



STEVE FOLTZ

Working to build healthy habitats for animals and people alike

AS THE DIRECTOR of Horticulture for the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden (CZBG), Steve Foltz leads the planting of animal exhibits and beds that enhance visitors' experience. He also oversees CZBG plant trials and projects that benefit the surrounding community.

SCOTT BEUERLEIN: You once told me of some adolescent mischief that involved a city park, cops and the transplanting of some trees.

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SCOTT BEUERLEIN is the Manager of Botanical Garden Outreach at the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden. His Garden Views *Horticulture* column presents perspectives from fellow gardening professionals across the United States.

This page, left to right: Steve Foltz; at the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden, horticulture welcomes guests from the very gates. **Opposite page, top to bottom:** Foltz and his team address every level of the landscape, from trees and shrubs to annuals that hem the paths.

STEVE FOLTZ: When I was a kid, I saw a great-looking ash tree with the best bright-red fall color growing near a telephone pole in Devou Park (Covington, Ky.). It was only about two-foot-tall, so I thought I could just dig it up and transplant it for my mom. As I was digging it the police drove by and I got busted!

SB: Then you went to one of the nation's best horticulture schools.
SF: Yeah, I attended the University of Kentucky when they had the most amazing group of professors. Leonard Stoltz for propagation, Bill Fountain and Bob McNeil for woody plants. John Hartman, Dan Potter, Tom Kimmerer. These guys have become legends! A.J. Powell, Bob Anderson, Jack Buxton. In my last semester I met probably the smartest of them all in Bob Geneve. Thank God I didn't have to take his class or I probably would have

flunked out of horticulture! What a group of people! I was very lucky, to say the least.

SB: You have a lot of respect for the great plantspeople from the past.
SF: Some of my fondest memories of people that influenced my career were those that helped me early on. Buddy Hubbuch from Bernheim Arboretum was a major influence. He knew every plant, from trees to wildflowers. You name it, he knew it. He taught me several lessons that I still remember today.

One was only plant out plants you can keep alive. He had a small nursery where he grew small plants to more survivable sizes before he would plant them out. And whenever I came to visit, he would give me plants. Always something unique, not just any plant. I asked him once why he was so generous to someone he hardly knew, and his



answer was “for every plant I give away I get 10 in return!” That has stuck with me for the past 35 years. What a guy!

Roy Klehm was the same way. A true plantsman as well as a kind and gentle person. He and his wife, Sarah, will always have a special place in my heart!

So many others gave of their time while I was a young, struggling horticulturist. It just reminds me that how you treat others can have an incredible impact on their lives.

SB: You have worked at the Cincinnati Zoo now for 33 years, where your department handles all garden spaces, exhibits, a nursery, a farm, some community gardens and every new project, all in-house. No designers, landscape architects, landscapers, etc. A horticulture department’s dream!

SF: I have been blessed to have the pleasure of working this long in one institution. From a couple college internships, to being invited back to be the Assistant Horticulturist

under Dave Ehrlinger. Dave was a true plantsman who had the vision of what the Zoo should look like. He taught me it wasn’t about the individual plants themselves but the overall feel they created! Looking back, I can still remember that conversation, and he was right. The feel was the big picture. Dave, too, was in many ways like Buddy and Roy to me. I was lucky to have him as my mentor.

SB: With all the projects and the unique setting of a zoo, there must have been some adventurous moments.

SF: There are some things you just can’t talk about in public! Let me just say I have had my share of “adventurous moments.” I’ll just say red pandas, cheetahs, rattlesnakes and cranes...and not the ones that fly! You will have to buy me a beer to hear those stories!

SB: You are all about the plants.
SF: It all starts with plants. Large trees provide our shade and cooling. Evergreens and large shrubs screen things we don’t want to see and guide our eye to what we do want to see. Flowering and specimen trees provide color and interest in the

spring and fall. They are often your main focal points in the garden.

Perennials provide pops of color and interest throughout the growing season. Unexpected surprises from January to December. But perennials are a moving target. Some are slow and steady while others are quick, colorful and short-lived. Annuals (and bulbs!) are the icing on the cake! They give you reliable and stunning color.

All these plants working together create that urban ecosystem that our cities and communities need. Everyone can do their part planting a diversity of plants in our communities. There are so many opportunities. Yards, schools, churches, businesses, communities...If we all all do more, we will have happier, healthier lives!

SB: How can public gardens ensure greater horticultural success for homeowners?

