time reflects that. Meetings begin in late January for the impending Christmas, with most of the staff overseeing individual Christmas projects throughout the year to bring together an exceptional festive display. Horticulturalists let loose their creativity through murals, stained glass, woven structures, preserved flowers and foliage that is all installed in the last week of November when the Conservatory closes for the changeover. The historic conservatory is transformed into a thematic winter wonderland, united through colour and different styles of ornament. Over the week, the borders are changed from a riot of colour through *Chrysanthemums*, to a tapestry of texture and colour befitting the season. Poinsettias, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, building the bulk of the display, Longwood uses commercially extinct cultivars that are continuously propagated year, kept in existence by the horticulturalists. Harmonious gradients wrap around the walkways in the main conservatory underneath colossal hanging baskets of *Tradescantia* and further Poinsettias. 'Living' Christmas trees planted with conically spiralling *Guzmania*





stood at attention along the fern floor, the sunken space flooded with water beneath sweeping ornate drifts of more Poinsettias, *Pilea*, and other *Euphorbia* species. Smaller drifts of annual planting swept down the banks of the east conservatory, the perennially planted glasshouse.

Throughout December I helped maintain the meticulous display. Dutch trolleys full of replacements would roll in from the cold packed with replacement bedding, replacing spent *Lilium regale* forced to flower in the depths of winter, and the crushed *Nephrrolepis exaltata*, trampled by the crowds of guests. All this work is undertaken before mid-morning opening, when the entire conservatory is rushed upon opening. Having never worked under glass, Longwood's acres of conservatory space provided me with a new experience, alongside the opportunity to work with some of the most talented and knowledgeable horticulturalists I have ever met, who taught me new ways to garden in a new environment. Capable of manipulating plants

to their whim, creating other worldly displays with plants far from their liveable climates. I grew a new profound respect for working in controlled environments, and tropical plants.

Avoiding the cold winter months, although Philadelphia had one of the warmest winters on record and one of only a handful with no measurable snowfall, I moved to production. Longwood recently completed construction of a 65,000-square-foot facility for growing stock, a state-of-the-art greenhouse for producing the immense *Chrysanthemum* structures and over 1300 different species / cultivars. I had the opportunity to see the incredible amount of work that goes into producing the garden-ready plants for all the different garden spaces of Longwood. From the sterile controlled access section for growing the 1000 bloom *Chrysanthemum*, to the tens of benches of Snapdragons for use all over the garden, all staked and tied at three points before being delivered. A Longwood production specialty are their hanging baskets. Immense spherical containers packed with a multitude of plants, something I had not seen in the UK before. As I traveled, I would see around the country at different gardens where Longwood Alumni had brought the baskets with them, a display of Longwood's influence trickling out into the industry.

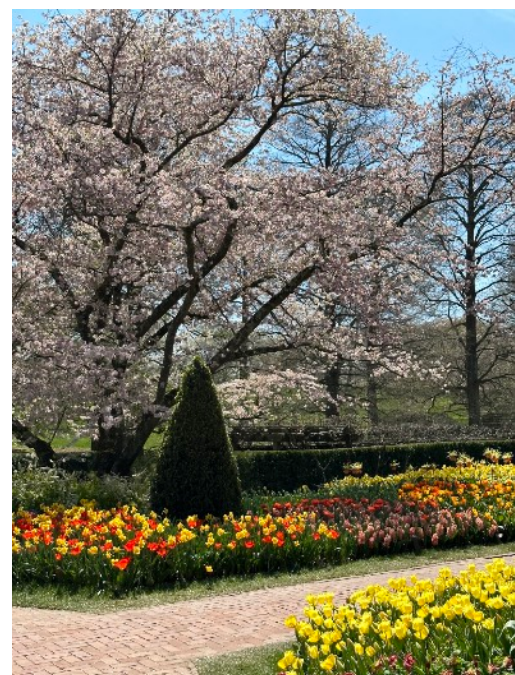
As winter slowly began to fade and the first signs of spring breaking began to appear, I moved on to Research and Conservation. I had a strong interest in this area, but before my time at Longwood, I had no prior exposure. Longwood has a long history of research work, from





producing cold hardy *Camellias* cultivars, to introducing new *Echium* and *Clivia* varieties and colours. In contrast to the commercial research work, Longwood also puts significant time and resources into finding, protecting, and conserving a host of endemic endangered plants. One project that I had particular interest in was the conservation of terrestrial orchids, which had a goal to propagate every terrestrial orchid in the contiguous United States. Alongside their projects, the team runs several trials, from testing Ball Seed varieties to trialing new plants requested by the horticulturalists. My placement with research and conservation also gave me the opportunity to work in a sterile environment. I worked in the tissue culture lab, cleaning up *Canna* varieties grown to be resistant to the various viruses that affect the genus, and deflasking terrestrial orchids grown in an agar medium to be eventually planted back out into the wild. I had only read about or seen pictures of this work, and Longwood gave me a chance to assist in something I would never be able to do in England.

Spring had sprung and I returned to the warming temperatures and emerging blossom, moving to the East to work under the falling blushed petals and the pink-mauve backdrop of *Cercis canadensis*. The East is built up of many sections, from the immense annual display of the Flower Garden Walk evoking Victorian grandeur, to the naturalistic natively planted Pierce's Woods, the conserved piece of arboretum from Longwood's inception. Having helped plant over 250,000 bulbs previously in the Autumn, it was incredible to see the effect of such mass flowering. Drifts of tulips of complimenting hues bled from blue to purple to pink, reds, oranges, and yellows, ultimately reaching the crescendo of the white borders. Interspersed throughout, the display was punctuated by varieties of *Muscari*, *Fritillaria*, *Narcissus*, and *Allium*. As the blossom slowed, the Tulips faded, and mornings were spent deadheading to maintain the near perfect displays. Tiny Tim's 'Tiptoe Through the Tulips' rattled around my head as I needled my way through drift after drift. Second only to Christmas, Tulip mania truly takes hold of Longwood. The wide brick-walk rapidly became standing room only, guests packed shoulder to shoulder in a constant flow. Mirroring the efficiency of the conservatory change-outs took place before opening, trolleys from production would roll down the bricks. Carrying Spring bedding to replace bulbs too far gone, in part due to the incredibly mild winter, which caused a shorter but still vivid show. A short distance away the spring ephemerals were beginning their orchestral performance. Plants found east of the Mississippi River and known to





grow prior to the arrival of Columbus are the palette of Pierce's Woods. The baby blue of *Mertensia virginica* atop fleshy stems, the trifoliate *Trillium* species, feathered *Dicentra cucullaria*, and the frothy profusions of *Tierella cordifolia* all rising and falling in their highly choreographed dance. Hayscented ferns, *Dennstaedtia punctilobula*, softly pushing through the leaf litter.

March turned into April and I went on to Central, the department at the heart of the garden, overseeing the Main Fountain Garden (Longwood's raison d'être in the summer months), Rose Garden, and Hillside Garden. Within the Main Fountain Garden, formally clipped Box delineate the lawns alongside fountain and fountain, the constant jets of water often accompanied by music throughout the day. The Hillside Garden is tucked behind, almost hidden away, with a romantic planting twisting and turning throughout the hillside under the dappled shade of Oaks, Conifers, and other specimen trees.

Rhododendron calendulaceum, the Flame Azalea, setting the slope ablaze with other Azaleas of purple and white. The floor covered in Hostas, Bluebells, and a litany of the mid-spring layer. Hidden behind the walls of flowering shrubs, a clump of Large Yellow Lady's Slippers, *Cypripedium pubescens*, glows in the undergrowth. Planted in 1963, it shows the commitment of Longwood to the preservation of these species.

My time in Central soon ended, and I moved to help the Professional Horticulture Senior class with their student exhibition gardens. This is an annual rite of passage for the graduating class where they design spaces around a central theme, then construct them over a week and they remain until the Autumn. The theme for this class was change and adaptation, a broad theme that they all approached and interpreted in their own ways. The gardens selected were on neurodiversity, the journey of change, and conformity and challenging that status quo. All unique but complimentary of each other, a perfect example of the class that created them.

By now I was on the ever-quickening downward slope of my fellowship. I returned to the Idea Garden, now incredibly familiar. I enjoyed the company of friends and a garden space I had come to know well. The work in preparation for the mid-summer period had largely been done, and I had the opportunity to pause and enjoy the fruits of our labour. The days grew warmer and more humid, the plants thrived and swelled at a pace.

Before my eyes, my final placement was upon me; Land Stewardship and Ecology. I briefly worked with the department in the controlled





meadow burn earlier in the year, however this was my first time working with them in a conservation capacity. It is an area that I find incredibly interesting, from my interest in terrestrial orchids and the natural plant communities in the UK to my obsession with native flora in the States that has so heavily inspired my Fellowship. During my rotation with them, the LSE team was in the midst of baseline sampling, a process of recording the flora of plots across the Longwood estate. Working with the expert knowledge of the team, we would spend days stood out surveying plots in woodland, meadow, wetland, a varied spread across the garden. Truthfully, the majority of the records for plots were invasive species; Bittersweet, Stilt Grass, Privet, Wineberry, all imports that enter and disrupt native ecosystems. However, this process was vital in establishing what was already present, a foundation upon which to build, change, and grow. Despite the constant presence of invasives there were glints of optimism, a lone Green Fringed Orchid, *Platanthera lacera*, was found.

Far faster than I could ever hope my time at Longwood came to an end, concluded by a subdued walk around the meadow and garden. Walking the paths after closing, the garden was for myself and the birds alone. Slowly tracing the paths I had driven, walked, and gardened along, I had the chance to say goodbye to a garden that meant and continues to mean a great deal to me. In one final act of generosity, a pristine Blue Jay feather sat in the middle of the path. I have spoken of reciprocity with nature when walking with friends, and I still can't help but feel the feather is a parting gift from the garden to me.

Outside of the day to day of Longwood Gardens it is a cornucopia of opportunity and community. From the very first day I was welcomed with open arms. My first weekend stateside was spent at the Kennett Square Mushroom Festival, a point of local pride as Kennett Square is the mushroom capital of the world, producing about sixty percent of overall national supply. In the first week I was invited to watch a UK v USA polo game by another group of students who would quickly become firm friends of mine. This hospitality, kindness, and generosity was extended constantly from so many of those at Longwood.

