

## IN THE GARDEN

# Where Do the Gardeners You Admire Turn for Advice? To These Newsletters.

A horticulture expert shares his must-read list.

**By Margaret Roach**

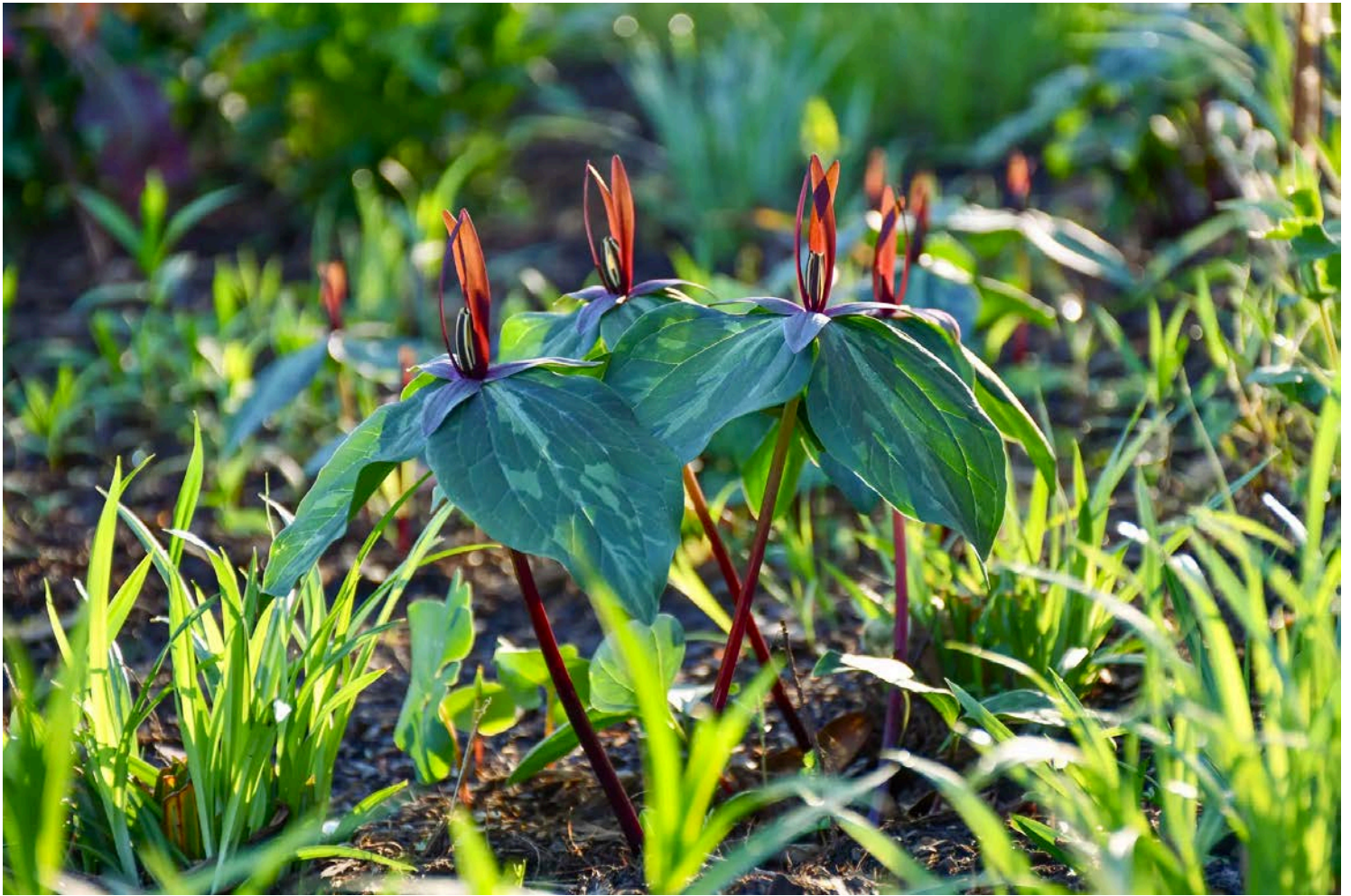
April 17, 2024, 5:01 a.m. ET

As a boy in Tennessee, Jared Barnes learned from his great-grandfather to place his lanky tomato seedlings on their sides when he was transplanting them, so they could root in all along their stems.

It was one of many gifts of horticultural knowledge that he derived from their time together. But besides getting young Jared off to a strong start in the garden, like those fledgling plants, they taught him something else: We gardeners will always have questions, with each new plant or task or problem, and we need reliable sources we can turn to — someone to ask, who will have answers, the way his great-grandfather did.

