

Royal Horticultural Society & Garden Club of America
Interchange Fellowship

Final Report
February 2025 – August 2025



Libby Bettney

Longwood Gardens, Kennett Square, Pennsylvania

Contents

February

Production	3
Prescribed burn	3

March

New York	4
----------	---

April

Ideas Garden	5
--------------	---

May

Chanticleer	6
-------------	---

June

American Public Gardens Association Conference	8
Oak Spring Foundation	10
New England	11

July

North Carolina	13
Aquatics	14

August

Land Stewardship	15
Chicago	15
Thanks	17

References	19
------------	----

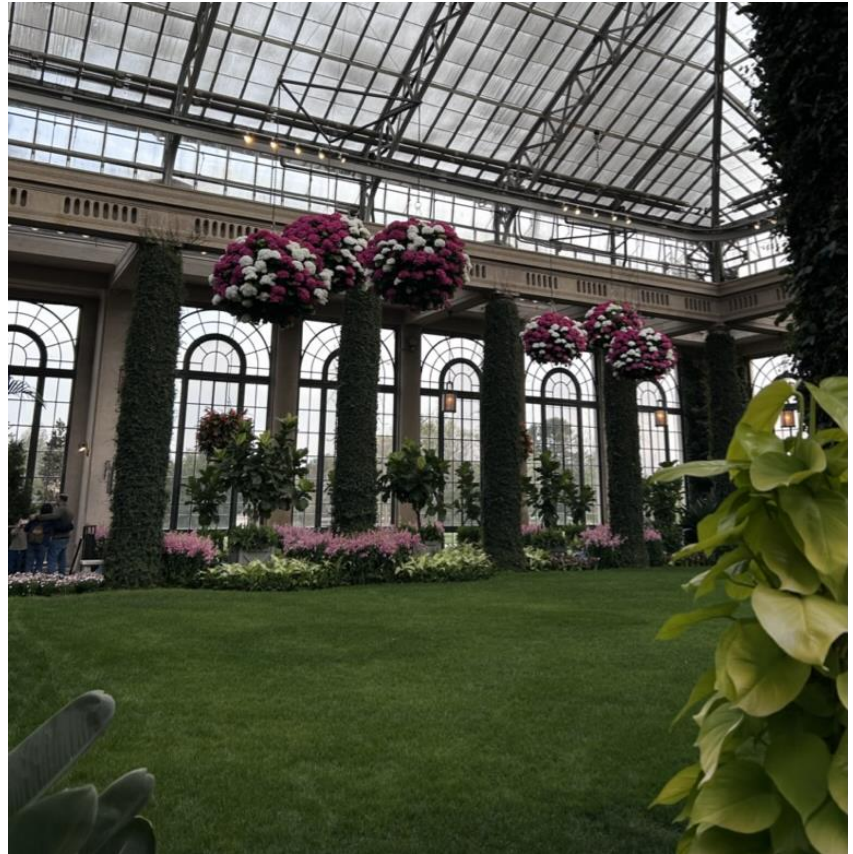
February

Production

My previous report documented my arrival at Longwood Gardens, my work throughout autumn and winter and my first trip to Southern California. This report picks up where we left off, still firmly in the grips of winter and experiencing my first ice storm. Being a gardener however, you must always trust that the warmer weather will come and your efforts in the colder months will be rewarded and so that is where I found myself, taking chilly walks to the production greenhouses of Longwood, preparing for spring. These huge facilities are out of public view, producing a whole array of plants to feed the hungry conservatories and outdoor landscapes. It was my first task whilst in production to get to grips with making baskets to form pink and white hydrangea clouds for the conservatories. Several horticulturalists worked together to create many large spheres, taking the small specimens of *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Floencia' and 'Jip Pink' and threading them through wires on baskets, careful not to knock any of the buds. Gaps were filled with moss and compost poured into their centres. The process was repeated, following a careful pattern working our way up, until a perfectly round cloud was formed. They were then carefully watered and fertilised until they were ready for display in mid-April, hoping guests will remember to take their eyes away from the display beds and look skywards.



Winter morning walks to work



Hydrangea baskets in all their glory

A brief hiatus from my time in the greenhouses came in the form of assisting in the prescribed burns of the meadows, a unique opportunity and one which could not be passed on. Historically, meadows in the eastern U.S have naturally

burned due to lightning storms and indigenous communities using fire as a method to maintain plant communities.¹ There are numerous benefits to the burn including the control of invasive, non-native plants, removing the built-up layer of thatch and the better retention of heat by blackened soil to improve germination of certain native species. It also prevents the encroachment of woody plants that would otherwise dominate, turning the meadow back into forest. On 26th February a mix of interns and staff came together to carry out a controlled burn in the meadow and an additional piece of Longwood property, continuing this traditional management technique.



Assisting with the controlled burn



NYBG Orchid Show

March

The GCA meet annually in New York at the beginning of the month and I was kindly invited to present an update on my time so far. It also provided an opportunity to further explore the horticulture of the city. I was able to take in part of Central Park, the scale of which I struggled to comprehend. I walked the length of the Highline, quiet at this time of year on a chilly morning and I visited Brooklyn Bridge Park. On my final day I was able to squeeze in a quick trip to New York Botanic Garden before returning back to Longwood. I was kindly given a tour of their facilities and saw their array of witch hazel, a natural favourite at this time of year as they are the most colourful of the winter flowering shrubs. The frost hardy orange, red and yellow flowers stand out joyfully on a grey day, *Hamamelis japonica* 'Shibamichi red' becoming a new favourite. The gardens were hosting their Orchid Show, using boldly painted walls to frame the orchids and juxtaposing fence post cactus (*Lophocereus marginatus*) to complete their display. The conservatories kept providing until the very end, even walking under an archway of jade vine (*Stonglodon macrobotrys*) to exit.