An extracurricular opportunity from Longwood that I had my eyes set on prior to my arrival was the controlled burn of the meadow. Previous Fellows had told me of it, and the chance to do something that is not a land management method practiced in the UK was amazing. A day spent choking on smoke, swatting embers out of my collar, and setting large fires is one seared into my memory. Prescribed burns are a land



management technique as old as the land itself. Whether an accidental starts from lightning, or from indigenous communities using fire to maintain sparse woodland for hunting and farming, plants have evolved to thrive in burnt conditions. A more exciting alternative to the low density grazing in the UK, it attacks non-native plants that aren't adapted to the heat, while maintaining the vigor of grasses and woody pioneer species that would be lost to grazing. Though the flames reach great heights and high temperatures, there is little material for it to sustain, and thus quickly comes to an end. Far more controlled than I anticipated, the fire was walked into the wind to prevent it spreading wildly. Drawing a charred line in the vegetation, the fire is enclosed until the wind blows it back into itself, snuffing itself out before it can even attempt to reach outside of the designated burn zone.

To attempt to include everything I was given the chance to do while at Longwood would be futile. Symphonies in the meadow, folk bands in the conservatory, day trips to other states to visit gardens with friends, food tours of cities, joining thirty-two thousand others in a forty mile bike ride through the five boroughs of New York City, water skiing on the Delaware river, pot lucks bringing together gardeners, the Galanthus gala, conferences and symposiums where I grew to know so many wonderful people, theme parks, flying with friends, all only a fraction of what I experienced. My year at Longwood was made great by all the people that I was so fortunate to meet and now call friends.



American Horticulture

Prior to arriving, my only preconception of American Horticulture was the stereotype of thick mulching. I knew and loved many of their cultivated natives, but I knew very little of the culture and style of American gardens. I was incredibly fortunate that over the course of my Fellowship year I visited over 50 gardens across 18 states. I attended nine conferences and symposiums. I had the pleasure of meeting horticulturalists from across the country hailing from many states. The sum of these experiences gave me an insight into the American Horticultural industry and its diversity, its similarities and differences to the UK, and what can be learned from it.



Being in the Garden Capital of America certainly helped. Having 38 gardens on my doorstep let me rush straight out after work to visit some of the best that America had to offer - it was a dream situation. Each garden excelled in ways so different to others, from Longwoods grandeur to Mt Cuba's commitment to nativity, to Chanticleers creativity to Andalusia's historic and beautiful setting. I feel it is reckless to paint with a broad brush across the American horticultural industry, however there were repeating themes that I saw, and many aspects that I have come away with a greater respect for, and thoroughly inspired by thanks to the diversity of American horticulture. The creativity, the reverence and commitment to nature, and the community are the three that have left the greatest impact on me.

I was blown away by the creativity displayed in so many gardens in so many ways. One large scale way was through their diversification of events. It is present in the UK in some ways, Wisley's Glow, Westonbirt's Enchanted Christmas to mention two, however in many gardens they went much further. Partnering with artists was a common event, Longwood Gardens hosting Bruce Monro's light installation and Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden hosting Incanto, an instillation on poetry and light sculptures. These events are on such an impressive scale and bring so many people into the garden. The most phenomenal creativity I saw was through displays. At Chanticleer across the entire garden they push the envelope of horticultural displays, beautiful planting combinations mixed in with stunning garden furniture and structures all built in-house during the winter months. I had the pleasure and privilege of working there for two weeks, where one horticulturalist said that if they weren't being experimental and having fun, why were any of them even there, and that attitude resonated throughout the garden. The Serpentine organically curves through a





clearing, changing each season to a new agricultural planting on mass. Whilst I was there, the dark foliage of Sweet Potatoes flowing down over the path, all to be harvested and donated to local groups. The steps down into the Tennis Court Garden are lined with *Metasequoia glyptostroboides* collected from in the garden. An ethereal cutting and vegetable garden overflowing on every path. Chanticleer is a playground of creativity and horticulture, exceeding and excelling at every turn.

Britain sits globally in the bottom 10% for biodiversity, with a loss of over 50% from preindustrial era levels. This was made painfully clear to me in America. The abundant wildlife and flora, and healthy intact natural spaces put Britain to shame. However, what was most stark was the attitude of gardens towards nature, and their commitment to it. I can only think of very few gardens in the UK that are putting their commitment to nature front and centre above everything else; Eden Nature Garden in London, John Little's garden and work, and Knepp are

the examples that come to mind, but in America there is a regular and much more consistent commitment to nature in so many gardens. Monarch butterflies are a perfect example. A beloved inhabitant of the Americas, the commitment to conserving and protecting these beautiful insects has led to an explosion of pollinator gardens and monarch way-stations across the country. Milkweeds, *Asclepias sp*, the host plant of the Monarch, are prolific across professional and amateur gardens and the results are incredibly positive for the Monarch. The commitment to conservation and ecology within American Horticulture doesn't stop there. Many gardens have native planting spaces within their sites, where plants only within their native region are used, and to beautiful effect. Chanticleer, Longwood, Lewis Ginter, US Botanical Garden, Filoli; all these major gardens of the United States all have native spaces. But again, this is only a small part; across the country there are exclusively native gardens. These gardens not only have native plants as their core purpose, but a commitment to education, testing, and promoting the native plants of America, and do it both beautifully and successfully. Mt. Cuba Center in Delaware is a great example. Hosting a trial garden, they trial the natives and nativars found east of the Mississippi (and prior to Columbus' arrival) for the public and the industry, publishing their results free for all. They create formal displays of the plethora of American native flora that are breathtaking and achieve such a stunning result. Stoneleigh in Pennsylvania is another beautiful garden that is exclusively native however focusing on ornamental displays, serving as a perfect example of marrying ecology and design. In Texas, the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center has a strong driving commitment to native plants of the South, furthering the First Lady's work on



conservation and public accessibility to nature.

Of course, it can be easy to look through the rose-tinted glasses of horticulture. There are biodiversity losses and crimes against nature committed across the states, such as pipelines tearing through unique environments in the Pine Barrens in New Jersey. I do believe however, that there are lessons to be learned from American horticulture of how we can garden sensitively and beautifully, and that we can and should be putting a greater emphasis on nature.



Landscapes

While I had little knowledge of American Horticulture before moving to Pennsylvania, I was enamoured with the American landscape. When I was starting out in horticulture as a landscape designer, a colleague of mine shared a book with me - Taking Measures Across the American Landscape by James Corner and Alex S. Maclean. This was formative for me. Beautiful aerial photos coupled with detailed plans and illustrations of the American landscape were etched into my mind, sparking a deep interest for the varied ecosystems of America. I wanted to see as much as possible in my short time across the Atlantic.



The Northeast in Autumn and Winter

I arrived in the states as the seasons were beginning to change. The Northeast is renowned for its Autumn foliage colour and I was eager to make the most of it. Within the first couple of weeks, Morgan Russell, another RHS Bursary holder, accompanied me as we headed further north into Pennsylvania to see the colours at their peak. Driving beneath a canopy of gold, crimson, and green we worked our way through the rolling farmland of Pennsylvania towards the Appalachian Mountains. We stopped at Hawk Mountain, a point along the migratory route of raptors. Hiking early in the morning, we crested peaks looking horizon to horizon, with Coopers Hawks and Sharp-shinned Hawks spiralling overhead. From there we drove through Pine Creek Gorge, a river cut valley lined with Aspen golden in the afternoon sun. Eventually we reached the cabin we stayed in for the night in the Allegheny National Forest, a short hop away from our destination. At dawn we arrived at

Kinzua Bridge, a walkway 300feet above the forest. Once a viaduct, brought down by a tornado then rebuilt, it is an unbelievable sight. The exposed forest had passed its peak but was still an amazing display of beauty. Witch Hazel, *Hamamelis virginiana*, with its spindly profusions of flowers was abundant beneath the shedding canopy of *Prunus serotina*, Black Cherry, *Fagus grandifolia*, American Beech, and *Acer saccharum*, Sugar Maple. Driving the six hours back flew by as we passed Penn State College, through the winding mountain roads in full colour. I fell in love with the Appalachians.

Shortly after I joined a group of professional horticulture students on a day trip to Connecticut. Driving past Manhattan before the sun rose to beat the traffic, we again jumped into a spectrum of natural color. We drove for hours to reach Broken Arrow Nursery, a specialist nursery for rare and unusual plants set in the rolling golden hills of Connecticut. We were toured around by the incredibly generous family who run it,



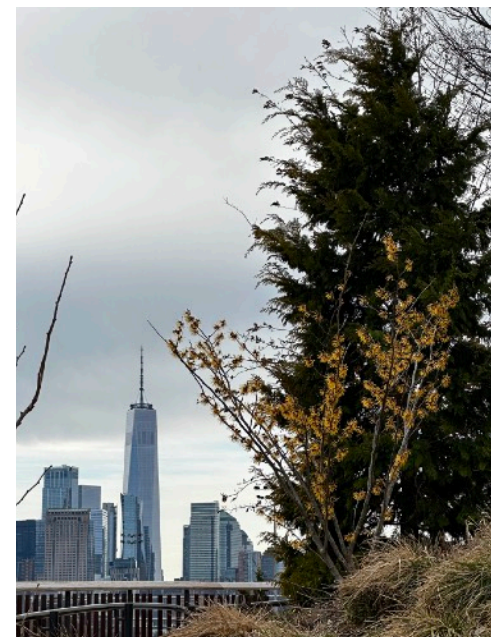


weaving between the rows of a multitude of plants they have bred over the years. Before long we went onto our next stop, Hollister House, an English inspired garden nestled into a New England hillside.

The Northeast hosts many unique ecosystems with New Jersey's Pine Barrens being one of the most special. It is the largest remaining Atlantic coastal pine barren covering over 1.1 million acres. With close friends, I spent a day hiking through the sandy back tracks, visiting recently burned sections of forest blackened soil and trees, leading to an old Firewatch tower overlooking the forest. Our trip's main purpose was to visit a pineland savanna, a section of grassland in the highly acidic boggy Pine Barrens. There we saw the globally imperilled Bog Asphodel, *Nartheceium americanum*, seed heads littering the ground, clearly a stunning display when flowering in spring. In the crevices of banks grew the Little Curly-grass fern, *Schizaea pusilla*, it's miniature fronds barely inches long, again globally vulnerable due to the loss of

the pineland habitat. More common but still incredibly exciting to me, were Blueberries and American Cranberries, *Vaccinium macrocarpon*, and a memory that will stick with me is eating the sweetest Cranberry of my life straight from the bog. Also abundant were Purple Pitcher Plants, *Sarracenia purpurea*, as well as the Spoonleaf, Thread-leaf, and Round-leaved Sundews, *Drosera intermedia*, *D. filiformis* and *D. rotundifolia*; an amazing privilege to see them growing wild. After hours of exploring the Pine Barrens and one of its savannas, we worked our way back to the car along Pitch Pine, *Pinus rigida*, lined paths.

