



2026 Landscape Conference at Fernbrook Nursery

Tuesday, October 20th, 2026

The Future of New Jersey's Landscapes

English – Track 1

Approved Credits:

NJ Pest - 3A-2, 8C-2, PP2-2, LTE/LTCO - 5 CEUs

Pending Credits: LA CES

Agenda

9:00am to 9:30am	Check-in at Registration Table Breakfast
9:30am to 10:30am	“Deer Resistant” Native Shrubs and Grasses with Bill Errickson, PhD., Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Monmouth County

Deer resistant native shrubs and grasses have seen an increased demand in the landscape in recent years. However, data on the performance and insect/disease pressures of different species and cultivars specific to New Jersey are still limited. This presentation will provide an update on the woody shrub and grass trials that are being conducted by Rutgers Cooperative Extension at the Cream Ridge Experiment Station. Species and cultivars of shrubs and grasses are being evaluated for their suitability in the ornamental landscape with data collected on stress tolerance, insect and disease issues and treatments, bloom times, and fall color. A discussion on using an integrated approach to monitor and control common insect and disease problems will also be included.

Speaker Bio: Bill Errickson is an Agriculture Agent II / Associate Professor for Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Monmouth County. His work focuses on supporting the nursery, landscape, and turfgrass industries to improve biodiversity and conserve natural resources through sustainable management practices. Bill holds a Ph.D. in Plant Biology from Rutgers University, a M.S. in Soil Science from the University of New Hampshire, and a B.S. in Biology from Stockton University.

10:30am to 10:45am	Coffee Break
10:45am to 11:45am	Beyond Plant Knowledge: The Skills Landscape Professionals Will Need in the Next Five Years <i>(Why the next generation of landscape professionals will need</i>

more than horticultural expertise to succeed) with Shravya Peddigari, Columbia University

Description:

Horticultural knowledge remains fundamental to the landscape profession, but the skills required to succeed in the industry are expanding. Landscape professionals today are navigating changing client expectations, workforce and labor challenges, new technologies, sustainability demands, and increasingly complex operational and business decisions.

This session examines the skills landscape professionals will need to complement their horticultural expertise over the next five years. The first portion will explore five areas becoming increasingly important to the profession: technology and AI literacy, data-informed decision-making, client communication, business and operational understanding, and adaptability in a changing workforce and industry. The second portion will turn these concepts into an interactive discussion. Attendees will work through real-world landscape industry scenarios involving client expectations, technology adoption, workforce decisions, and business trade-offs. Participants will evaluate the situations, discuss possible approaches, and compare how professionals from different areas of the industry may reach different decisions.

Learning Objectives:

At the conclusion of the session, participants will be able to:

1. Identify key technological, workforce, client, and business trends influencing the landscape profession.
2. Describe five professional competencies that complement horticultural and technical expertise in the changing landscape industry.
3. Evaluate how emerging technologies, including AI, can support professional judgment, communication, and operational decision-making.
4. Analyze real-world landscape industry scenarios involving client, workforce, technology, and business considerations.
5. Identify specific skills they can strengthen to prepare themselves and their organizations for changes expected in the landscape profession over the next five years.

Speaker Bio: Shravya Peddigari is a green-industry leader, plant scientist, and Director of Operations at Columbia University in New York City. Her work spans operations leadership, grounds and landscape management, sustainability, workforce development, safety, and the integration of emerging technologies into complex service environments.

She holds a Master of Science in Plant Science from the University of Maryland, College Park, with an academic background in turfgrass and athletic field management. Her professional experience combines technical plant knowledge with operational leadership, giving her a unique perspective on how the landscape and horticulture industries are evolving.

Shravya is also a speaker and industry contributor focused on the future of the green industry, particularly the skills professionals will need as artificial

intelligence, data, technology, and changing workforce expectations reshape traditional roles. Her work explores how landscape and horticulture professionals can move beyond technical expertise and develop stronger capabilities in leadership, decision-making, communication, technology adoption, and business thinking.

11:45am to 12:45pm **Lunch | Visit Vendor Area**

12:45pm to 1:45pm ***Talk & Tour – A comprehensive overview of how a nursery produces plants for the landscape industry with Kevin Fenning, President, Fernbrook Nursery***

Description: Join us on an informative and educational tour of Fernbrook’s nursery operation. This tour includes a visit to the Propagation House. We will begin where all cuttings start, focusing on how they are produced and the stages following root development. Next, we will visit the Potted Tree Production area where we will view our potted production, with a focus on native trees. Last, we’ll conduct a Field Tour and tour the Fernbrook fields, stopping to discuss specific plants, our best IPM practices, and how trees are harvested for sale.

