

# Native Plant Nirvana

For 20 years, the Cullowhee conference has been a summer ritual for native plant fanatics who gather to share their passion for American plants.

BY CAROLE OTTESEN



Attendees enjoy an informal regional networking session outdoors at a recent Cullowhee conference.

THERE IS MAGIC in the misty Great Smoky Mountains. Every July, when more than 400 native plant enthusiasts convene at Western Carolina University (WCU) in Cullowhee, North Carolina, the blue mountain haze rolls down to engulf the '60s institutional architecture, the sweltering dorm rooms, and the school cafeteria food. And out of the mist emerges a wonderful, magical, 72-hour-long horticultural Brigadoon. At least that's the way it's perceived in the minds and hearts of attendees who convene and connect at the Conference on Native Plants in the Landscape, known by regulars simply as "Cullowhee."

"I wouldn't miss the Cullowhee conference—the people, the location, the mission—for anything," says Deanne Eversmeyer, head horticulturist for Washington Golf and Country Club in Arlington, Virginia. "It's kind of like recharging my battery." Kim Hawks, founder of Niche Nursery in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, agrees. "I go to

Cullowhee to be re-fueled, re-charged, re-energized...to re-connect."

Connecting is what makes the magic. It is what people do at Cullowhee.

"We're a group of gifted, wonderful, friendly people, but many of us are loners," says former conference director and steering committee member Mary Painter of the ardent plant people who attend. "We needed a place to go and meet people like ourselves," adds the nurserywoman from Hume, Virginia. Jan Midgley, another former director and steering committee member, says, "Nowhere else do I find such a large number of people who have interests and values in sync with mine." Finding soulmates makes the conference an emotional and intellectual homecoming and the inevitable parting a sweet sorrow. "It is the only conference I go to," says Hawks, "that is so painful to drive away from."

It is hardly surprising that what makes Cullowhee so special is the unique connection felt by the participants. It was the

idea of getting native plant lovers together that started it all in the first place.

## THE BEGINNINGS

It may seem strange now, but 20-odd years ago, the idea of landscaping with native plants was new. “Not much was really known about growing wildflowers using standard nursery practices and conditions,” remembers Leo Collins, chief botanist with the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), who is often called the “father of Cullowhee.” In the early 1980s, research by one of Collins’ co-workers, Rob Farmer, revealed that wild plants responded famously to nursery culture. When Farmer left TVA soon thereafter, the job of caring for the plants fell to Collins.

“I agreed to take care of the plants until we could give them away to various state and municipal organizations,” recalls Collins. As he did so, he observed that the people interested in natives seemed isolated. “Everyone felt he or she was the only one interested in native plants,” he says. What was needed, Collins thought, was a means for these people to network.

Then, serendipitously, a TVA project was canceled and the budgeted money was freed up for a one-time project. Collins and TVA co-worker Judith Bartlow decided to organize a native plant conference.

“We knew we needed speakers,” says Collins, “but we also needed lots of time for people to talk to each other.” From the beginning, getting people together in a loosely structured setting has been an important aspect of the conference and one that most participants remember fondly. Originally designated as “socials,” the name was changed to “regional networking sessions” after one post-conference questionnaire was returned with the comment, “Some employers (i.e., the federal government) don’t like to see social events featured when they are footing the bill.” Whatever they are called, these get-togethers have fostered friendships, knowledge about natives, new introductions, mutual projects, plant sharing, and—now and then—even marriages.

## THE FIRST CONFERENCE

Rather than holding the conference at a resort, Collins and Bartlow chose a university setting to keep the price low.



Western Carolina University, nestled in the Great Smoky Mountains, has been the setting for the annual conference since its inception nearly 20 years ago.

“We didn’t want to exclude anybody,” says Collins, who recalls that the cost for the first conference, including a room and meals for two days, was \$45. “We wanted *all* people interested in natives, not just nurserymen.” This philosophy still prevails: Last year, the conference registration fee was \$75, and room and board for three nights cost \$127.

The budget in the first few years did not allow for speakers’ fees, although travel costs were sometimes offset. But money has never been the object and there has never been a lack of talented speakers.

At the first conference in 1984, John Creech, then director of the USDA Plant

Exploration Division and a former director of the U.S. National Arboretum and president of the American Horticultural Society, led off the conference with a presentation titled “Why Don’t We Copy the Japanese for a Change?” Noting the Japanese emphasis on their own natives in horticulture, Creech pointed out that in the United States there are native counterparts to many of the imported plants—often of Japanese origin—that were so popular in the American nursery trade at the time.

Among the other speakers at the first conference were Harry Phillips, author of the propagation bible *Growing and Propagating Wild Flowers* and Universi-



Making connections: Serious plantspeople Bill Martin, George Ellison, Mary Painter, George Mitchell, and Peter Loos relax among kindred spirits at a recent Cullowhee conference.

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—Leo Collins, on the first Cullowhee conference in 1984

ty of Georgia woody plant expert and author Michael Dirr, whose topic was “Native Shrubs and Trees Suitable for Horticulture.”