In the new year I was invited to the GCA Annual meeting in New York to present the Fellowship and my time so far to the scholarship committee. It was an honour to be asked to share my time in America and provided an opportunity to explore the urban horticulture of New York. Over two days I worked my way up and down the city, cycling through central park at dawn, catching the train up to New York Botanical Garden, walking the length of the Highline, exploring the levels of Little Island, and crossing the river for Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Seeing these gardens in person after seeing so many pictures was fulfilling. The Highline was phenomenal, *Hamamelis* blooming with the Empire State building in the background, Crocus pushing through the leaf litter with the browned flowers of grasses buffeting in the wind, bare branches and stems complimenting the brick and metal of the city. It was unexpectantly comforting to see urban horticulture again, and remarkable to see garden spaces with the backdrop of such prominent architecture and landmarks.





The South in Spring

While the winter wasn't as dark and cold as those in England, I was eager to get a running start on the year. The south has always had a special place in my heart. Before I was born, my family lived in Charleston, South Carolina, and my sister was born there. The Spanish Moss-soaked Live Oaks are stamped throughout my childhood, along with memories of running around swamps in search of alligators. I was beyond excited to return to a familiar place with fresh new eyes to explore the flora and gain a greater appreciation for the fauna.

I flew to Atlanta, Georgia, welcomed by a humid embrace as I left the airport. Driving out of the city, the trees were in the gorgeous lime-green hue of pushing leaves; viridescent haze becoming of the 'City in the Forest'. Climbing in elevation I left spring again, back to the bare stems and brisk air of late winter. I worked my way northeast to the edge of the Blue Ridge and Piedmont ecoregions in South Carolina to stay with close friends on Lake Keowee. Exploring the ridges of the area, I climbed Table Rock Summit, the second highest point in South Carolina. Along the trail were the first signs of spring, Bloodroot, *Sanguinaria canadensis*, Mayapples, *Podophyllum peltatum*, and Spring Beauties, *Claytonia virginica*, throughout the trail. At the summit, escaping from a small crack was a lone American Alumroot, *Heuchera americana*; a welcome surprise to see a common bedding plant





thriving in its native range. After absorbing the panoramic views of the Carolinas I made my way down beneath the white quartets of Flowering Dogwoods, *Cornus florida*, and amongst the pale-pinks halos of the Mountain Azalea, *Rhodoendron canescens*. Nearby in Clemson was the South Carolina Botanic Garden. I met with Sue Watts, another expat and Education Program Coordinator at the garden. She and I walked the garden as she explained the providence of the plants and the garden's role in the area and state. SCBG had one of the best displays I have ever seen in a garden. An almost mile long trail winding through the length of the garden, detailing each of the South Carolinian ecoregions and its associated plants. From Blue Ridge, to Piedmont, to Southeastern Plains, to Middle Atlantic Coastal Plain, to the Southern Coastal Plain. The trail was so educational and beautiful, with the Blue Ridge and Piedmont zones in full spring bloom, rich in *Trillium*, *Mertensia*, *Phlox*, and more.

From there again I headed further northeast into North Carolina. Chicaning my way through the Blue Ridge Mountains, stopping at every overlook, waterfall, and pull-in to steal glimpses across hazy mountains and into the burgeoning spring ephemerals. I was beyond excited to see my first Trilliums in the flesh, the Toadshade Trillium, *Trillium sessile*, coating the bank of one pull in. Following the advice of Adam Black of Bartlett Tree Research and Arboretum, I stopped in at a local land preserve nestled into a tight valley in the mountains. I was treated to a spring display that far exceeds that of any cultivated garden I have ever seen; steep slopes densely packed in with *Trillium*, *Viola*, *Claytonia*, *Iris*, *Sanguinaria*, *Erythronium*, *Tirella*, and *Arisaema*. I spent hours traipsing up and down the slopes, crisscrossing trails making sure I saw every square inch and ensuring that the sight of the mountainside, a patchwork of gentle colours, would never leave my mind. The day progressed, and I needed to make my next stop over in Shelby, North Carolina. There I was meeting Fred and Nancy Blackley. Fred is a Landscape Architect and was a RHS / GCA Interchange Fellow before the RHS was involved in the program. While he was the Fellow, he and Nancy married, and both came to the UK to spend the year delving into Britain and her horticulture. They both extended their unending generosity and kindness to me, offering to host me. We talked for hours about England and their experiences, and my time in the states so far, after Fred had whisked me around several of the local nurseries that he knows and uses. The next day we watched the sun rise over the Blue Ridge Mountains, before heading to see current and previous projects of his, from the landscape of a high school to the layout and trails of a section of the North Carolina Arboretum, and then onto the Biltmore, a historic residence of the Vanderbilts. In every garden Fred had invited





his friends to join us, executive directors of the gardens, who so generously gave me their time and answered as many questions as I could field them about their work. It was beyond an honour and a privilege to have met Fred and Nancy, who are the embodiment of what I believe the Fellowship to be; a familial network eager to share knowledge and experiences.

Unfortunately, time continued to march on, and I had to leave the loving home of the Blackleys and continue my trip south. This time, I was heading to Charleston, South Carolina, an anchor point of my life and my family. I had not been back in years and I was excited to see the familiar environment through a horticultural lens. First on my list was a visit to the historic plantation gardens of Middleton Place and Magnolia Plantation, located next door to each other along the Ashley River, and both owing their history to the enslaved people who built and worked the properties. Distinctly different despite being neighbours, it was fascinating to draw comparisons between the two, and their respective interpretations of their

histories. Middleton Place is a National Historic Landmark, persisting through the American Revolution, the Civil war, and through hurricanes. Proudly declaring itself America's oldest landscape garden, it is a series of sprawling lawns and towering Southern Live Oaks, *Quercus virginiana*, dripping with Spanish Moss, *Tillandsia usneoides*. Showing its southern extent, in the formal beds there were Foxgloves flowering in March alongside Rhododendrons. Paying important homage to its history, Middleton Place has actors reenacting the work that went on in its grounds, not shying away from the fact that people were treated as property. In comparison to the neighbouring Magnolia Plantation, the graveyard of the enslaved people at Middleton Place was clearly maintained, and holding interpretation explaining who the people buried there were, and how their families are still nearby to this day. This was in stark contrast to the graveyard at Magnolia Plantation, which was beyond the car park and swamp, in amongst the shrubs, with a small wooden signpost pointing towards it. Magnolia Plantation was the far more commercialised of the two, with trams full of tourists shuttled around the 'From Slavery to Freedom' tour, included in admission. With less focus on landscape and more on garden, Magnolia Plantation took inspiration from garden rooms of England with distinct spaces throughout the garden. Most interesting to me were the old rice fields, space reclaimed from the Ashley River where rice was grown in swampy, waterlogged conditions. The perimeter path around the old fields was maintained, giving me the opportunity to walk out into the afternoon sun and see the wildlife of the south much closer. American alligators, *Alligator mississippiensis*, sunning themselves on





paths, and deadwood with Great Blue Herons and Little Blue Herons, *Ardea herodias* and *Egretta caerulea*, soaring silently overhead or perched amongst the reeds. While watching one Great Blue Heron slowly picking its way through the disused rice field, it thrust its head down, returning with a baby alligator in its beak. That evening I walked the streets of Charleston in the dying light, crossing cobbled streets exploring the discrete gardens and urban planting of the city.

The next day called for an exploration of the southern natural. I drove into the sunrise over the Cooper River Bridge heading towards the Francis Marion National Forest. My first stop was a section of the Palmetto trail before heading further into the forest, to a spot rich with Yellow Pitcher Plants, *Sarracenia flava*, flowering beneath the canopy of the lustrous *Pinus palustris*, Longleaf Pine. I went deeper into the forest still, in search of the Lady Lupine, *Lupinus villosa* but unfortunately only finding its glaucous rosette. After getting a taste of the Coastal Plain, I turned out to the Coastal zone, and heading back across Charleston I went south to the

Botany Bay Heritage Preserve. On Botany Bay Island bleached and smoothed driftwood washes ashore constantly, building a dramatic coastline stumpery that is mostly submerged by the tide. Setting the green backdrop to the arboreal skeletons are the pride of South Carolina and subject of their state flag, the Palmetto palm. A dense barrier forms to prevent the ingress of deadwood further comprised of Cabbage, Saw, and Dwarf Palmetto, *Sabal palmetto*, *S. repens*, *S. minor*. My final night was an early one before making the northwesterly drive back to Atlanta, to visit the Atlanta Botanic Garden who plays an outsized role in conservation across the South before my flight back to Philadelphia. This excursion enthralled me through the diversity of the American Landscape, from mountains to swamps to grassland to coast. I was captivated and desperate to see more.

A few weeks passed and spring was still out of reach in Pennsylvania. After several recommendations, I signed up for the Spring Wildflower Pilgrimage in the Great Smoky Mountains. This is an annual event running for close to 70 years, where people across the country gather for guided hikes, talks, and events throughout the national park to celebrate the coming of Spring and the glory of the Smokies. Ahead of the pilgrimage, I made a stop in Richmond, Virginia, to visit the Interchange Fellowship chairwoman Mary Frediani and see the work of the GCA in Richmond, alongside a visit to Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden with President and CEO Brian Trader.

For six days I camped in the Smokies, and during heavy rain and misty mornings I would head out and follow maps to different meeting points.