¹ Kirsty Wilson, 'Fire in the Meadow: A Beneficial Burn' (Longwood Gardens, 8th April 2016) <<https://longwoodgardens.org/blog/2016-04-08/fire-meadow-beneficial-burn>>

Back at production I was able to spend time with the chrysanthemum specialist learning how they graft and the work that goes in to training the thousand bloom mum and the other forms. I had the opportunity to practice grafting in the ‘cleft’ style, joining chrysanthemums to *Artemisia annua* rootstock. This rootstock is more resilient to the summer heat as well as having increased disease and insect resistance compared to the chrysanthemum roots.

Our intern trips took us to Philadelphia and Washington DC. The Philadelphia Flower Show, the largest of its kind in North America is held in early March. The flowers and plants sat in contrast to an indoor setting, bordered by carpet and lights over head – yet the displays provided joy for the thousands who attend and a hint of what can be achieved in the season to come. We hoped to catch Washington DC full of cherry blossom, however, we were a few days shy of peak bloom yet the saucer magnolias of the Smithsonian gardens (*Magnolia x soulangeana*) more than made up for it.

Slowly the countryside around Longwood was waking up, attending a Snowdrop event at Winterthur confirmed this as the galanthus, winter aconites, leucojum and crocus were raising their heads across the banks. Whilst this was happening skunk cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*) was also doing the same across the boggy areas of the landscape. I learnt that it is one of few plants that exhibits thermogenesis, the ability to metabolically generate heat and flower whilst there is still snow on the ground.²



Magonila in a Smithsonian garden

April

By April I had made my way back to the Ideas Garden at Longwood, into the ornamental kitchen garden. There was a whole array of seeds to plant, many of which were new to me. Some of the sowings included: pea eggplant (*Solanum torvum*) originating from Central America, African eggplant (*Solanum aethiopicum*), bitter melon (*Momordica charantia*) a South East Asian gourd and rat tail radish (*Raphanus sativus*) which was direct sown. We made a brand-new bog garden, digging and lining holes before filling them with a peat sand mix. Acknowledging the substantiality concerns of using Canadian peat, the beds were used as an opportunity to exhibit the plants carefully curated by the research team at Longwood including *Sarracenia leucophylla*, *Calopogon oklahomensis* and *Calopogon tuberosus*.

After a patient wait Spring had arrived in full force and there was a wealth of tulips on display at Longwood, the infamous brick walk that we had worked so hard on in the autumn was awash with colour, the square fountain was ablaze with hot tones and our intern trip to Chanticleer was perfectly timed to see an incredible display of blossom. In the autumn I had helped plant a range of naturalising bulbs in a new lawn area in the West and by mid-April the display here was beautiful, they had arisen in a scattering beneath the oaks and amidst the fescue. The perennial border around the kitchen garden was also a highlight. Clary sage (*Salvia sclarea*), giant Korean celery (*Dystaenia*

² Susan Mahr, ‘Skunk Cabbage, *Symplocarpus foetidus*’ (University of Wisconsin-Madison) <<https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/articles/skunk-cabbage-symplocarpus-foetidus/>>

takeshimana), sea kale (*Crambe maritima*) and rhubarb (*Rheum rhaponticum*) combined to make the bright spring green display whilst Dyer's woad (*Isatis tinctoria*) provided bursts of bright yellow and white irises punctuated the border.

May

Andalusia Symposium

Graciously, I was invited to attend the Andalusia symposium, an incredibly picturesque historic house set against the Delaware River. There were four speakers throughout the day. Charlotte Harris, of the UK based Harris Bugg Studio spoke of designing with stories of place from using the canals as inspiration for the paths in the kitchen garden at RHS Bridgewater to creating a feminist rose palette on the Isle of Man. The Head Gardener of Beth Chatto's garden in Essex explained in detail the history and design of the garden as well as their work externally, in nearby housing estates and in temporary locations in the town. I left the day inspired by the emphasis on sustainability and ecology.

Chanticleer

I was provided the opportunity to work for two weeks at Chanticleer. I was kindly welcomed into the family there, given the opportunity to work with all the horticulturalists across their areas, learning from everyone and being introduced to many new plants. The diversity of garden styles at Chanticleer is vast, from gravel gardens to Asian woods to cutting gardens and teacup fountains. Despite the vastly different planting palettes there is a cohesion between all the gardens, with seamless transitions between areas. My two weeks there left me with such an appreciation for the imaginative and artistic style of gardening the horticulturalists employ. Each kindly took the time to introduce me to their areas, Lisa explained how the ruin garden is built on the footprint of an old house and emphasis falls on textures here with *Acer davidii* forming a key component. Her gravel garden has a southwestern exposure featuring a matrix of resilient plants that frequently self-seed. In mid-May the *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *Wulfenii* was awakening and acid yellow of the dyer's woad was shining bright. The *Pulsatilla vulgaris* seed heads and the horned poppy (*Glaucium flavum* x *Glaucium grandiflorum*) stood out to me and Lisa also introduced me to moon carrot (*Seseli gummiferum*) a curious drought tolerant biennial that self-seeds freely.