One hundred twenty-seven people attended the first conference. “The energy level was really high,” remembers Collins. “At the end of the second day, people who had been up late the night before were up early for the programs.” A veteran of countless conferences, Collins was surprised that “nobody mentioned politics or sports. It was all plants.”

## UNQUALIFIED SUCCESS

The following year, the conference moved to larger quarters within the uni-

versity and attracted 327 participants. By 1986, when the conference could accommodate 430, Collins says, “We maxed out; we had people on the waiting list and had to send back money.” Since that time, the conference usually fills within three weeks after registration opens. Despite a location that seems remote from everywhere, it draws people from 20 states and England. “Fifty percent of the conference attendees are ‘Cullowhee vir-

gins,” says Painter, “and getting in can take some ingenuity or extra push. Some hand-deliver forms, FedEx them, or send them by overnight mail.”

In its first years conference organizers made ends meet with help from TVA; suddenly and in spite of itself, it became profitable. “Even charging as little as we did, we were still accumulating money,” says Collins. “We started giving student scholarships and paying our speakers—\$50 in 1987, \$100 in 1988.”

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It was the closest thing to an Andy Hardy movie—let’s do a conference—that I have ever been associated with,” jokes Dick Bir, Extension specialist in horticulture at North Carolina State University, who became director in 1988. “We remained the most rule-less group I have ever worked with. The rules that exist belong to the university, not the conference.” Highly organized himself, Bir wisely loosened the reins at Cullowhee so it retained its warm, friendly, and intimate atmosphere.

“We want people to come to the meeting, learn, share, and have a good time,” says Bir. “There is lots of good fellowship with new friends with a common interest...lots of sitting in the dark enjoying mountain nights, sipping, and sharing.”

## THE PERFECT MIXTURE

But the feel-good atmosphere is only a comfy cocoon for the real purpose of the conference: information about using natives, presented in lectures of the highest caliber. “Tops in their fields” isn’t enough. “Speakers must be both informative *and* engaging,” says Collins. “Life is too short to sit through a dull lecture on an exciting subject.”

Speakers have numbered among many of horticulture’s bright lights. A very short list includes the late J.C. Raulston of the North Carolina State Arboretum (now the JC Raulston Arboretum); Ed Blake, director of the



Leo Collins, who is known as the “father of Cullowhee,” took this photograph of a tour of campus landscaping during the first Cullowhee conference in 1984.

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In 1987, the first satellite conference was held in Memphis, and others soon followed. Painter remembers sitting at a diner with F.M. Mooberry—who at the time was coordinator of horticulture at the Brandywine Conservancy in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania—to map out the conference that Mooberry subsequently

Crosby Arboretum in Picayune, Mississippi; Darrel Morrison, dean of the School of Environmental Design at the University of Georgia; Alabama nurseryman Tom Dodd, Jr.; Bob McCartney of Woodlanders nursery in Aiken, South Carolina; and countless others.

The combination of horticultural excellence and easy-going spontaneity creates the kind of atmosphere that fosters collaboration. “A lot of things have been spawned at Cullowhee,” notes Painter. “For instance, the Georgia Native Plant Society was formed by a list posted on a message board at Cullowhee.”

The atmosphere also allows serious plantspeople to let down their hair. “People who are innately shy will get up there to entertain others,” says Painter. “And we just happen to have in our ranks people who are exceptionally talented in many ways—including musically.” It is not uncommon to see participants setting up musical instruments in the driveway in front of Reynolds Hall dormitory. Eager vocal accompanists quickly join these impromptu ensembles.

One serendipitous meeting of attendees from different states has enhanced regional networking sessions. Attendee Bill Flemmer, a New Jersey nurseryman who is also a guitarist and singer, met nurseryman Wayne Hitt, who plays keyboard, and Mark Gormel, of the Brandywine Conservancy in Pennsylvania, who plays drums. Their band is able to practice for only a few hours before performing on Friday night.



Nurseryman Bob McCartney of Woodlanders lectures to a group of conference attendees in the plant sale area.



On a pre-conference field trip to local nurseryman Darwin Thomas' backyard, participants examine a bog garden filled with carnivorous native plants.

Likewise, the Cullowhee Players, who perform skits after dinner on Friday night, hail from 10 to 12 different states. They receive scripts from Painter—who writes the scripts, directs, and acts—but have only about “a half hour for rehearsal on the volleyball court on Thursday night.”

### FAMILIAR FORMAT

The conference is always held the third week of July. For those who don't come early for the highly sought-after pre-conference field trips, it begins on Thursday afternoon. Most stay in university residence halls, where creature comforts include two sheets and a pillowcase, a small, thin towel, and a miniature bar of soap.

Friday is devoted to lectures, including the popular walks around campus with a landscape architect or with WCU botanist Dan Pittillo. Friday evening is the “regional networking session” picnic, held at the baseball field, featuring music, dancing, and entertainment by the Cullowhee Players and anyone else Painter can cajole into

performing. The conference ends at noon Saturday after the session, “Plants with Promise,” in which attendees briefly describe native plants they feel have potential for landscape use.