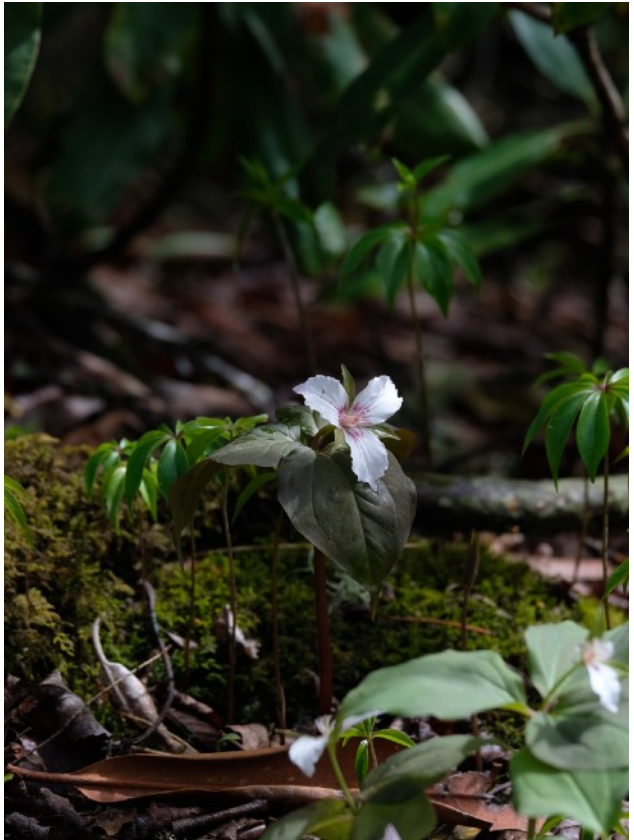
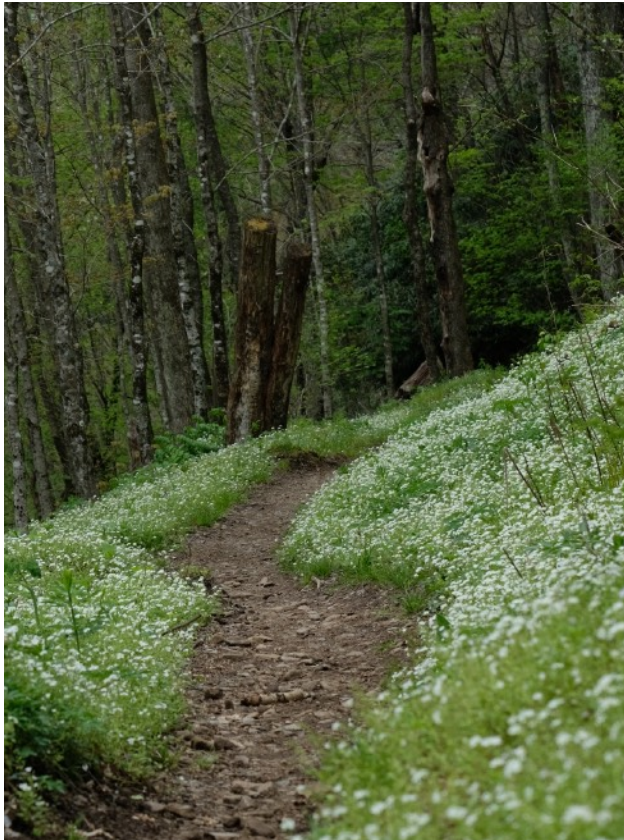
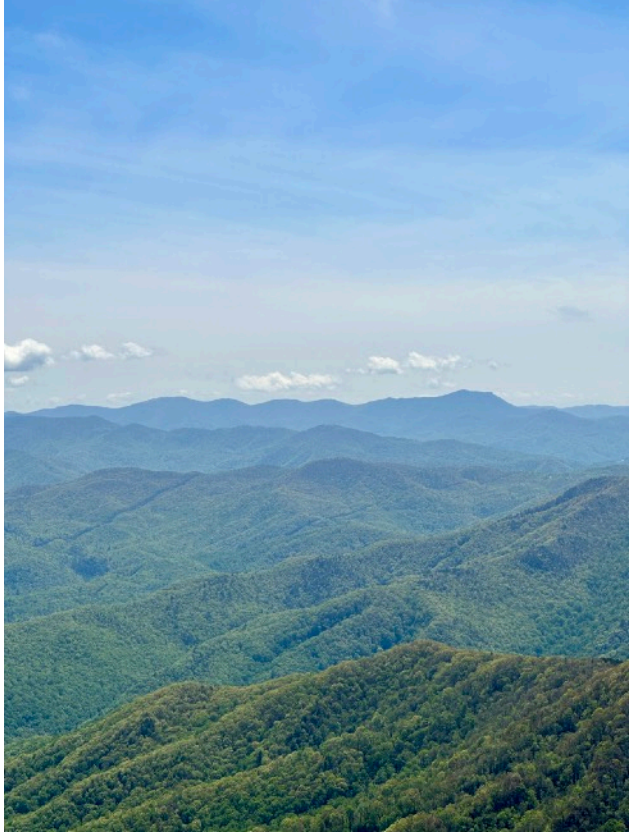




Following the expert guide of National Park Rangers and local botanists, I hiked up and down mountains in the park, over rivers and through the forest, learning about the park, its history, and all the inhabitants. Meeting and making friends I swam in crisp rivers fresh from the springs and saw more breathtaking plants than I had ever seen before. The first few days in heavy rain, I listened to talks on low elevation deciduous tree communities, and learned about the Hemlock Woolly Adelgid wreaking havoc on the Hemlock population, both *Tsuga canadensis* and *Tsuga caroliniana*. I hiked to higher elevation acidic conifer dominated forest and saw *Kalmia latifolia*, Mountain Laurel in full bloom with its geometric buds and blooms, before seeing a series of stunning clusters of the Pink Lady's Slipper Orchid, *Cypripedium acaule* spattered in the undergrowth. However, for me, the pinnacle of the week was the final day. An eleven-mile hike up to the Appalachian Trail, then along and up to Mt Cammerer and its fire tower. With an elevation gain of 3,045 feet, I hiked back through time from mid-spring to early spring, watching as the elevation grew, the seedheads reverting to florescence. Colonies of Trout

Lily, *Erythronium umbilicatum*, returning from mottled patches of foliage to a carpet of yellow downturn flowers with their recurved petals. Having never explored much at elevation I found new plants to me, one of which being the Painted Trillium, *Trillium undulatum*, found above 2,500 feet with its brushed pink centres. The trail switched its way up the mountain, over stream crossings and through dense forest. The trees grew sparser as I neared the junction with the Appalachian Trail, an ocean of white Fringed Phacelia, *Phacelia fimbriata*, parted across the trail punctuated by Mountain Meadow-Rue, *Thalictrum clavatum*; a serene and pristine landscape. Climbing further still I passed into a more acidic space, with Rhododendrons enveloping the trail forming a tunnel, with Pines further along. A few isolated *Viburnum lantanoides* marked the trail, their lace cap flowers overhanging in the misty air. Reaching the summit, the craggy rocks split either side of the path, with only the hardiest of plants surviving, Red Spruce, *Picea rubens*, American Mountain Ash, *Sorbus americana*, and a variety of Rhododendrons clinging to the exposed edges. By some divine grace I had the fire tower to myself with completely panoramic views of the Smokies, low clouds rolling in to exemplify their namesake. I climbed out further into the rocky outcrop, amongst the dwarfed and stunted trees, to eat and soak in some of the most commanding views I've seen in my life.





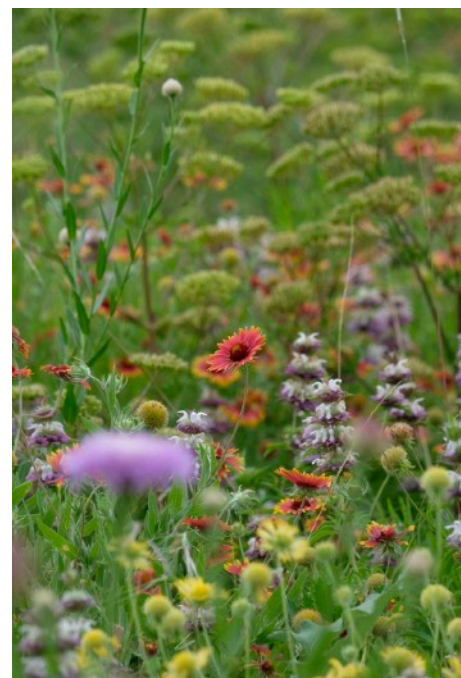
Texas in Early Summer

Part of the Fellowship involves attending the annual American Public Gardens Association Conference, a coming together of all those involved in the public horticulture industry in America. In 2023 it was held in Fort Worth and Dallas, Texas. I had preconceptions of Texas before going, stereotypes of what I had heard before visiting. I was profoundly blown away by the Texas I saw, and I only saw a minuscule section. One of the talks at the APGA conference was 'A Botanical Waltz Across Texas' showing only a small selection of the flora of the Lone Star state, however I quickly learned that of the 10 ecoregions of Texas, 4 are more biodiverse than the whole of the UK, the Pinewoods, the Gulf Coast Prairies and Marshes, Edwards Plateau, and the Trans-Pecos.



While the conference was taking place during the week, I wanted to make the most of my time in a new state, so I took the weekends to explore, predominantly in the Crosstimbers and Prairies ecoregion of the state. The first weekend I explored the surrounding country to Fort Worth and Dallas, going from remnant prairie to remnant prairie, finding myself surrounded by a whole new spectrum of plants. First to Tandy Hill, an urban remnant prairie unspoiled due to its harsh terrain making it unsuitable for farming, but now protected within the city. A skyscraper backdrop to a highly diverse prairie was something I never expected to experience. *Gaillardia pulchella*, *Ratibida columnifera*, and an assortment of *Asclepias* species peppering the landscape intermingling with *Monarda citriodora* and *Centaurea americana* splashing purple amongst the reds and oranges. Leaving the city I passed by the arched gates of ranches, sprawling across the land. Large areas of grassland and prairie have been secured for conservation however less than 1% of Texan Prairie remains today. At dawn I reached Parkhill Prairie.