SF: Education! We need to be more focused on educating the public about the value of plants in our lives. It always amazes me the responses I get from homeowners when I ask them what kind of tree that is in their front yard. So often, they don't know. And they've lived there for years.

If we want people to see the value of plants, we need to teach them plants and all that they do for us. Clean air, water—you know, little things like that!

SB: How does plant trialing tie in?

SF: First, it expands our diversity of plants while informing which do well in specific regions. Pretty important concept, I would say.



Above: Hardy hibiscus anchors this bed, sharing space with other summer bloomers. The zoo trials perennials and annuals for performance and shares results with the public. **Opposite:** Tens of thousands of tulip bulbs are planted each fall so spring crowds arrive to a riot of color.

People sometimes say they have a brown thumb and I ask them, “What have you failed with?” They often list plants that cannot grow in our conditions. So let's point them in the right direction and get them off to a good start.

SB: You are not afraid to express your opinion, sometimes going against the grain and even countering other experts.

SF: Following trends is a sure way to always be behind. Good horticulture will never go out of style. The CZBG has had pollinator gardens for over 30 years. Now those are suddenly the rage! We didn't plant them because it was trendy. We planted them to show how some plants by their design attract pollinators. We planted host plants simply to show that in order to have pipevine

swallowtails visit your garden, you might want to provide the one plant that pipevine swallowtails need to rear their young. That's just good horticulture.

SB: You are currently very excited by a new school garden.

SF: For the past eight years, CZBG has partnered with the Cincinnati Reds Community Fund and P&G. Three iconic institutions in Cincinnati teaming together to help underserved communities. Our role was adding a horticultural touch to projects. We started with planting trees and building long-lasting gardens. I think to date we have planted hundreds of mostly large-caliber trees in urban areas, built gardens, set up greenhouses, planted pollinator garden and more.

This year the project will include a new partner, Children's Hospital, and will create a new Urban Learning Garden at our local grade school, Rockdale Academy. This garden will essentially be a one-acre botanical garden. It will feature a greenhouse/year-round plant lab, a very large

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a diversity of plants in our communities.**

— Steve Foltz



pollinator garden, two Quonset huts for growing all kinds of plants for the garden and to sell for fundraising. There will be raised beds for every vegetable you can grow in our region, from asparagus to zucchini! It will have native fruit trees, including named varieties of pawpaw, some conventional fruit trees and an herb garden with cooking classes held by local chefs. Part of the garden will be an extension of our already super-successful plant trials for annuals and perennials. We'll also have a shady amphitheater and a sensory garden for touch and smell, plants like lamb's ears and monarda, katsura and yellow birch. This garden will nourish, enrich and inspire every child in Avondale through horticulture.

SB: You see a thousand kids at the Zoo every day. What are your thoughts on the future of horticulture?

SF: If we communicate the importance of horticulture to the public, especially children, and show how it is relevant in their everyday lives, I think we will have a bright future. I'm also an adjunct horticulture professor, and through the years so many of my students did not understand what horticulture really is and how it relates to sustainability. And yet they all want to help the environment! That is where I think horticulture has done a poor job in PR. People don't see us as playing a key role in sustainability. But we have a huge role!

Too many people identify us with lawn companies that mow and blow and use a lot of pesticides. They don't see us as educated, dedicated professionals. Occasionally, we might get called in to some forlorn site that has been stripped of soil, beat to the ground, asphalted over and built on, and we're asked to donate a few plants to make it pretty. But then they don't trust us. They'll tell you that you're making a pollinator desert or they'll urge you to use only native plants because they won't need any inputs. Really?

As a society, we need to think about our soil and how to repair and protect it. How do we compost more and get it into plantings? We need to know and plant the right trees that can survive urban conditions and shade our urban heat islands, and commit to sufficient soil volume if we expect them to thrive for decades and provide the environmental services we need and we're investing in. We need to be much more mindful of planting a diversity of plants for wildlife, especially the pollinators. And who else but well-trained horticulturists can do this?

To truly build a good ecosystem in the urban and suburban landscape we need to plant 50 times more than we do now! We are not even close to balancing out our destruction through construction.

So, if you ask me for my opinion on future of horticulture, I will say it is bright, because beautiful, healthy landscapes are what we need for our health and our happiness. But horticultural professionals can't do it all ourselves. We need to lead the way and inspire everybody to garden more and provide the plants, tools and information to be successful. And this requires all of us in the green industry to work together. If we don't, we will just be following the trends and not getting to where we need to be. ☞