A highlight of the conference every year since 1987 is the Tom Dodd, Jr., Native Plantsman Award. Originally called the North American Plantsman Award, it was renamed to honor its first recipient. It recognizes “an individual or organization conserving, studying, promoting, or propagating native plants.” Recipients include legendary Texas nurseryman Lynn Lowery, 1988; Lady Bird Johnson, 1990; Caroline Dorman (posthumously), 1994; and The Nature Conservancy, 1998.

Rubbing shoulders with the legends of horticulture, listening to brilliant lectures, enjoying music and entertainment, and finding a fellowship of people with overlapping passions are heady activities to be squeezed into less than 72 hours. What puts the Cullowhee experience over the top are all the other offerings. Field trips, which quickly fill up, take attendees into the Smokies for botanizing. Kim Hawks remembers these jaunts as “the most special day of the conference...rain or shine, with a van-load of plant enthusiasts eager and open and in love with native plants.” Other popular destinations include the Biltmore Estate—the country retreat of George Vanderbilt in Asheville—and the

## Attending the Cullowhee Conference

Details of the 2003 conference (July 22–26) will be posted at <http://cess.wcu.edu/np> starting in May. Attendees may register either online or by mail (*not* by phone). For more information, contact the WCU Department of Continuing Education and Summer School, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC 28723; (800) 928-4968.

### SATELLITE NATIVE PLANT CONFERENCES

**Lone Star Regional Native Plant Conference**, May 28–June 1, 2003. Nacogdoches, Texas. For information contact: David Creech at [dcreech@sfasu.edu](mailto:dcreech@sfasu.edu), (936) 468-4343; or Peter Loos at [info@ecovirons.com](mailto:info@ecovirons.com), (281) 362-1107.

**Native Plants in the Landscape**, June 5–7, 2003. Millersville, Pennsylvania. Call the Professional Training and Education office at (717) 872-3030 for a printed brochure, available in March 2003, that includes conference information and a registration form, or visit the Web site <http://muweb.millersv.edu/~npitl/index.html>. Note: The Web site is not yet updated for 2003.

Joyce Kilmer National Forest where, Midgley says, trippers can see “awe-inspiring forests of pre-settlement America.” One of the local excursions is a visit to the backyard of nurseryman Darwin Thomas, where attendees learn to assemble containerized bogs of carnivorous natives.

### SHOPPING AT CULLOWHEE

Every year, a contest is held for the design of the souvenir T-shirts. Depicting a native plant along with the name “Cullowhee,” the T-shirts are highly prized and collected. A book sale, initiated in 1992, offers hard-to-find books on natives and other horticultural topics.

The annual plant sale features perhaps the most phenomenal collection of southeastern natives assembled anywhere. “The initial reason for having it was to show attendees the actual plants that were being talked about,” says plant sale chair Ed

Clebsch, emeritus professor of biology and ecology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and the 2002 recipient of the Tom Dodd, Jr., Award. Cognoscenti appreciate the rarity of some of the offerings, spend freely, and fill trucks and back seats with loads of plants. Along the interstates, cars packed with greenery draw stares and, sometimes, reactions. One year, nurserywoman Sally Kurtz was stopped along I-40 by a Virginia state trooper, who mistook *Hibiscus coccineus* for a marijuana plant.

Each winter, Eversmeyer, who first came to the conference as a scholarship recipient in 1989, sends out “Notes from Cullowhee,” a newsletter containing updates on the conference, its satellites, and other native plant happenings around the country. “It’s my contribution to a conference that’s doing good work with natives and is great fun,” says Eversmeyer.

Run by a volunteer steering committee whose members reside in half a dozen states, Cullowhee somehow has managed to grow and prosper. “For two decades, it has worked,” says Bir, “because of dedicated volunteers.” He also cites the help of Western Carolina University and Jim Horton, the university’s liaison with the steering committee. Veteran conference attendees also credit Sue Dietz, former WCU coordinator, for her superb handling of campus details. “We were lucky to fall in with Cullowhee,” says Collins. “Somewhere else—we wouldn’t have had the same people support, the same atmosphere, the same beautiful landscape.”

The Queen Mother of native plant conferences will celebrate her 20th anniversary July 22 to 26. In two decades, Cullowhee has grown up, grown larger, and grown more sophisticated. There is a bittersweet sense among early organizers that the conference has outgrown its ad hoc beginnings. “Being the director of the conference early on was just a lot of work you did because you wanted to,” says Collins. Now there’s a paid director. “It’s something that could go on your résumé,” he adds.

“Now that we are on the verge of adulthood,” says Bir half jokingly, “lots of ’60s folks are passing the torch.” A new generation of native plant enthusiasts is taking the long trip through the mountains to connect with like-minded souls and experience the magic of Cullowhee. 

*Carole Ottesen is an associate editor of The American Gardener and a Cullowhee conference regular.*



Above: At the plant sale, attendees can see and buy the plants mentioned in the lectures. Right: Participants snap up native treasures often unavailable elsewhere.