In dewy grass I saw the crimson flowers of Texas Paintbrush, *Castilleja indivisa*, reflecting the colour of the sunrise. Heading into the prairie the grasses were abundant, *Panicum* and Little Bluestem were prolific. Dotted along the path were the familiar sights of Echinacea, *Echinacea angustifolia*. Dropping down into a lower, wetter section of the Prairie, a lone Crayfish valiantly defended the path. As I write this and double check pictures and identification, it turns out to be the Parkhill Prairie Crayfish, *Procambarus steigmani*, endemic to the Parkhill Prairie, and globally critically imperilled. As I progressed, the familiar faces of the *Ratibida* and *Gaillardia* were still present, but a low ghost white flower was hidden beneath the grass. *Delphinium*

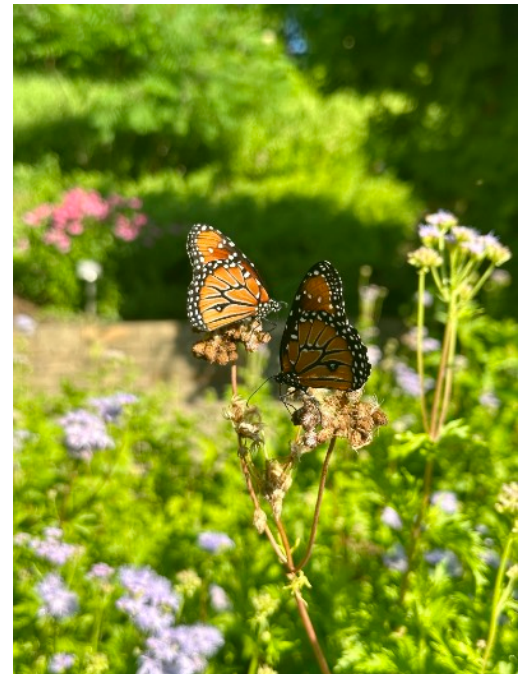


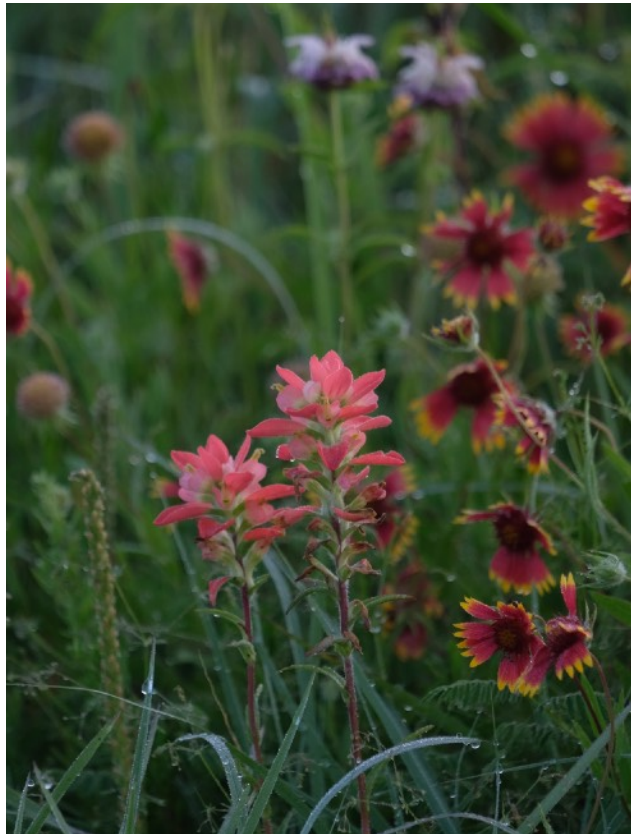
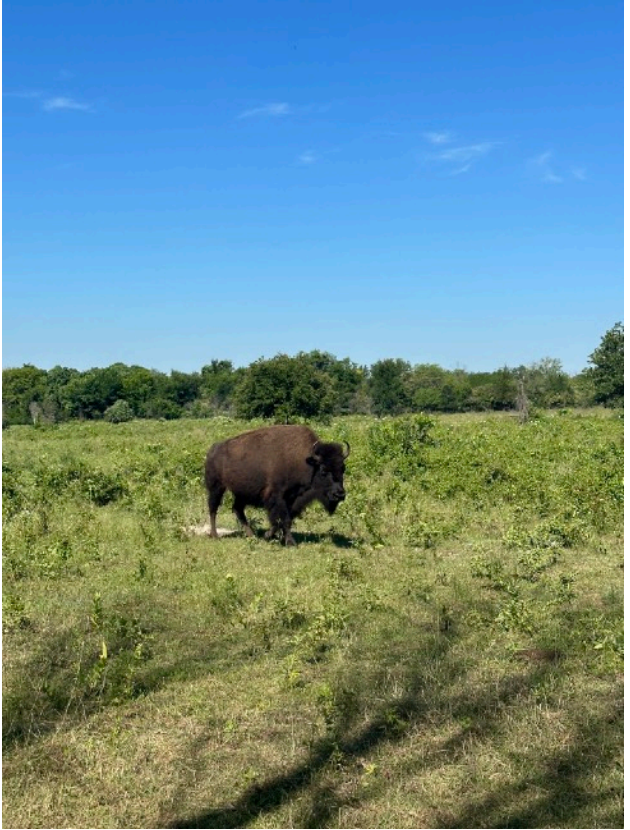


carolinianum, the Carolina Larkspur stood, sparsely flowering along its stem. I spent the rest of the day driving from prairie to prairie, reveling in the stunning roadside verges left to grow and flower. I would come to learn this was thanks to the First Lady, Lady Bird Johnson, who during her husband's (and arguably, her) presidency brought about the Highway Beautification Act, a measure which enshrined and protected the natural beauty of Texas through the flowering roadsides. Eventually I made it to Fort Worth Nature Center. Hiking through the metallic green fields of Little Bluestem, *Schizachyrium scoparium*, I came across the emerging shoots of the Crested Coral Root Orchid, *Bletia spicata*. In the car park I came across an entirely new plant that I have developed an obsession with, Standing Cypress, *Ipomopsis rubra*, a tall biennial with the feathery foliage of cosmos, but with vividly red flutes up the stem. Here I came to see another Texan native that is near threatened, a keystone species that was systematically slaughtered to near extinction, the American Bison, *Bison bison*.

Once the conference was over, I immediately set off further south, wanting to visit two fables of Texas; Austin, and Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. In search of any prairie, I found a few bedraggled state flowers still holding onto their last blooms, the Bluebonnet, *Lupinus texensis*. Having used the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Centre's online resources countless times looking at American wildflowers, it was a pilgrimage of sorts to see the garden in the flesh. A native only garden, it shows examples of how to garden with Texan natives all the while educating the public on them and their desperate need for conservation.

I was wholeheartedly blown away by Texas. I saw more new plants to me than anywhere else in the country so far, more than I could ever list here. I did not expect to see such beauty and conservation despite the daunting prairie loss and the lone star attitude. I believe a considerable part of it is thanks to Lady Bird Johnson and her work throughout the tumultuous period of her and her husband's presidency. Regardless of unwanted ascension, war, and sociocultural conflict, she achieved great things that are continuing to do wonders for the state of Texas and its flora.







The West Coast in Late Summer

Faster than I ever wanted, my time in America was coming to an end. I had been planning a west coast trip over the entirety of my Fellowship, pushing it back and amending it repeatedly thanks to the trepidation of leaving a place I had come to profoundly love. I had taken every recommendation offered to me, I planned and planned again, and finally I had my itinerary. I would travel to Seattle, working my way down visiting gardens and national parks, and seeing as much as of what the west coast had to offer before returning to the UK.

I left Philadelphia for the second-to-last time heading to Seattle, Washington. Hemmed in at the back of the plane, seated in the aisle, I saw nothing of the country from the air until the final descent into Seattle. Through the rounded window I could see the snowy peaks of the Cascades. Sparing no time, I left the airport for the Kitsap Peninsula where Dan Hinkley's home and Nursery, Windcliff, resides. Driving beneath the smoke-obscured summit of Mt Rainier I drove through the coniferous setting of the Pacific Northwest, into smaller towns named after local Indigenous groups and individuals. Positioned across the Salish Sea from Seattle, Windcliff has the phenomenal setting of the iconic Seattle skyline overlooked by Mt Rainier, when wildfires aren't raging. The Indianola nursery grows a unique selection of Dan's own collection and cultivation, growing an amazing collection of *Eucomis*, *Dierama*, *Lilium*, *Kniphofia*, and so much more. Surrounding his beautiful home is a mediterranean marvel of a garden, bristling with vibrant combinations and artistic flourish. My schedule was demanding, and I left soon after for my first night stop, overlooking the Sinclair inlet, set against the mountains of the Olympic National Park. I watched the sunset cast long shadows from the mountain peaks against a peach-tangerine sky as a seal crossed the harbour.

Rising in the dark, I set off around the north side of the Olympic National Park. I made it to the northern extent of the park before the sun rose. Stopping briefly, I watched the rising sun illuminate the mountains from behind, reflecting their silhouettes across the still Lake Crescent. My plan for the day was to explore the Hoh Rainforest. A temperate rainforest averaging 3.55 meters of rain a year, it was an entirely new ecosystem to me. My urgency to arrive early was to ensure a spot to be able to hike. Arriving amongst some of the first, I had the Hall of Mosses to myself. I fell into another world, towering trees carpeted from canopy to earth in Moss and Lichen. Sitka Spruce, Douglas-Fir, Western Red Cedar, Hemlocks, Vine Maples, Big Leaf Maples giving the dense wooded valley its





character. I soon set off along the Hoh River Trail, hoping to get away from the soon to be bustling visitor centre and see some of the majesty of the Pacific Northwest Wilderness. Traversing tree roots and rocks, the trail was quiet apart from the birds and I. Stopping to admire the abundance of understory plants, Salmonberry, *Rubus spectabilis*, creating a miniature canopy above the jet-black stems of Western Maidenhair Fern, *Adiantum aleuticum*, and a mélange of spring ephemeral foliage. After five miles I stopped on the Hoh River for lunch, watching the water pass by and the forested mountain slope flow with the wind. My night stop was Kalaloch beach on the coast, a wide coastline characterful and hazy in the mid-afternoon sun. I walked the beach watching American white pelicans, *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*, effortlessly gliding along the shore in the lowering light set against the jagged coastline. Without intention, this trip had become a way for me to come to terms with leaving America, and the life I had built in my short time there. Falling asleep to the sound of gentle waves rolling up the beach, the Milky Way cool and still above

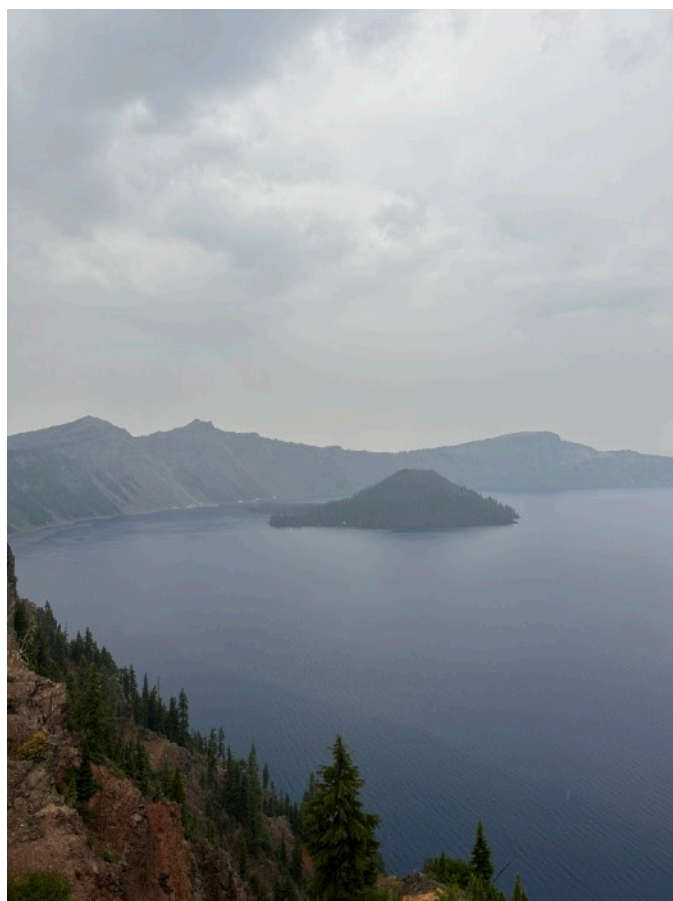
me, I recounted my year and laid there grateful.

