

Always Trying Something New

Story By Michelle Byrne Walsh
Photography By Ron Capek

Every day, all week long, Jim Nau is surrounded by the newest, latest, most colorful plants thriving in demonstration garden beds. As the curator of the Ball Horticultural archives and cultural advisor to the Ball Horticultural Company in West Chicago, he works with horticulturalists, new plant introductions, and the trial gardens. So when he comes home to his own garden, he wants to have a private place to decompress, read his mail, sip iced tea, and above all, experiment with new plants.

“When I moved into my house in 1999, it was just a ‘yard,’ just a lot of grass to mow. I wanted to do something different, so I ripped everything out, including an old fence, and started putting in things I liked,” Jim says about his 100-by-50-foot St. Charles property. “My vision was that I wanted to do something different, and I just went ahead and planted the things that I liked.

“My gardening style is very eclectic,” he adds. “I have the luxury of working at the Gardens at Ball, and I get to observe all of the different plants in different settings. I also have a lot of friends at different nurseries, so I buy many uncommon plants.”

Since 1982, when he first graduated with a degree in horticulture and business from Iowa State University, Jim Nau has worked at Ball Horticultural Company. For 34 years he was the manager of the greenhouses and gardens. In this role, he oversaw the greenhouse and grounds staff that cares for the 55-acre grounds including the wetlands, prairie and, especially, the 9 acres that comprise the Gardens at Ball. Nau is also the author of



ABOVE: Trailing creeping Jenny and wandering Jew spill from a rustic brown pedestal where they mingle with a collection of tender and hardy plants on the ground — lime green coleus, hardy geranium, variegated hosta and canna lily.

OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT: Red Weather vane 

OPPOSITE PAGE, RIGHT: TBallerina sculpture 

TOP: Gryphon is a hybrid foliage begonia that tolerates deep shade. It can be taken indoors in fall to continue its life as a houseplant.

BOTTOM: A healthy stand of variegated aegopodium provides a backdrop for a planting of 'Redhead' coleus, begonia and a pink calla lily.



three books, *The Ball Culture Guide* (first to third editions, 1988 to 1998), *The Ball Perennial Manual: Propagation and Production* (1996), and the *Ball RedBook: Crop Production*. (18th edition, 2011), as well as countless articles (several for *Chicagoland Gardening*).

Some of Jim's favorite plants include *Baptisia* spp. and peonies; he is also fond of his seven-son flower tree (*Heptacodium miconioides*), "with fall flowers that emerge white and fade to a blush pink," a willow (*Salix* spp.) "that does beautifully," and the mature redbud (*Cercis canadensis*) "that is stellar in bloom." The one tree in the garden that brings back warm childhood memories for Nau is his silver maple (*Acer saccharinum*). "I know it is considered a weed tree, and people give me grief for liking it, but it is my favorite tree. I grew up under a silver maple – as a boy I camped overnight beneath one with my dog, and I constantly sat beneath it as a child. The silver maple I have today is cabled so it won't fall on the house, and I will always love it."

Nau spices up his container collection with uncommon "indoor" plants such as wandering Jew (*Tradescantia zebrina*), Swedish ivy (*Plectranthus australis*), Thanksgiving cactus (*Schlumbergera truncata*) and several varieties of "indoor" ferns. He also liberally uses some of the best new annuals introduced that year.

"I have a lot of containers, and I created undulating beds in the garden. I always plant in threes and fives, but there is really no rhyme or reason for my garden design. If I like something, I put it in," he explains. For example, the first time he saw the giant 'Empress Wu' hosta, he just had to have it. The same thing happened with *Hosta* 'Sum and Substance'. So, he made room for them.

His "number one annual" is coleus (*Plectranthus* spp.), which boasts countless colors, sizes and leaf shapes. "There are so many colors and uses for coleus. I use them in containers and in the ground," he says. "I also like the ornamental cotton (*Gossypium hirsutum*) I grew last season. One variety was green leaved, and another had a purple cast to its leaves. I am experimenting with them by keeping them in the garage over the winter to see if they will make it."

Nau enjoys experimenting with new plants — pushing the boundaries, but also reading and responding to the plants' signals.

"Plants don't read books, so they don't know what they are supposed to do. They actually tell *you* what you should do for them," he explains. "My garden has been a learning process. For example, I recently was writing a chapter on *Baptisia* spp. for my next book. So, I bought several of these new varieties of baptisia and have been able to observe them in different seasons and weather."



A collection of trees in a neighbor's garden provides welcome privacy to Jim's perennial border. Yellow daylilies and lavender hosta bloom in high summer. In the foreground, left _____ the variegated _____. In the background a tall stand of pale beige-pink _____



Nau's garden is enclosed by mature trees that provide delightful privacy. He notes, "I can go back there, sit and read, or I can have a group of friends over for hors d'oeuvres and we never feel like we are being watched by the neighbors."

In addition to Nau's career at Ball Horticultural, he has also served as a past president and judge for All-America Selections as well the past president of the Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers (ASCFG). He was the recipient of the Perennial Plant Association's Garden Media Award and has been a keynote speaker for several industry conferences. In addition, Jim received the Medallion of Honor award from All-America Selections for Outstanding Achievement in Horticulture. He is also a past chair of the St. Charles Tree Commission.

And like many of us, especially now in early spring, Nau is always planning something new for his garden. "I already have a long list of new and unusual plants I would like to grow in 2019." 🐦

Michelle Byrne Walsh is a freelance writer and editor, a U of I Extension Master Gardener volunteer in McHenry County, and a member of GWA: The Association for Garden Communicators. mbyrnew@comcast.net

ADVICE FROM THE PROS Q and A with Jim Nau

Q: Tell us about one of your big mistakes.

A: "Not fixing a drainage issue sooner. My neighbors and I recently got together to create a drainage system in the area where our collective sump pumps emptied out. I used to have 1 inch of standing water in that area all of the time — and mosquitoes. Now it's not a problem, but I wish I had addressed it years ago."

Q: What is your most beloved gardening book?

A: You are talking to a historian! I have more than 2,000 books in my library arranged by references, propagation, perennials, annuals and such. But I would have to say my original 1860s copy of Thomas Jefferson's granddaughter's book, *The Parlor Gardener: a treatise on the house culture of ornamental plants*, by Cornelia J. Randolph.

Q: Is there an American public garden that everybody should see if they can?

A: Chanticleer, in Wayne, Penn. I always get inspired there. I love the terrace garden — the eclectic arrangements, and the plant combinations. There is always something new to see there.

Q: How has your gardening/design style evolved through the years?

A: It has been a learning process over the years. If I see a new plant, and then I have to have it, I will then have to learn about that plant. I might start a new plant out in a pot to observe it, and then I might overwinter it in the pot indoors to see how it performs.

Q: If you could invite one famous gardener (living or dead) to dinner, whom would you choose?

A: Liberty Hyde Bailey from Cornell University (1858-1954). I have a few of his books. (Bailey was a horticulturist and botanist, co-founder of the American Society for Horticultural Science, and was instrumental in launching agricultural extension services and 4-H.)

Q: If you were to write a garden book, what would be your topic?

A: I have written three gardening books — but I want to write a book on garden history. It would be titled, *Stories of the Plants We Love (and Some We Don't)*.

Q: What don't you like about gardening?

A: I don't know how to answer this – nothing really. But I can say that I enjoy when I have people over to my garden, and they look at a plant and ask "What's that?" because in that moment, I get to introduce people to plants. Later, if they add that new plant to their own garden, it brings a bit of happiness to their hearts."