Around the Chanticleer House I learnt more about the flowering lawn, an area of hard fescue densely planted. Cow parsley (*Anthriscus sylvestris*) rose the highest, I have been used to seeing this grow on the verges of country lanes back home, but was now seeing how it could be managed in a garden. It comes with its challenges, it can easily self-seed and take over along with a large ring of basal foliage shading out competing plants. Tim, the horticulturalist caring for the area, pointed out he was now trialling Baltic parsley (*Cenolophium denudatum*) as an alternative. *Hesperis matronalis* and *Camassia leichtlinii* 'Pink Star' were highlights of the lawn at this time too. Tim took the time to explain his considerations when refreshing annual sections of larger perennial beds, as we swapped out spring for summer annuals, mixing bromeliads with the last of the Virginia bluebells (*Aechmea* 'Tropic Torch Red' and *Mertensia virginica*). He explained how he used *Lilium formosanum* seed heads and a repeating plant vocabulary to draw the eye through the bed. Just opposite the flowering lawn I spotted *Helianthemum* 'Wisley Pink', which I thought was incredibly pretty with its delicate pink petals and bright yellow stamens – it is also drought tolerant.

Przemyslaw's area of the creek was awash with *Camassia leichtlinii* 'Blauwe Donau,' bright colours of *Primula japonica* and a carpet of lush spring green. He explained the newly finished project of widening the creek, done in an attempt to slow the flow of water through the garden and reduce flooding in the wider landscape. It was here I was introduced to a plant with one of the best common names I've heard so far, Turkey tangle frog fruit (*Phyla nodiflora*). It can be

used as a ground cover, spreading vigorously and it tolerates both drought and flooding whilst also providing nectar for butterflies.³

Being able to help with the floral displays for the public areas was a real treat, meaning I was able to harvest in the cutting garden and wider garden which took me to the *Viburnum macrocephalum*, forming a scene reminiscent of a fairy-tale with Virginia bluebells and a yellow tree peony. It was also a joy to see Darian create with *Syringa reticulata* ssp. *amurensis*.



Viburnum macrocephalum at Chanticleer



Hellebores and strawberries in a monochromatic arrangement

³ Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, 'Phyla nodiflora' (University of Texas at Austin)
<https://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=phno2>

I worked with David in the Teacup garden, appreciating his ingenuity in regards to containers, from herbs planted in industrial size colanders, crocheted liners and smell of *Viola cornuta* [Sorbet® Honeybee] planted at nose height in a wall mounted container. It was also a joy to work with Grant and Adam, both previous RHS/GCA fellows who spent a year in the UK. Grant is now the propagator at Chanticleer, spending the day with him, he explained to me the components involved in their lightweight potting mix and that cuttings should be placed at the edges of a pot as there is the most oxygen there. We took heel cuttings of *Acer negundo* ‘Kelly’s Gold,’ sitting attractively at the entrance to the garden with its chartreuse foliage. Joe made me think about laying out plants in a completely new light - he explained your pattern should have a story and to consider where you are planting and how the plant would naturally disperse, perhaps it has runners, perhaps the plant is on a bank and its seed would roll downhill, or perhaps it would be taken by the prevailing wind. All these considerations and thoughtful details combine to create such a magical garden, my time at which I greatly, greatly appreciated.

Returning to Longwood Gardens, the kitchen garden team were incredibly busy. Harvesting as much as we could for the restaurant, sending edible flowers such as *Hesperis matronalis*, *Antirrhinum majus*, *Calendula officinalis* and *Viola x wittrockiana* to the kitchens. Some of the early harvests included mustard and nasturtium leaves, strawberries and honeyberry (*Lonicera caerulea* ‘Magadan’) a tart berry that the birds hadn’t discovered hiding on the hillside.

June

American Public Gardens Association Conference

Summer had certainly arrived and with it a diary full of exciting travels. As part of my time as a Fellow I had the opportunity to attend the American Public Gardens Association Conference, this year it was being held in Denver, Colorado. Spread across 4 days, people who make up all components of the public garden experience come together



Rosa ‘Harrison’s Yellow’



Denver Botanic’s conservatory

to exchange ideas and information. The generous nature of the public garden community is embodied as people freely provide advice, sharing their research and experience. Throughout the days I attended a variety of talks from managing change, climate change in historic gardens to the acquisition of water rights in the desert. I valued the direct addressing of challenges with water in our ever-changing climate. A tour of Boulder highlighted the potential of crevice gardens. A perfect example of one sits outside a nondescript sports complex. The garden contains plants from the steppe biome, is never watered and irregularly cared for yet thrives. The same can be said for the roses bordering the far side of the complex, pictured is *Rosa* 'Harrison's Yellow', also known as the rose of Texas. The tour given by Kevin Williams, horticulturalist at Denver Botanic Garden had a resounding impact on me. Kevin maintains an area of perennials employing deep sand beds, using 3 inches of sand to smother weeds and sow seeds in to. The sand is free draining and additionally retains more heat in the soil, the results are even more extreme conditions than the steppe climate of Denver. Therefore, it is only those plants tolerant of extreme climates that thrive, ensuring a diverse and resilient planting. From this tour I came away with a list of plants to admire for their resilience, in particular: *Salvia ringens*, *Penstemon palmeri* and *Sphaeralcea ambigua* amongst many others. In the larger garden the roses were perfect, their crevice garden was an incredible piece of art work and their iris garden was in full splendour. I saw an example of Zuni waffle beds, beds moulded into squares with higher sides to resemble a waffle. These beds have traditionally been used by the Zuni Tribe in New Mexico and now these beds were being used to conserve moisture in the dry conditions of Denver. The garden is presided over by their conservatory, the eco-brutalist construction merges the bold and heavy forms of the building with the organic forms of plants.