As would become regular, I rose early in the chill of the predawn darkness. My next stop was in the heart of Oregon. Once again sacrificing scenic drives for progress, I drove for hours in the dark putting in the time early to get to Crater Lake with plenty of time to spare. Interrupting my journey intending to stop for fuel, I arrived at Mt Hood, a dormant volcano in the Cascades. Despite my initial plan, I was talked into driving up to the highest point possible, where I was greeted by a glorious alpine meadow, filled with *Symphiotrichum*, *Solidago*, *Lupinus*, *Anaphalis*, and *Veratrum*, all overlooked by the peak of Mt Hood. The remainder of the drive through Oregon was unfortunately a blur, dramatic landscapes obfuscated by thick wildfire smoke. Stopping briefly in the orange tinted sky in Bend to pick up local field guides, I continued through dulled environments and extreme fire warnings before entering clearer air. Different national forests bled into each other, and mountains flanked the horizons, until after an eternity on a single straight road, I took a right turn and Mt Thielsen stood proudly, looming in my direction. I pulled over to admire the view of the extinct volcano and its incredible peak. In the scree-like road edge there was a Lupin, silvery and low bearing a lone blue bloom, *Lupinus lepidus*, the Pacific Lupine. Before long I was at my next campsite, under towering Douglas-Firs, *Pseudotsuga menziesii*, and warning of wolves, I set my camp beside Union Creek. Ensuring I had a dry place to





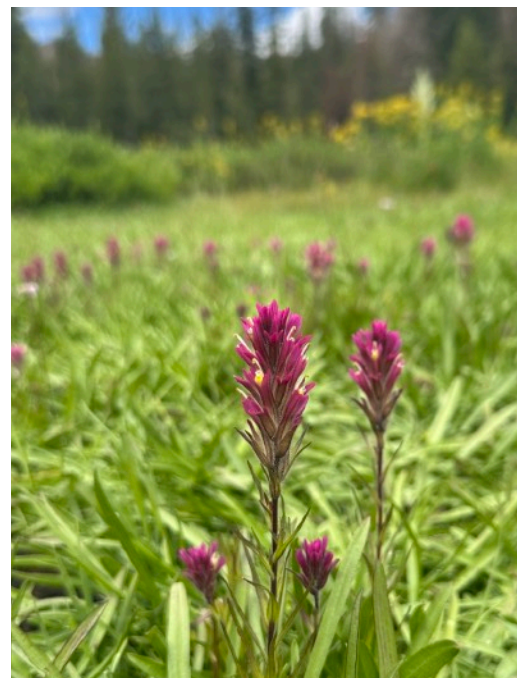
sleep, I headed back out to Crater Lake, my target for the day. The deepest lake in the United States at 594 meters, it was created by the collapse of the volcano Mount Mazama, leaving behind the cinder cone of Wizard Island. Fascinatingly, no rivers run into the lake; it is filled annually by snow and rainfall. While I was there, I was lucky to see firsthand how wildfires start, with lightning striking a nearby peak sending a plume of smoke into the air before rain came to douse it. Following that, I headed back to Union Creek and walked along its edge, along its rocky slopes before resting in its cold waters. Walking back to my tent, the creek edge was rich in flora, with Giant Rattlesnake-Plantain, *Goodyera oblongifolia*, and Spreading Dogbane, *Apocynum androsaemifolium*, in bloom beneath the branching foliage of Salmonberry.





Breaking camp in darkness, I started for California, picking my way through mountainous terrain and the summer-dried expanses of northern California. Passing Mt Shasta the landscape changed, the roadsides became dense with Conifers and Manzanitas. Soon passing into Lassen National Forest, the landscape changed dramatically again, burnt and barren wastelands spread for miles. In 2021, the largest single fire in California history and second largest overall fire burned through the area. The Dixie Fire burned 963,309 acres over four months, resulting in the most expensive fire to fight in the whole of US history. The western extent of the fire reached into Lassen Volcanic National Park, my next stop. Having had very little exposure to wildfires, outside of the controlled burn at Longwood and the smoke from the Canadian wildfires, I was fascinated to see the effect of wildfire on a massive scale and how the landscape was two years after the burn. Driving into the park the damage was clear. Miles and miles of charred remains of trees with sparse if any vegetation growing beneath. The burn scars run the length of the park, however

there were the beginnings of new growth. My first stop was Kings Creek where an active fire was still burning. Immediately around the creek the riparian corridor was lush. The surrounding forest was an obvious husk of its former self, but along the water's edge was a floriferous stream of Broadleaved lupine, Corn Lily, and Arrowleaf Groundsel, *Lupinus latifolius*, *Veratrum californicum*, and *Senecio triangularis*. Amongst the grass there was a dark magenta glow, Meadow Paintbrush, *Castilleja lemmonii*, low but numerous, spreading across the wet area. A California endemic, it is globally vulnerable. At the trail head there were a series of warning signs, active fire warning, active cougar warning, but I could see a little beyond; through the burn there were signs of life. Satin Lupine, *Lupinus obtusilobus*, was prolific through the barren soil. As I walked on, there only seemed to be about three species growing, the Satin Lupine, Pussy Paws, *Calyptidium umbellatum*, and Mountain Coyote Mint, *Monardella odoratissima*. I was in awe of the landscape. The destruction caused by the fire was total, 50-foot trees stood black and dead like teeth of a comb, but woodpeckers hopped from tree to tree, their drumming dampened in the desolation. Scrub Jays, *Aphelocoma coerulescens*, chased each other from branch to branch, while several White-lined Sphinx moths, *Hyles lineata*, shot from flower-to-flower feeding. Soon I entered a clearing where the burned landscape split evenly down one side of the path and the verdant reclamation of the wet area grew. Looking out across the Cold Boiling Lake where bubbles rose from Lassen's volcanic hydrothermal activity, I could see the smoke from the active





fire, a lone fallen tree still burning at its core. In the geothermal lake's edges, Round-leaved Sundew, *Drosera rotundifolia*, grew prolifically, mixed in with Primrose Monkeyflower, *Erythranthe primuloides*. Leaving the lake and continuing on through the uniformly desolate former forest, still only the Lupin, Coyote Mint, and Pussy paws persisted, either being pioneer species or incredibly resilient. A stream from the previous lake led to the next, Crumbaugh Lake. Overlooked by Mt Conard it was a stunning view. The surface was still, and the water's edge was packed with the white spires of California Corn Lily, *Veratrum Californicum*. I could have so easily spent days here walking the torched forest and the streams and lakes, botanizing and bird watching to my heart's content, but my self-imposed schedule kept me moving.

I made the decision to race back to where I would be camping, on the shore of Summit Lake to set up camp, then head out to the hike that was recommended to me prior to leaving Philadelphia - The Cinder Cone. Driving down gravel roads for miles took me to Butte Lake where the trail began. Skirting the edge of the Fantastic Lava Beds beneath the sparse canopy of Lodgepole, Ponderosa, and Jeffrey Pines, *Pinus contorta*, *P. ponderosa*, and *P. jeffreyi*, I started out on the volcanic sand path towards the Cinder Cone. An 860ft pile of volcanic rock formed in two volcanic eruptions in the 1650s, it towered through the trees with a lone steep winding path on one side. Emerging from the forest, the landscape is desolate. Very little grows in the clearly highly acidic environment. Approaching the base, a few isolated Cushion Buckwheat, *Eriogonum ovalifolium* var. *Nivale*, bloomed in the loose volcanic material. Ascending the cone was a challenge, the loose rock moving constantly underfoot; two steps forwards was one step back. Halfway up the slope a lone Ponderosa Pine stood tall, showing the slope to be close to 45 degrees. Reaching the summit, I was alone. No one below on the trail and no one around the crater. I could see for miles in all directions, the view of the park was astounding. Below me were the Painted Dunes and Fantastic Lava Beds, where lava solidified in different ways. I had never seen a landscape like this, barren and alien but entirely captivating. I stood and stared, walking laps around the crater. At the summit a variety of Buckwheats bloomed, Naked and Sulphur, *E. nudum* and *E. umbellatum*. With only the Buckwheat and Pine accompanying me, the landscape was mine to enjoy. In time I began the slow amble back down. Elated and tired, my legs carried me back to the car while I held the view in my mind as long as I could. Returning to the campsite I was still consumed by the Cinder Cone, which competed with thoughts of my time in America ending. I went to the lake, and as the setting sun dipped below Lassen peak, I swam in silence.







