Book Review: *Fruits and Plains: The Horticultural Transformation of America*

*Thomas J. Schlereth*

*Fruits and Plains: The Horticultural Transformation of America*  

Many readers, at first glance, may find this book’s main title a bit puzzling. What do pomology and plains have in common? The author intends this minor mystery but he does provide several clues in his introduction and the nine chapters that follow. I must admit I had not completely grasped his full meaning until reaching his closing chapter where a complete explanation is found. Out of respect for the author’s book-craft, I too will leave this resolution for the end.

Long before arriving at the book’s conclusion, I knew that what I was reading was a provocative and persuasive re-interpretation of several interrelated research fields; namely American plant pathology, biogeography, and cultural history. Moreover, it was a brilliant and novel re-interpretation of nineteenth-century American history using American cultivated plants as a primary resource.

Beginning with the introduction (“Taking the History of Horticulture Seriously”), Philip J. Pauly launches his methodology of interconnecting American horticultural history with American cultural history. This fruitful hybrid yields many useful insights, one of which is how our perpetual indulgence in claiming to be exceptional in our nationhood can also be found, repeatedly, in our horticultural history.

As one might expect of a cultural historian, Pauly frequently reminds us of a more universal issue evident in all of our interactions with the natural world: that is, whether we are home gardeners or plant scientists, landscape architects or arboretum directors, USDA bureaucrats or environmental historians, we all *culture* nature. When we *horti*-culture nature, its plants become, to various degrees, natural artifacts subject to various forms of human artifice.

Hence there are two general perspectives that characterize Pauly’s achievement. First, one can see it as a revisionist interpretation in American Character historiography, a subfield in interdisciplinary American Studies scholarship since the 1950s. Second, the book is also a carefully documented survey of how Americans, despite their professed objectivity (scientific and otherwise), historically brought various types of cultural baggage (political and economic; regional and religious; profes-
sional and personal) to their several centuries of interactions with other living organisms and particularly with plants and plant pests.

To document this dual approach—explaining both American history and the history of American horticulture—Pauly analyzes the motives and actions of a cadre of Americans who cultured nature in diverse ways and often for divergent purposes. Many will be familiar to *Arnoldia* readers: for instance, Thomas Jefferson, Frederick Law Olmsted [Senior and Junior], Charles Hovey, Charles S. Sargent, Horace J. McFarland, Jens Jensen, and Liberty Hyde Bailey. Also studied are less well-known but influential plant culturists such as David Hosack, Beverly T. Galloway, William Saunders, Ephraim Bull, Charles T. Simpson, Daniel Simberloft, Charles L. Marlatt, and Katherine Bates.

With these *dramatis personae*, Pauly explores several additional subthemes. In chapter one, for example, he stages Thomas Jefferson as an early exemplar of American horticultural chauvinism, particularly in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785, 1787) written, in part, to answer Guillaume Raynal’s *Histoire de deux Indes* (1770), a European best seller that claimed the New World’s flora, fauna, climate, as well as its native peoples and even its recent emigrant Europeans were all in a state of continual anthropological and biological degeneracy.

In chapter one, he also provides early definitions for terms readers will find throughout the book: first, a vocabulary of “N-words”: nature, natural, naturalism, nationalism, and nativism; second, a litany of “C-words” that no cultural historian can do without: culture, cultural, and culturalism, plus related “culture” nomenclature that Pauly uses frequently.

Chapter two initiates another important book topic—the tensions and controversies (diplomatic, military, economic, political, and scientific) that have been factors in the history of plant introductions and plant pests all arriving in increasing numbers to a supposedly virgin land. The first culprit is the Hessian fly (*Mayetiola destructor*) which Pauly discusses as “America’s first invasive” as well as “the nation’s first postcolonial public scientific issue.”