Gentiana acutis and *Aquilegia* spp. at Betty Ford



Aspen groves as part of the borrowed landscape

I took the opportunity whilst out in Colorado to spend a day travelling to the Betty Ford Alpine Garden in Vail. The garden is the highest elevation botanical garden in North America, sitting at 2,700m in the Rocky Mountains. With Aspen groves on the mountain side forming their borrowed landscape, the garden features a collection of alpine plants not just from North America but around the world. The drive from Denver took us by snow-capped mountains and through mountain tunnels to the alpine garden where we saw tulips and primulas blooming in June.

Oak Spring Garden Foundation

I was kindly awarded a scholarship by the Oak Spring Garden Foundation to attend the Great English Estates and Landscapes course at their property in Virginia. I saw this as an opportunity to increase my knowledge of the historic estates I had previously worked at in the UK and further understand their history and wider context. The course ran over 4 days, a small group of us gathered from a variety of sectors to deepen our comprehension from country houses in the middle ages to the decline of the country estates from the late 19th Century onwards. As well as providing us with the broad context it also allowed for focus on key features of a country estate such as the walled kitchen garden, deer parks and farm buildings. The course was enriched by its setting at Oak Spring. Time in the library, the incredible collection of Bunny Mellon, allowed us to view 18th Century illustrations of the estates by Knyff and Kip as well as Humphry Repton's Red Books. We saw incredible botanic illustrations from the 17th Century. It felt an honour to be able to walk around the beautiful grounds and estate, under the crab apple arbour *Malus* 'Mary Potter' and see the trompe l'oeil by Fernand Renard connecting two glasshouses. My time at the foundation was enriching and a real highlight of my time as a fellow.



Views from Oak Spring Foundation



Views over the walled garden at Oak Spring

A week back in the kitchen garden at Longwood, included harvesting for the restaurant, staking the summer display beds and learning the 'Florida Weave' method for staking tomatoes. On the 19th June a huge storm passed through the gardens. The next day involved helping to clean up the damage caused; numerous trees were down, huge limbs ripped from the tree and I even saw evidence of a lightning strike on a tree.

New England

Quickly I was off on another trip, heading north to New England. I was provided with the opportunity to volunteer at Tiny Hearts, a cut flower farm in the Hudson Valley of New York. It also happened to be the week of some of the hottest temperatures of the year so far – luckily their walk-in cooler provided a perfect place for discussing tasks and the next job. Jenny kindly showed me her operation, explaining how tulip forcing earlier in the year works, she highlighted some of her favourite species to me and just as valuably, the ones she avoids.

Into Massachusetts I stopped at the New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill, generously welcomed by the team and given a tour. We discussed some of the challenges that come along with public gardening and the diversification of the garden to include weddings and Christmas light displays. The woodland area of the garden softly houses beautiful features including a swirling dead hedge and moss steps in the shade. Grace Elton, CEO of NEBG, and former RHS/GCA Scholar had kindly organised a visit Peter and Shirely Williams' garden. A large garden, wrapping round a historic farmhouse. The garden varies from formal elliptical swimming pools with an enclosing border to meadows and naturalistic waterways on the edge of the woods filled with native planting. There was a shady border brimming with texture and form it was also the first time I had ever heard about or seen a Moon garden, a garden designed to be viewed in the moonlight with plants chosen for their ability to reflect the gentle white light of the moon. The Full Moon Maple (*Acer japonicum* 'Aconitifolium') and ghost ferns (*Athyrium* 'Ghost') sit on top of a layer of reflective glass chippings – an enchanting little corner of the garden. As we approached the front of the house, passing a traditional vegetable garden, the American pillar roses were in peak bloom and just outside the front door the landscape features a quietly extravagant vegetable garden, with a rill flowing by granite edged raised beds.



Granite beds and a rill through the vegetable garden



Rosa 'American Pillar' growing along the fence

Into my third state of the trip and on to Rhode Island to see Sakonnet Garden. Instantly you were presented with the intimate and charismatic nature of this garden created by the use of small garden rooms. Initially taken through an archway of rhododendron trunks carpeted by moss, this entrance set the tone for the rest of the exploration through the space, meandering through a host of different rooms with distinct personalities. In particular I was surprised by a room of acid greens and neon yellow as swathes of golden Japanese forest grass and variegated comfrey surrounded the path way (*Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola', *Symphytum* spp.). The rooms contrasted with the pollinator garden, emerging from the defined and enclosed rooms in to this garden, the sky felt bigger here as you overlook the fields beyond. Artistic features are constant throughout the garden, from carefully placed chairs, to elaborate bug hotels and the most creative reuse of old hose pipe I've seen, as it was weaved into fence panelling. This garden, with an entrance barely noticeable from the road felt like finding hidden treasure. Pushing further north to the Arnold Arboretum in Boston I was kindly shown round by the horticulturalist who cares for the rosaceae collection. My favourite sight of the day being the sun streaming through the panicles of the *Cotinus coggyria*, it was certainly living up to its common name of smoke tree. My timing was right to see the most popular feature in the rose garden, an arbor brimming with *Rosa* 'Crimson Rambler' flowering at the entrance to the collection. Throughout the week I again experienced the kindness and hospitality of the GCA members and Longwood alumni, welcoming me into their homes, feeding me and showing me the best local swimming spots.