Having crossed the halfway mark of my west coast trip, I woke again in the very early morning. The Milky Way still bright above as I packed my camp. Moving west, I was heading to the coast, taking a route through the Northwestern Coastal Range, along long winding roads through isolated country. Eventually the sun broke over the ridges and I could see miles and miles of undulating terrain. Hours passed and eventually I began to descend towards sea level. At the bottom of the valley the forest grew thicker around the road. The gradient of conifers gradually began to change, darker trunks increased in frequency and size. I was amongst the Coastal Redwoods, *Sequoia sempervirens*. Eventually my surroundings changed to a near monoculture of timber monoliths. A single crease of sky visible above the road eclipsed everywhere else by the canopy. I entered Humboldt Redwoods State Park and started on the Avenue of the Giants, a route traversing a series of protected and conserved groves including the world's largest contiguous old-growth Redwood Forest. My destination was the Garden Club of America Grove, the first conservation project of the organisation in 1931, which has now

grown to over 5,100 acres. Treading on a carpet of soft needles underfoot, I walked beneath giants in the dappled morning sun. Very little grew in the understory. Small colonies of Redwood Sorrel, *Oxalis oregana*, and the occasional Western Sword Fern, *Polystichum munitum*, dotted the space between trunk and fallen log. Walking down to the South Fork Eel River I crossed the smooth pebbled beach in the opening. I stood and let the water wash over me. I could hear no traffic or people, just the gentle ripple of water and the songs of birds in the forest. I drove out past the remainder of the Avenue of the Giants with the window down, soft warm winds billowing from the red-tinted bark passing by. Being dwarfed by such immense living things had a profound effect on me, like the feeling of insignificance looking up into the infinite night sky.

I towards the coast, winding through the California roads before the valley peeled away on either side revealing the Pacific Ocean. Dramatic, and coastal scrub disintegrated into rocky cliffs that tumbled into the lapping blue sea, grey obelisks standing above the water. I skirted the coast down towards Mendocino where I would be visiting the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens and staying the night. Under grey dampening cloud I walked the garden, through the Dahlia patches and mixed borders, out to the clifftop benches looking north along the coast, still processing the Coastal Redwoods. The garden was lovely, but how can one follow a Redwood Forest? Although subdued, I made the most of it, watching the water ebb and flow around the rocky coastline, spotting Bluff Lettuce, *Dudleya farinosa* growing out of the cliffside.

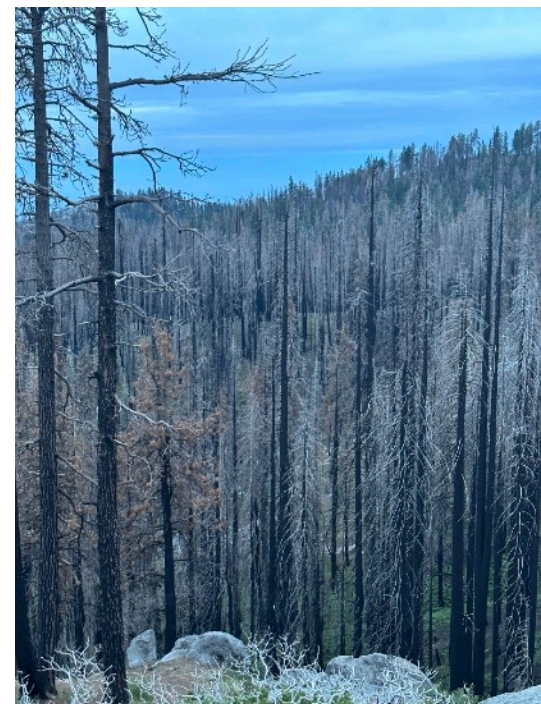




Renewed, I left again before dawn. Heading south towards Napa Valley and wine country, through some of the agricultural heartland of the state. The grey cooler climate of the northern coast soon gave way to the tan dried grasslands reaching from horizon to horizon. I avoided San Francisco, instead heading to Mt Diablo, a datum point for much of Northern California. The heat of summer had spent most of the flora, however a single California Fuchsia, *Epilobium canum*, remained in bloom. My avoidance of population centres was forced to an end, I darted through Oakland and the bay to make it to Filoli. Inspired by Lutyens and Jekyll, the formality of the garden shines. The sunken garden is defined by the clipped *Taxus cuspidata* and sunken pool planted with waterlilies, and the xeric bedding and containers opposing the lawns. Formality echoes on, through the Rose Garden and into the Walled Garden. Vistas are positioned around the garden, often framed by topiary or fastigate Yew. After a few hours, the midday sun got the better of me, and I set back out heading to my next night stop, back into the yellowing rolling

foothills and eastward into the mountains. Climbing ever higher along hairpin roads I crossed into Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Park. Under threat of the first Pacific Hurricane in 80 years, I headed inland, pitching my tent under the shelter of Giant Sequoias, *Sequoiadendron giganteum*. Rushing to make the most of the last few hours of light, I clambered down from my campground over fallen giants to Grant Grove, where the widest tree on earth, General Grant, resides. Fire had reached here too. Reaching black wounds stories high scarred the trunks of Sequoias, upturned stumps as high as houses charred. In the undergrowth parasitic species like Distichous Paintbrush, *Castilleja disticha*, and Woodland Pinedrops, *Pterospora andromedea*, were present in the wet soil and through the leaf litter respectively. In the night the distant rumble of thunder drummed on, and the nearby scream of a Mountain Lion, *Puma concolor*, cut through the air.

After a restless sleep I broke my tent down and left before sunrise. I was eager to make it to my next destination before it was busy. Driving along mountainous ridges I went South, passing through scorched swathes of forest, the dark bristles of torched trees barely lit in the predawn light. I arrived and hiked down the trail to General Sherman, the largest tree by volume in the world. Whether it was the threat of the hurricane or just perfect timing, I had the trail to myself. I made laps around General Sherman again and again. He stands out amongst the other giants of Congress Trail, however, he is damaged. His leader lost and a new limb reaching upwards on one





side. A considerable burn scar at the base means he will not likely grow taller, only outwards. In the surrounding basin, damage is all around. In 2020-2021 alone, fires killed 13-19% of all Giant Sequoias, and in this hallowed ground a number perished. Pacing from tree to tree it soon became clear every tree was fire damaged in some way, a scorch here, a burn scar 50 feet up the trunk there, and for many all that remained was the charred trunk towering above me. It was awe inspiring to see these famous and phenomenal trees, but I was overwhelmed by the realisation this is their decline into oblivion. They grow for thousands of years to reach monumental sizes; a sapling no taller than me can be one hundred years old, and yet there were none. In the drive to the grove there was nothing but destruction and desolation. The understory was a few young pines but little to no Sequoias. There were the occasional colonies of Solidago and Lupine, but these are opportunists. Looking back through the giants at General Sherman from a distance I felt when, not if, the next fire came, could they protect this grove again? If

almost 20% of all Giant Sequoias were lost in the last 3 years alone, would, in my lifetime, return here to a graveyard? Befitting my existential crisis, the impending fallout from the first ever tropical storm warning in Southern California forced me to leave. I drove out along mountainous ridges and steep drops in silence again, the burnt Sequoias still on my mind.

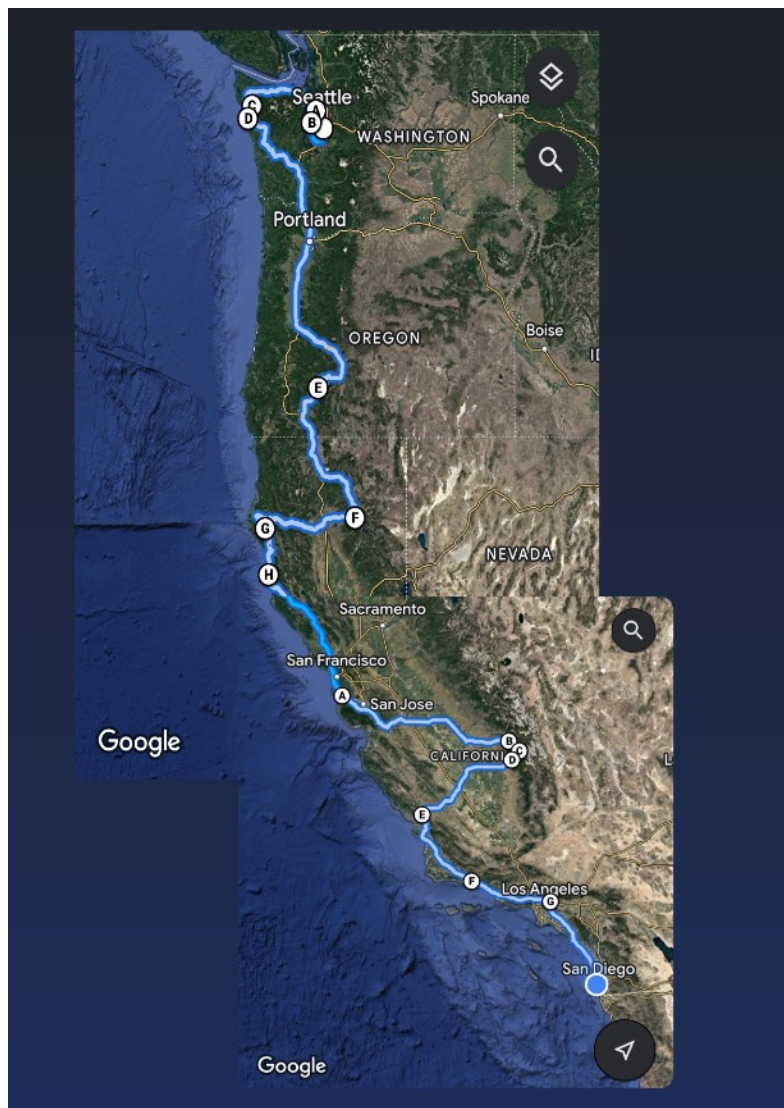
From there on, the Hurricane turned Tropical Storm continued to influence my trip. After staying the night at a family friend's farm, I dodged heavy rain and high winds down to Santa Barbara. Palm fronds littered the street under driving rain and ocean winds. Lotusland, long described to me as one of Americas greatest gardens, was unavailable, but the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden was open. After a visit reminiscent of an English garden, rain soaked and grey, I carried on to what would be my final night stop and second to last day on the west coast. The Huntington was my original destination, but unfortunately the weather stopped this too. After braving the 8-lane insanity of Los Angeles highways I was to meet members of The Diggers, one of the Pasadena Garden Club of America groups, who so kindly offered to host me and to show me the work that they do in their community. The Diggers maintain El Molino Viejo, The Old Mill. The historic mill to the San Gabriel Mission, it has a rich history and is the oldest commercial building in Southern California. The garden is kept beautifully, richly



mediterranean with Agaves, Aloes, and other succulents throughout the space. Following further kindness and generous hospitality of the GCA, I set off the morning of the next day for my final drive to San Diego.