It's similar to the dynamic he witnessed in what was once his favorite segment on the nightly news. "As a kid, I wanted to be a meteorologist for a little while," he recalled. "And part of the reason is because every night I saw someone get up in front of a group of people and share knowledge and information."

Although he once drew a hurricane outline on the chalkboard when the teacher left the classroom — an attempt to explain the eye of the storm to his fellow second-graders — translating the weather was not in his future. (And for his efforts, he received a scolding.) Instead, he grew up to be a horticulturist.



Dr. Barnes, an associate professor of horticulture at Stephen F. Austin State University, lives in East Texas, where woodland ephemerals, like the maroon-flowered *Trillium gracile*, are among the earliest bloomers. Jared Barnes

---

Dr. Barnes, 38, is now an associate professor of horticulture at Stephen F. Austin State University, in Nacogdoches, Texas, where he teaches a rotating schedule of eight courses, from the introductory unit, *Cultivating Plants*, to plant propagation, plant breeding, public-garden management and more.

About four years ago, he began expanding his audience with a free weekly email newsletter called “plant-ed,” which includes a numbered list of links to must-reads that have caught his attention, as well as the latest article from his own blog.

Creating the newsletter, he said, is one of his “forcing functions” — a term perhaps more familiar to those who work in math or science, meaning a “systems way of thinking where a choice that you’ve made then forces something else to occur.”

His commitment to publishing the newsletter weekly, he figured, would ensure that he diligently surveyed the landscape of horticultural information — research reports, magazines, websites, social media and other newsletters — to find his own selections to recommend.





Indian pink (*Spigelia marilandica*), with its red-and-yellow blooms, is a welcome spring performer in Dr. Barnes's East Texas garden. Jared Barnes

## Down the Rabbit Hole, After Answers

Another catalyst for combing through the current literature: his curious students.

“They think of things that I wouldn’t have,” Dr. Barnes said. “Some of these rabbit holes I go down in my newsletter are after they ask me a question, and I’ll say, ‘I have no clue, but let’s look into it.’”

Inspired by the native-plant trials at Mt. Cuba Center, in Delaware, which he follows closely, he recently oversaw the addition of a 7,000-square-foot trial garden at the Plantery, a campus botanic garden that serves as a living lab. More than 30 students helped.

“In a few years, we hope to have performance data similar to Mt. Cuba’s reports — but for Southern plants,” he said.

Prairie-inspired naturalistic plantings dominate much of the landscape in his garden. Jared Barnes  
He is also constantly on the lookout for inspiration for his personal garden, a landscape he shares with his wife, Karen Barnes, and their 9-month-old daughter, Magnolia. They call it Ephemera Farm, a reminder to take notice of the small things before it's too late.

“They’re here and then they’re gone,” he said. “And I feel like in East Texas they oftentimes can be gone a little bit faster, because we’re hotter and things bloom quicker.”

His garden “is definitely more wild and ecological in style and design,” he said, which may explain why his top go-to newsletters are ecologically focused.

In beds close to his log cabin-style house, woodland ephemerals, including maroon-flowered *Trillium gracile*, a native of Texas, Arkansas and Louisiana, have just finished blooming. Next come treasures like Indian pink (*Spigelia marilandica*), with its red-and-yellow blooms, which can be found as far north as Maryland and into parts of the Midwest.

Beyond those beds, prairie-inspired naturalistic plantings dominate.

“As a kid, I loved walking on my great-grandfather’s hill, through the broomsedge and the grasses, and I love the feeling that environment evokes,” he said. “I’ve tried to do that same thing here: create a place where we can cultivate that feeling.”

A breathtaking stand of yellow wild indigo (*Baptisia sphaerocarpa*) a half-hour from his home inspired Dr. Barnes to add the species to his garden. Jared Barnes

He finds inspiration in contemporary wild landscapes, too. Stands of Hubricht's bluestar (*Amsonia hubrichtii*) that he saw in Arkansas made an impression, as did a quarter-mile stretch of white false indigo (*Baptisia alba*) just 20 minutes from

home and a breathtaking stand of yellow-flowered *B. sphaerocarpa* about half an hour away. Those three are in his garden now.

When something doesn't cooperate, he uses his researcher's skill set to find the cause — for example, why his clasping jewelflower (*Streptanthus maculatus*), a mustard family wildflower native to Texas, Arkansas and Oklahoma, had reached barely six inches tall instead of the expected three feet.





His naturalistic home landscape also includes white false indigo (*Baptisia alba*). Jared Barnes

A newsletter that he discovered held the answer: The plants had balked at his very acidic 4.2 pH soil. The solution? Lime.

A lot of what he is trying feels experimental. That's because there's not much information available about taking a Southeastern approach to creating such landscapes, he said. For the most part, he hunts for clues from elsewhere, hoping they can be adapted.