Neon yellows in Sakonnet Garden



Sunlight through a smoketree

July

North Carolina

July afforded me the opportunity to travel again, this time heading south to North Carolina. Basing myself in Raleigh I was soon greeted by the crapemyrtles (*Lagerstroemia* spp.) lining the streets, ubiquitous with the state. My first stop was meeting the kind people at the JC Raulston Arboretum. It was here I first learnt about crapemyrtle bark scale, which penetrates the bark, sucks the sap and excretes honeydew⁴ - it is able to spread rapidly. Although not fatal, the high volume of crapemyrtles in the state means the pest can have far reaching spread and impact. I also learnt more about the impact of rose rosette disease (RRD), caused by a virus spread by a small mite. It results in deformed stems, leaves and flowers, red succulent growth being a prominent indicating factor. It ultimately leads to the death of the plant.⁵ RRD played a significant role in the redesign of part of the next garden I visited, the Sarah P Duke Garden. Here their rose garden had been heavily impacted by RRD and without a known cure they were forced to redesign the traditional rose garden. Instead there is now a diverse range of companion plants amongst several, more naturally resistant, roses. The additions include some you may predict in a rose garden such as echinacea and dill, and some you would not traditionally think of such as agave and golden barrel cactus. The updates make for a longer season of interest as well as promoting increased sustainability, I appreciated their adaptable response to the problem rather than stubbornly continuing to fill the garden with ill-fated roses.



Juniper Level Crevice Garden



The Rose Garden at Sarah P Duke

⁴James Baker, 'Crapemyrtle Bark Scale' (NC State Extension) <<https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/crapemyrtle-bark-scale>>

⁵Missouri Botanical Garden, 'Rose Rosette' (Missouri Botanical Garden, September 2024) <<https://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/gardens-gardening/your-garden/help-for-the-home-gardener/advice-tips-resources/insects-pests-and-problems/diseases/viruses/rose-rosette>>

I was fortunate enough to meet with the two curators of the native plant garden, guiding me through their trillium walk, I learnt a large proportion of the total species of these plants are native to the SE United States. We walked past their pond, where the margins are filled with sarracenia, before entering their Piedmont Prairie, an interpretation of the vast grasslands that previously covered around 80 000 miles sq. The native grasses and flowers that once covered such vast amounts of land are now consigned to a very few places throughout the region. This section of the garden at Sarah P Duke contains plants propagated from local ecotype seed such as *Liatris Pilosa*, *Pycnanthemum incanum* and *Penstemon digitalis*. My final visit of the trip was to the Juniper Level Botanic Garden, standing out was the 300ft long crevice garden, made using the concrete of a dismantled building that was previously on site. The garden combines expected and unexpected plants from agaves to hellebores and even a desert sun fern, the South African *Cheilanthes eckloniana* 'Naude's Neck.'

At Longwood and I joined Tim and Suzanne in the Waterlily Courtyard, which had reopened in the spring after being renovated. The pools were full of day and night blooming tropical, hardy and hybrid waterlilies. The Victorias were growing rapidly by the day, increasingly dominating the pools. Hot days were spent in waders, creating definition between the specimens, editing and clarifying the marginal planting that borders the southern edge of the ponds. These plantings were full of edible plants, *Colocasia esculenta* for taro chips, *Ipomoea aquatica* as water spinach and *Eleocharis dulcis* producing water chestnuts. I learnt more about one understated feature of the pools, sat amongst the many tropical water lilies is the yellow flowering *Nymphaea stuhlmannii*⁶. Native to a small area of Tanzania and rarely seen, the species had not been cultivated for over 100 years however, Longwood, working with partners, has recently imported tubers and successfully produced new plants from seed which are now on display for the guests to see. A dominating feature of the court is the aforementioned Victoria: *Victoria cruziana*, *V. amazonica* and *V. 'Longwood Hybrid'* which sit proudly, slowly pushing any competing plants out the way with their sharp spines. Frequently, we would remove old leaves and spent flowers trying our best to avoid splinters. I was also lucky enough to see Tim explain the procedure they undertake to pollinate the plants to produce the *V. 'Longwood Hybrid'*.



View of the new West Conservatory from the Waterlily Courtyard



Taking a break with the *Victoria cruziana*

⁶ Katie Mobley, 'A Dazzling Return: Our Waterlily Court' (Longwood Gardens, 7th May 2025) <<https://longwoodgardens.org/blog/2025-05-07/dazzling-return-our-waterlily-court>>

August

Land Stewardship

My final placement was in the Land Stewardship team of Longwood Gardens, the team responsible for the meadow and hundreds of acres surrounding the gardens. From the team I learnt about the hard work it takes to constantly be managing invasive species, hand pulling and clearing tree cages of hops (*Humulus japonicus*), mile a minute (*Persicaria perfoliata*), purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) and oriental bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*). The meadow was glowing with a rich tapestry of native plants such as milkweed (*Sclepias syriaca*), joe-pye weed (*Eutrochium purpureum*), mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*) and dense blazing star (*Liatris spicata*). I was seeing the goldenrod (*Solidago sphacelata*) beginning to bloom yellow, a strong memory of when I first arrived in September and a sure sign that I'd seen all four seasons at Longwood.