This initial late eighteenth-century debate over invasives and introductions resurfaces in several places throughout the book in its survey of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century arguments over exotic vs. native species as well as the horticultural practices (organic vs. chemical) in solving plant pathologies. Chapters five and six, cleverly named by Pauly as “Immigrant Aid: Naturalizing Plants in the Nineteenth Century” and “Mixed Borders: A Political History of Plant Quarantine,” document the local, regional, and national aspects of these prolonged conflicts, many of which are still contested issues in present-day horticulture.
In chapter six’s subtitle, another Pauly interpretive emphasis appears. He recognizes that plants have politics in the sense that people culture plants with political (and other) motives. For some readers, however, his extremely detailed accounts of the political infighting among plant importers and breeders, university science faculty and nursery growers, government officials and departments as well as plant collection administrators may
prove too tedious a tale to stay with until the chapter’s conclusion.

Turning back to chapters three and four, respectively titled “The Development of American Culture, with Special Reference to Fruit” and “Fixing the Accidents of American Natural History: Tree Culture and the Problem of the Prairie,” we find major clues to the book’s main title as well as nineteenth-century America’s fascination with pomology. It also introduces us to Midwestern horticultural biogeography, one of the book’s three such foci—the other two being the country’s northeastern corridor and the anomaly of the “horticultural construction” of Florida. The latter history turns out also to have interesting ties to northeastern plant culturalists, as diverse as diplomat Henry Perrine, proprietary town builder and citrus magnate Henry Stanford, railroad and luxury hotel entrepreneur Henry Flagler, plus the USDA’s David Fairchild (after whom the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden in Coral Gables is named), and America’s most famous nineteenth-century woman abolitionist and author, Harriet Beecher Stowe. [Interestingly, author Pauly grew up in Ohio, one gateway to—as well as an important part of—the Midwest’s horticultural hearth.]

Pauly’s chapter nine (titled “Culturing Nature in the Twentieth Century”) is unfortunately only a 28-page introduction to what might have been a larger Fruits and Plains or a second volume as its sequel. Here we find important developments such as the founding, at long last, of a National Arboretum in 1927, and the influential Midwestern prairie restoration by James Curtis and Aldo Leopold at the University of Wisconsin Arboretum in 1936. Also treated are the importance of the American Society for Horticultural Science and the enormous multiplication of garden clubs nationwide, plus a brief survey of “How Pests Became Invasive Species.” Given its brevity, the chapter is a tantalizing but selective overview of an extremely complicated and conflicted century in American horticultural history.

In beginning his final chapter, Pauly references the poetry, travels, and academic career of Katherine (Kitty) Bates, an undergraduate and later a lifelong English professor at Wellesley College. Pauly muses that Bates, both as student and teacher on the Wellesley campus, could gaze across Lake Waban and see the highly cultured conifer topiary garden and arboretum at the estate of H. H. Hunnewell, one of New England’s most well-known horticulturists and a generous benefactor of the Arnold Arboretum. In 1893, Professor Bates took a combined pleasure/professional trip to teach a summer-school course at Colorado College. En route she visited Chicago’s World’s Columbian Exposition designed in part by Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., travelled through Kansas prairies and wheat fields, and climbed Pikes Peak for a majestic view of the seemingly never-ending Great Plains. Atop that mountain-top, she reflected on all that she had seen on her westerning odyssey. On the peak, the beginning words of a poem also came to her. It was published in 1895 by The Congregationalist as its Fourth of July number. New Yorker Samuel A. Ward set the poem to music and we have sung it ever since, a geographical and horticultural counter point to Francis Scott Key’s militant navel ode whose melody Key borrowed from a British drinking song.

Professor Pauly deploys Professor Bates’s verses (obviously “the fruited plain”) to announce his final chapter titled “America, The Beautiful.” More an epilogue than a chapter, it serves as his own anthem to his subject’s meaning in both American horticultural history and American cultural history. He concludes by noting that the Bates metaphor provided him with “a kind of professional and personal perspective” by which to summarize and to reflect on his book’s methodology (the transformation of horticulture by American culture, culturing, and culturists) and its ambitious scope and synoptic brilliance (to offer an answer, in my judgement, to the question: “What’s American about American nature?!”).

In his moving, intimate acknowledgements—placed significantly but uncharacteristically at the end of his conclusion—he alludes to his personal battle with lymphoma cancer. Phillip J. Pauly died of the disease in April, 2008, at age 57, and American historical scholarship lost one of its most insightful culturists.

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