My final destination was not solely horticultural, but personal too. My housemate from Longwood, who welcomed me into Longwood and America with open arms, had moved out to start anew in San Diego. Continuing his streak of good heart, he invited me to visit. He introduced me to the Southern California life, strolling through beautiful pastel neighbourhoods to brunch before visiting beach after beach.

After roughly 2,500 miles I had only scratched the surface of the west coast. Through Hurricane, wildfires, and an earthquake I had seen the unrivalled beauty that is present and under serious threat.



Southern Epilogue

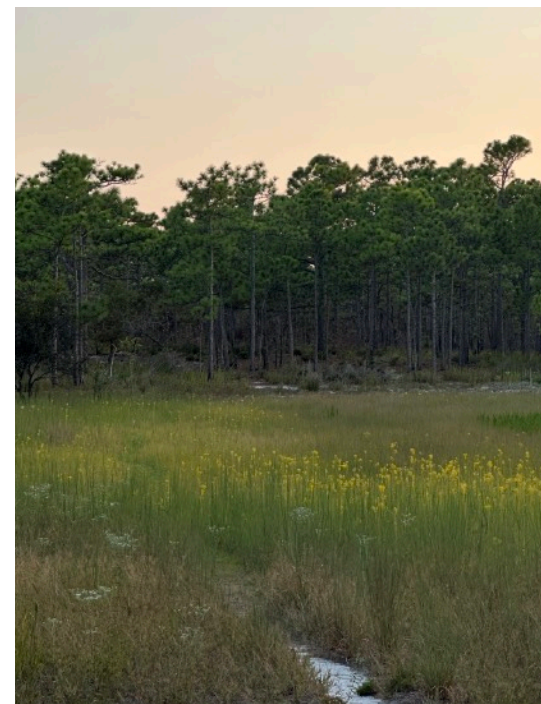
With a few days of time off left to me, I tacked them on to my west coast trip. Taking a redeye flight to Atlanta and then Charleston, I started on a trip back up the east coast, visiting as many people as I could to say goodbye and to thank them for all their help over my year in America. And to look at some plants.



I made a brief visit to Charleston and John's Island to see good friends, followed by a fleeting visit to the Angel Oak, a colossal sprawling Live Oak, before watching the sunset over the marshes of the Ashley River. The next day I drove back to the Northwest of South Carolina for more thank-yous before traveling back to the coast. I headed to Carolina Beach State Park where I would camp for the night, and search for Venus Flytraps, *Dionaea muscipula*, endemic to a 70-mile area around the city of Wilmington, North Carolina. Here in the August heat, it felt like I was alone in the park, passing only two people on the trails. At a trail head there were the vivid berries of American Beautyberry, *Callicarpa americana*, before entering a boardwalk flanked by *Sabal* and *Yucca filamentosa*. Rounding the corner I saw the sunken wet area, Yellow Pitcher Plants, *Sarracenia flava*, rose above the vegetation signalling the conditions. Looking closer there were sundews, and then neatly presented, a handful of Venus Flytraps growing in the sand. Overhead the Longleaf Pines and

Turkey Oaks, *Pinus palustris* and *Quercus laevis* gently swayed on the ocean breeze. After seeing my goal plant so early on, I walked aimlessly on, crossing the scarcely vegetated sand beneath nodding pines, and dodging broad webs spun by the palm sized Golden Silk Spider, *Trichonephila clavipes*. Loose sand sank and spread beneath my feet as I went over and down the dunes. Reaching the sea, I sat on driftwood amongst the Saltmarsh Cordgrass, *Sporobolus alterniflorus* at the water's edge, watching the pelicans float along the wind before diving for fish. Slowly the sun sank, and I turned back for camp, taking a different route back. The sky turned a sapphire blue and the Pines parted into a grassy field speckled and rife with yellow; the Tall Pinebarren Milkwort, *Polygala cymosa*.

After a hot and humid night on the sand, I woke and made my way to a local swamp that was highly recommended to me. Down a small road surrounded by pines I pulled into an unmarked sandy



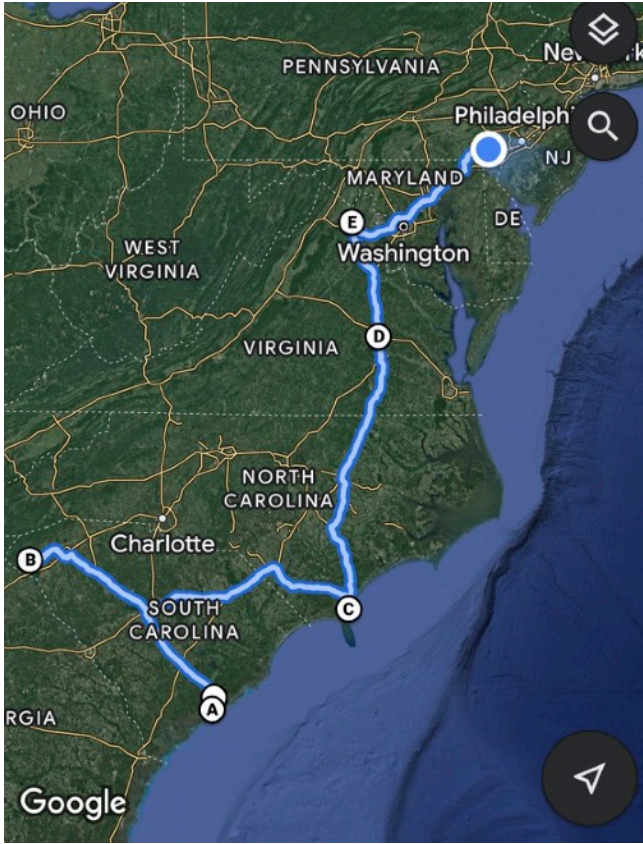
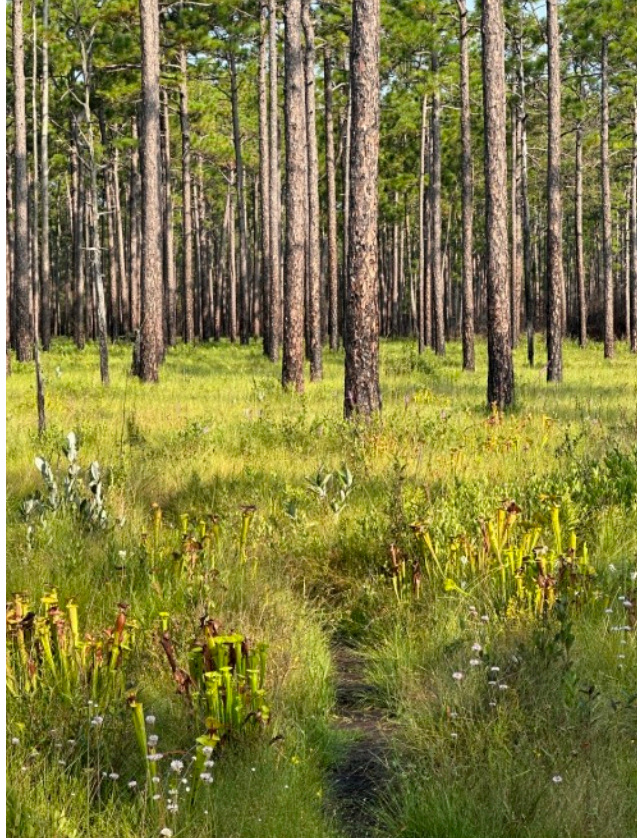


track. A discrete noticeboard met me, showing some of what could be found further into the swamp. Following the only trail out, I snaked through the undergrowth and through thick mud, through burnt scrub and into a clearing. Before me was a pristine Longleaf Pine Savanna. Home to at least 14 different insectivorous plants, I almost immediately saw clumps of Venus Flytraps and Sundews littering the pine needles. I was already ecstatic at this point, but could see still more further in. Purple spires of Blazing Stars, *Liatris sp.*, emerged from the grass and clusters of Cinnamon Fern, *Osmundastrum cinnamoneum*. The rounded heads of Grassleaf Barbara's-Buttons, *Marshallia graminifolia*, decorated the trail edge, while communities of Purple and Yellow Pitcher Plants were dotted between the Pines. Stopping to take pictures of nearly every plant around me, I almost walked clean by a colony of Orange Fringed Orchids, *Platanthera ciliaris*, in perfect full flower. I stood alone in wonder, chuckling out loud to myself – this was without a doubt one of the most amazing places I had ever been in my life.

The trail led on, past evermore Pitcher Plants, Barbara's-Buttons, and Milkworts. Up ahead I could see the brilliant red of something familiar yet new to me. A plant I had dreamt of seeing in person for years prior to coming to the states after seeing it posted online by Southern botanists year after year. In dense grass, there stood a single Pine Lily, *Lilium catesbaei*. Facing upward, her flawless red petals arch back towards the sandy ground, a purple speckled yellow throat looking skyward, anthers and stigma stood proud above. I stayed and admired the Pine Lily for an age. Reciprocity on my mind, the American landscape had gifted me an opportunity to see a plant I had long wanted to behold, and here it was on my final botanizing trip of my year abroad. I spent another hour or so exploring and observing a remarkable world, in awe of what is possible in protecting and conserving our beautiful planet.

My final night stop was back in Richmond, seeing the Lewis Ginter and the now completed Incanto installation. The following morning, I set off to Pennsylvania via Oak Spring Garden Foundation. Visiting a friend in residency there, we walked under laden arches, through decorated summerhouses, and through garden gates into the courtyard garden of Bunny Mellon's home. We talked plants and futures, and I relished the company of a close friend I wouldn't see for some time. Relationships like this formed the backbone of my Fellowship.





Departure

Any attempt to summarise my Fellowship is inadequate. I cannot recount all the amazing opportunities I was given, all the places I visited, all the wonderful people I met, and all the flora and fauna I saw. I have learnt more than I ever imagined; about horticulture, nature, and myself. I was given the opportunity of a lifetime, and I am and will be eternally grateful to the people and organisations responsible. With deep, sincere thanks to The Royal Horticultural Society, The Garden Club of America, and Longwood Gardens, for selecting me as the RHS/GCA Interchange Fellow for 2022/2023. Thank you to all the individuals at Longwood, Chanticleer, in Pennsylvania, Texas, California, Washington, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia who gave me bottomless support, guidance, advice, and friendship.



When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

When Death Comes

Mary Oliver