1:45pm to 2:15pm ***Survey Analysis: Native Plant Gardening and Demand for Sustainable Landscaping Practices with Jamie Hardy and Jennifer Barros, Rutgers Environmental Stewards***

Description: Rutgers Environmental Stewards present data pointing to market opportunities for landscape professionals.

Speaker Bios: Jennifer Barros is a Rutgers Environmental Steward. Previously a social worker, Jennifer now co-leads volunteer gardeners at her local park, and works for a native garden design and installation company in her community. Jamie Hardy is a Rutgers Environmental Steward, a school garden coordinator certified through Oregon State University, and holds master's degrees in both Sustainability Management and Landscape Design from Columbia University. She serves on the board of the Wild Ones NJ Gateway Chapter and leads environmental arts education and habitat restoration initiatives in Essex County schools. Her work reflects a deep commitment to helping people reconnect with nature through native plants and sustainable landscapes.

2:15pm to 3:15pm ***Beyond the Usual Suspects: Underutilized Native Trees and Shrubs with Carl Hesselein, President of Pleasant Run Nursery***

Native plant palettes often rely on the same familiar species, leaving many distinctive and highly useful plants overlooked. This presentation explores lesser-known native trees and shrubs that bring ecological function, regional character, and unexpected beauty to layered landscapes.

Featured plants will include rarities such as *Croton alabamensis*, a rare, fragrant shrub with silvery leaf undersides and vivid orange fall color; *Euonymus americanus*, whose delicate green stems and extraordinary “hearts-a-bustin” fruit enliven shaded woodland plantings; and *Cotinus obovatus*, a sculptural small tree celebrated for its smoky summer inflorescences and exceptional autumn color. Together with additional underused selections, these plants demonstrate how designers can move beyond a limited, predictable palette without sacrificing performance or visual impact.

Attendees will discover new possibilities for woodland edges, understory compositions, naturalistic gardens, and other layered planting schemes while considering the site conditions, ornamental qualities, ecological relationships, and design opportunities that make each species worthy of wider use.

Speaker Bio: Carl Hesselein is a fifth-generation nurseryman and President of Pleasant Run Nursery, a wholesale container nursery in Allentown, New Jersey, specializing in native, rare, and hard-to-find plants. Born to two fourth-generation nursery professionals, Carl grew up fully immersed in the industry, making his eventual career in horticulture feel either inevitable or, as he might describe it, hereditary punishment.

After graduating from Allentown High School, Carl earned a degree in botany from Humboldt State University in Northern California. He returned East in 2010 and continued his training at Behnke Nurseries and Stadler Nurseries in the Washington, D.C., region, followed by an internship at Hawksridge Farms in Hickory, North Carolina, under renowned plantsman Rick Crowder.

Carl returned to Pleasant Run in 2016, beginning in perennial production before transitioning into sales and, ultimately, company leadership. He was named the New Jersey Nursery and Landscape Association’s 2022 Young Professional of the Year. Under his leadership, Pleasant Run Nursery was selected as the recipient of the PPA Grower Award by the Perennial Plant Association in 2023. Outside the nursery, Carl enjoys time with his wife, Meredith, their three children, and two dogs—often searching their creekbed for stinkpot turtles and buried treasure.

3:15pm to 3:45pm

Rooted in History. Growing the Future. A Conversation on Leadership, Legacy & the Next Generation with *Tom Knezick, President of Pinelands Nursery, NJNLA President*

Description: The green industry has always evolved through resilience, innovation, and collaboration. In this engaging closing conversation, Tom Knezick will reflect on the industry's remarkable journey, discuss the opportunities that lie ahead, and challenge attendees to embrace their role in shaping the future. A fitting conclusion to a day dedicated to honoring our roots while growing toward tomorrow.

Speaker Bio: Tom Knezick is President of Pinelands Nursery. He hosts the Native Plants, Healthy Planet podcast, is president of the New Jersey Nursery & Landscape Association, and was honored with a Horticultural Industry Leadership award from Nursery Management.

3:45pm to 4:00pm

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