Early mornings in Longwood's Meadow

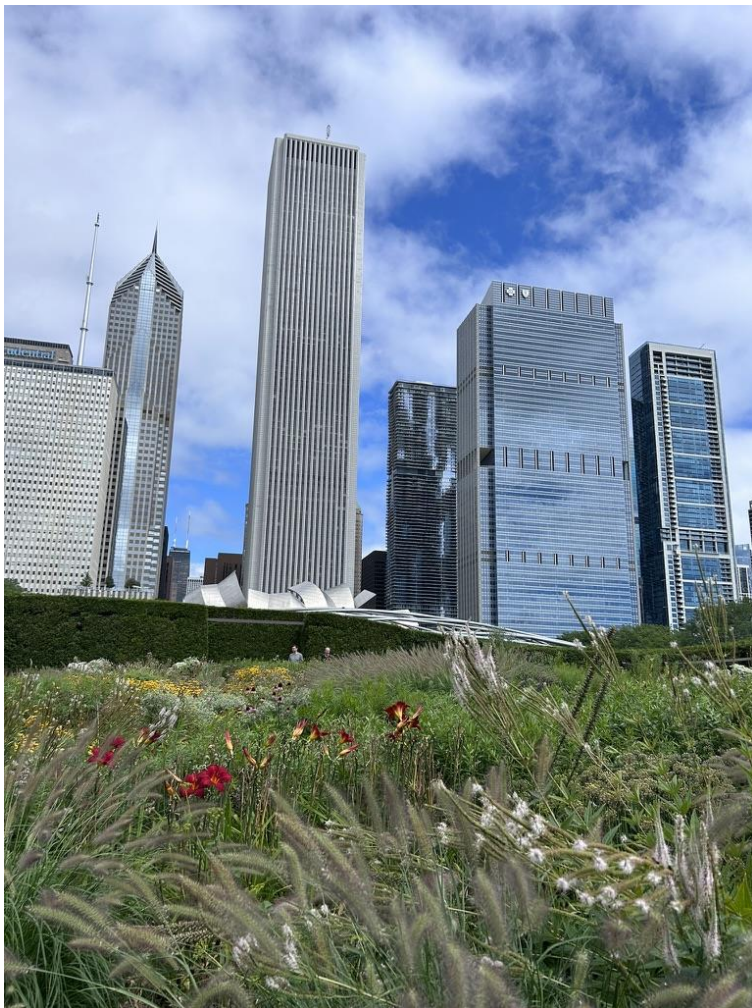


Chicago

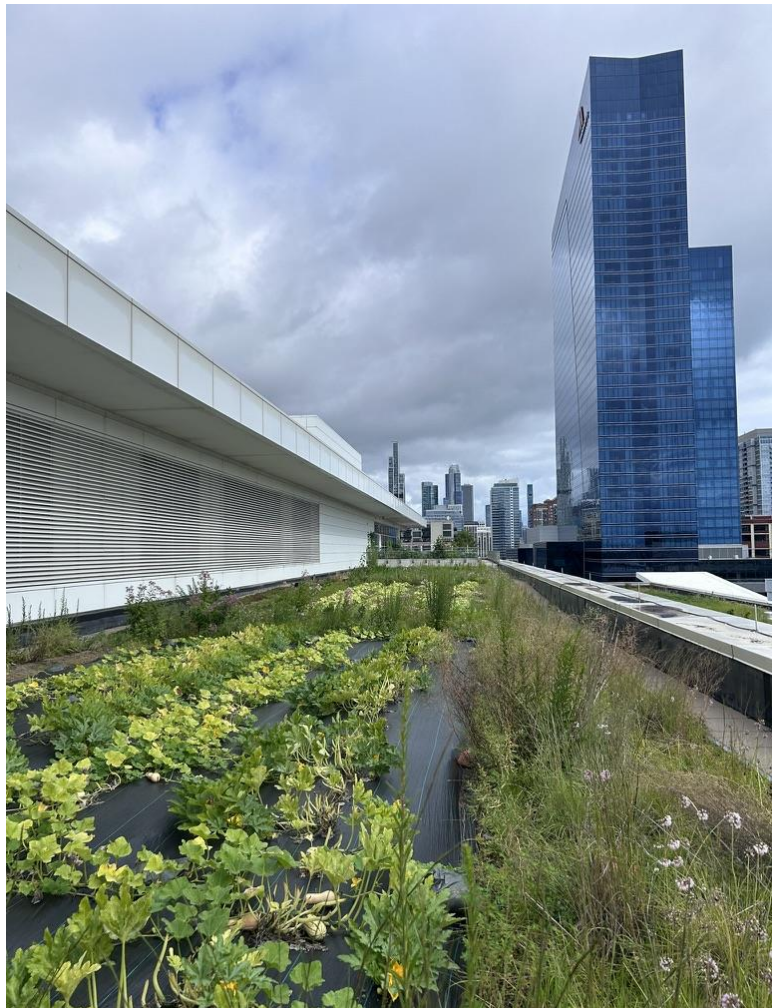
Squeezing in one last trip before my return to the UK I travelled to Chicago, the kindness and generosity of the GCA was very much felt again. A wonderful itinerary had been put together for me, taking me to many of the small gardens maintained by the different branches of the Garden Club of America. I saw the various community projects taking place in the suburbs, from delivering freshly cut flowers for those accessing food pantries at the Backyard Flower Lab to the Evanston Grows community, ensuring free, fresh food is grown and delivered in the area whilst providing