One such source: the Northeast-based ecological horticulturist Rebecca McMackin's Grow Like Wild newsletter, published at the full moon most months.

"Hers is just so rich with good science information," Dr. Barnes said. "She tends to focus a lot more on insects and other organisms as well, about the ways they interact with plants."





A succession of red flowers sustains migrating birds headed north each spring. In Dr. Barnes's garden, native *Penstemon murrayanus* feeds visiting ruby-throated hummingbirds. Jared Barnes

In one issue, Ms. McMackin wrote about how a succession of red flowers sustains migrating hummingbirds headed north each spring, a topic she revisited in a recent TED Talk. Although she was using a local example, Eastern red columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), it underscored for Dr. Barnes what he had witnessed in his garden with native *Penstemon murrayanus*, which “the hummingbirds go wild for.”

The insight she shared: Red flowers and hummingbirds co-evolved, forging exchanges of nectar for pollination services. So it’s not surprising that birds have an extra photoreceptor that allows them to see red especially well.

Ms. McMackin, in turn, subscribes to Dr. Barnes’s newsletter, and both regularly read the monthly Bulletin of the Ecological Landscape Alliance, a membership organization of landscape professionals and keen gardeners that promotes sustainable, biodiverse approaches to landscape design.

They both also enjoy *The Prairie Ecologist*, from Chris Helzer, the director of science for The Nature Conservancy in Nebraska, and his photographs of plants and creatures of the prairie community. “He’s someone on the ground, on the front lines of that habitat,” Dr. Barnes said, “helping me be better informed.”

Dr. Barnes found inspiration for his Texas meadow making in the work of Dan Pearson, a landscape designer in England who transformed grass-dominated fields into flowering meadows by overseeding with yellow rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*), an annual species that is hemiparasitic. Jared Barnes

## From England, Clues to Meadow Making

Both gardeners also look forward to an email hailing from farther afield: Dig Delve, a weekly dispatch from the naturalistic landscape designer and author Dan Pearson and his partner, Huw Morgan, who garden in the West of England.

Dr. Barnes was fascinated to read about how they had been able to transform their grass-dominated fields into flowering meadows without tilling or other soil disturbance. If they had simply tried overseeding into the dense growth, they would have failed. But they succeeded because they included the seed of yellow rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*), a U.K.-appropriate annual species that is hemiparasitic with grasses.

Hemiparasitic plants get some of their nutrients through photosynthesis, but steal others using rootlike structures called haustoria, which grow inside the tissue of host plants. In this case, that weakened the grasses enough for some wildflowers to get a foothold. Aha!

Stands of Hubricht's bluestar (*Amsonia hubrichtii*) that Dr. Barnes saw in Arkansas inspired him to plant it in his own garden. Jared Barnes

Dr. Barnes wondered if he could identify native hemiparasites in his region that might do the same thing and help him with meadow making. He is currently experimenting with wood betony (*Pedicularis canadensis*) and Indian paintbrush



(*Castilleja indivisa*), “tapping into what nature does, to garden better,” he said.

He often finds good leads to share in the monthly GrassSolutions email from Hoffman Nursery, a wholesaler specializing in grasses and sedges (*Carex*). The emails combine blog posts by the Hoffman staff and citations of recommended articles from elsewhere. Ideas that have caught Dr. Barnes’s attention lately include suggestions for using grasslike plants in urban habitats and on green roofs.

To pique his interest and earn a mention in his own newsletter, however, subjects don’t need to match his particular garden conditions. He knows that his Zone 8b garden, with its extremely acidic soil, 50 inches of annual rainfall and recent temperatures ranging from minus 6 to 116 degrees Fahrenheit, is hardly the typical scenario for most subscribers.

Parallel fences provide defense against animals trying to get into Dr. Barnes's garden. Celosia, Gomphrena and asters add a jumble of late-summer color. Jared Barnes

And then there are the deer, gophers, armadillos and wild boar. Yes, feral pigs.

“The first year we lived here, I walked outside one morning, and it was like someone had run a tiller or tractor through a space like half a basketball court in our backyard,” Dr. Barnes recalled. “It was absolutely horrifying.”

Now a double fence — two parallel, six-foot-high stretches of welded wire mesh strung between wood posts — limits access by various species wishing to investigate (or plow) the garden, and so do motion-activated sprinklers.

Does anyone subscribe to a niche newsletter on gardeners' animal adventures — or have a favorite resource on another garden topic to recommend? Do share. He's listening.

---

*Margaret Roach is the creator of the website and podcast A Way to Garden, and a book of the same name.*

If you have a gardening question, email it to Margaret Roach at [gardenqanda@nytimes.com](mailto:gardenqanda@nytimes.com), and she may address it in a future column.