internships and volunteer opportunities. In contrast, I saw private gardens on the shore of Lake Michigan, which to me looked more like an ocean. Exploring urban horticulture further I saw rooftop farms of inner-city buildings. This developed my understanding of the challenges they face including wind pressures, fans creating micro climates and weight restrictions. I saw how the latter forced creative design of pathways, such as using 'glavel' an expanded recycled glass which is incredibly light weight. The depths of beds can often be incredibly shallow, around 3-4 inches, use of the cucurbitaceae family with their lateral roots helped prevent reliance on deep soils.

Of course, we had to include a visit to the Lurie garden in the city centre. Technically a green roof as it sits above a car park the naturalistic planting of the garden sits diametrically opposed to the surrounding skyscrapers and office buildings. The garden falls into two, with a light planting half, featuring native meadow plants and a salvia river, the second half features larger shrubs and numerous trees casting shade reflecting how the city was once a shoreline and river delta. The whole garden is wrapped in a large shoulder hedge, protecting the garden from the crowds of the park. The garden sits so pronounced against its surroundings, making it a real highlight of my time exploring urban horticulture.



The Lurie Garden



McCormick Place rooftop Farm

Heading further out into the suburbs I visited sites preserved by Citizens for Conservation, an organization protecting and restoring thousands of acres just outside of Chicago. Over the past 100 years over 90% of Illinois' tallgrass prairies have been destroyed, the remaining areas were often graveyards and the sides of railways. Luke from CFC explained that brush along the railroads was previously kept in check by the train drivers throwing hot coals out from the train and burning a small section, inadvertently ensuring the survival of these prairie plants as they were well adapted to recovering from fire. We visited Grigsby Prairie, a 30yr old restored tallgrass prairie where Luke pointed out some key plants to me. Turkey foot grass (*Andropogon gerardii*) one of the 'Big Four' native grasses of tallgrass prairies of the mid-west and developed to cope with the grazing of migratory bison.⁷ Rosinweed (*Silphium integrifolium*) is a valuable plant for pollinators, Prairie dock (*Silphium terebinthinaceum*) has large basal leaves which are cool to the touch due to their incredibly long taproots, up to 20ft, meaning they draw on ground water and the Compass plant (*Silphium laciniatum*) usually orients itself north south to avoid the heat of the midday sun. The prairie is now at such capacity that invasives are not a common problem and the site can be managed via burning. My time in Chicago was hugely diverse and took me the length of the city. GCA members yet again showed limitless hospitality, hosting me for the week, showing me the horticultural highlights of their areas and acting as excellent tour guides.



Grigsby Prairie, right side was burnt this spring and the left the year before



Trains passing by The Roof Crop Foundation's roof top garden

Thanks

There is an extensive list of thanks to be given out; to the staff at Longwood Gardens, the team in the Idea Garden, Andy, Lauren and Janet in the Education Department, Rowena Wilson at the RHS and Mary Frediani at the GCA who made all the trips happen. The generosity of the GCA members too cannot be underestimated, as they

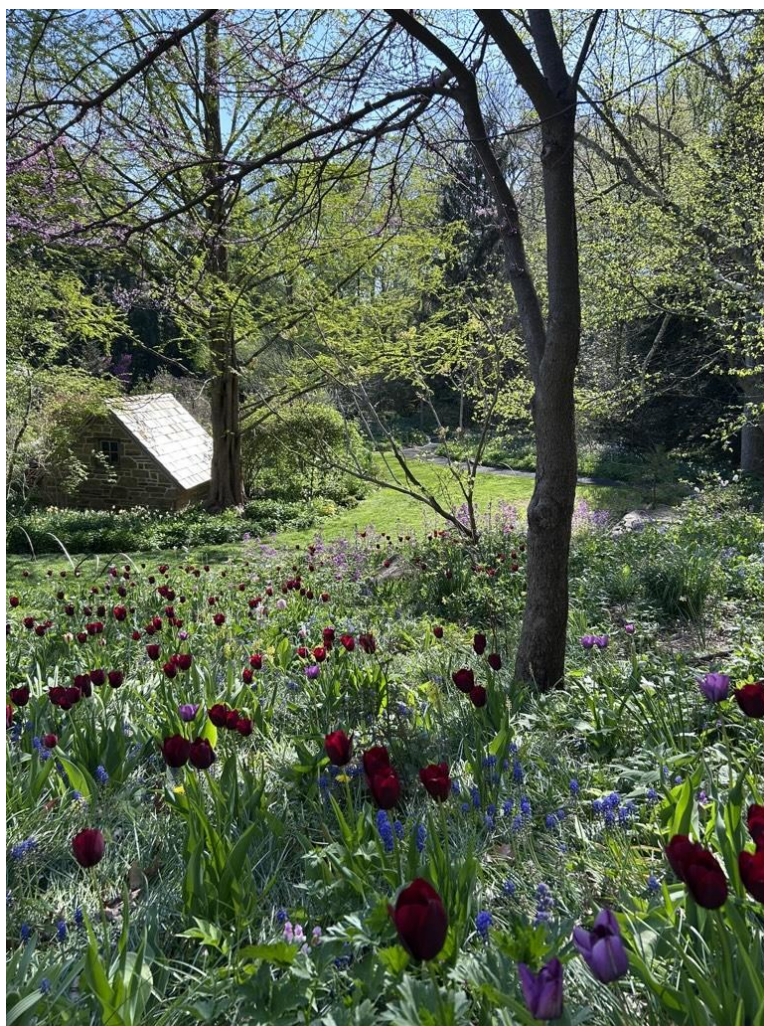
⁷ Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, 'Andropogon gerardii' (University of Texas at Austin)
https://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=ange

unquestioningly welcomed me into their homes and clubs. The community of Red Lion Row has been invaluable as has the network of previous GCA Fellows, all so willing to answer questions and help in any way they can.

As my time as the RHS/GCA Fellows comes to an end there is a chance for reflection. My travels over the last year have taken me to the West Coast, the Mid West, New England and to the South. I've been on Eastern, Central, Mountain and Pacific time. I've felt some of the coldest and hottest temperatures I've ever worked in, visited gardens at near sea level and at 8,200ft. I've touched the Atlantic and the Pacific Ocean, swam in lakes in Massachusetts, rafted on the New River in West Virginia and I can't forget tubing in Lancaster County. My horticultural experience has grown, I have visited many gardens, climbed trees, donned waders and come into contact with so many new plants. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity I have been afforded this year, I have met many kind and knowledgeable people who have been so generous with their time and expertise. I hope one day I can go some way to repaying them.



A summer evening in Massachusetts



Spring at Chanticleer

References

James Baker, 'Crapemyrtle Bark Scale' (NC State Extension) <<https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/crapemyrtle-bark-scale>>

Katie Mobley, 'A Dazzling Return: Our Waterlily Court' (Longwood Gardens, 7th May 2025)
<<https://longwoodgardens.org/blog/2025-05-07/dazzling-return-our-waterlily-court>>

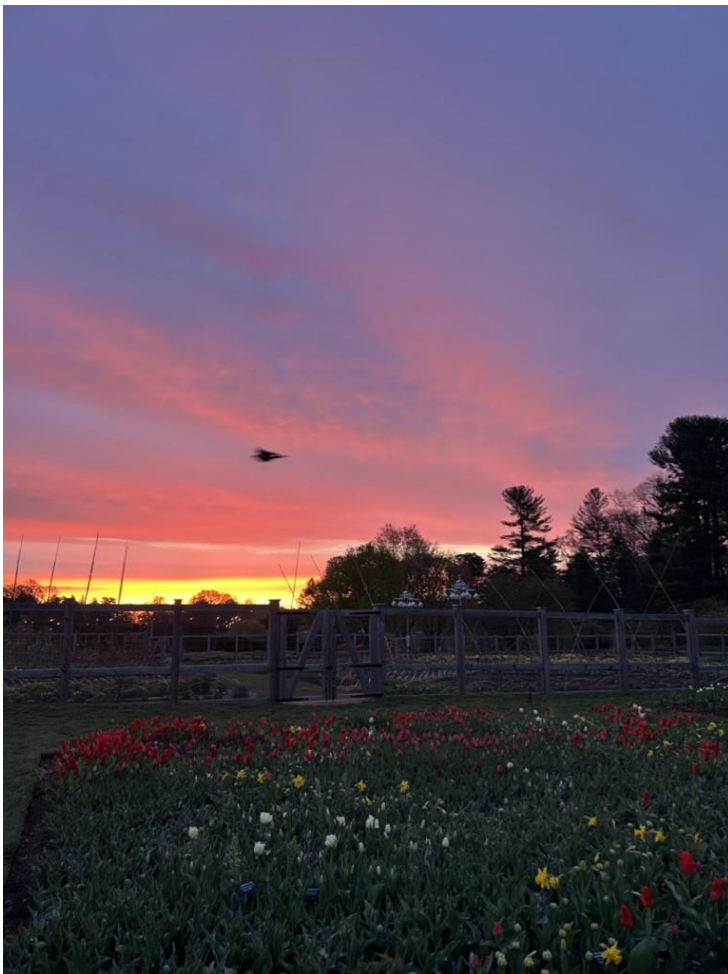
Kirsty Wilson, 'Fire in the Meadow: A Beneficial Burn' (Longwood Gardens, 8th April 2016)
<<https://longwoodgardens.org/blog/2016-04-08/fire-meadow-beneficial-burn>>

Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, 'Andropogon gerardii' (University of Texas at Austin)<
https://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=ange>

Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, 'Phyla nodiflora' (University of Texas at Austin)
<https://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=phno2>

Missouri Botanical Garden, 'Rose Rosette' (Missouri Botanical Garden, September 2024)
<<https://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/gardens-gardening/your-garden/help-for-the-home-gardener/advice-tips-resources/insects-pests-and-problems/diseases/viruses/rose-rosette>>

Susan Mahr, 'Skunk Cabbage, *Symplocarpus foetidus*' (University of Wisconsin-Madison)
<<https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/articles/skunk-cabbage-symplocarpus-foetidus/>>



Sunrise in the Ideas Garden



Morning at the Oak Spring Foundation