



Jan Midgley

Sowing Native Seeds

Story By Michelle Reynolds Photography By Bob Farley

I met Jan Midgley in the summer of 2009. I was busy spearheading a grassroots effort to implement native plant gardens surrounding the newly constructed Ruffner Mountain Nature Center. On a crash course to learn as much as I could about native plant gardening, I reached out far and wide to experts in the field. I gathered information, a combination of paid and volunteer labor, resources and advice, and Jan was at the top of the pyramid of people to call on. She was introduced to me as the go-to guru of native plants. I had a lot to learn about mimicking the plant communities of the mountain in the cultivated gardens, and she so generously and enthusiastically worked to fill in the gaps of my understanding. For each new phase of the landscape project, I paid Jan and her nursery, Wildflower, a visit. I would listen and learn as we walked around her gardens, the nursery rows, and the hoop houses and potting sheds behind her home. I admired the front-yard meadow, the pond and singing frogs, and the wet meadow that catches runoff from the irrigation system. I enjoyed seeing thoughtful groupings of plants representing different ecosystems of Alabama, and I loved hearing the stories of where each plant came from. She explained propagation methods, seed-storing solutions, germination, soil mixture, water needs, light requirements, importance of provenance, and she gave transplanting tips for best results. These things were not secrets to be guarded and kept, but instead to be given as gifts, to be shared freely and openly for the betterment of the good Earth. I would buy a load of plants, and Jan would fill the rest of the car up with things she said I just had to have. With each visit, I would drive away with renewed confidence in what I was doing, a list of more names to call, and with the knowledge she imparted.

Her appreciation for biodiversity and her dedication to conservation are passed on to all who encounter her as she makes casual suggestions based on her own observations



Jan shows me around the lath house with her nippers and dam knife (for lifting plants out of the soil) in hand. The group grew an impressive 64,000 plants in 2016. "Every penny we make goes to the BBG. We couldn't grow a thing without their support," Jan said.

and studies. Her keen intuition, plenty of trial and error, tweaking here and there, meticulous note taking, all culminate in a conservation ethic with a far-flung impact. I love my copy of her field guide, *All About Alabama Wildflowers* (*Southeastern Wildflowers* – seven books titled and marketed for each southeastern state – *All About Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, and Louisiana Wildflowers*). The books includes for each state: information on physiographic regions, forest types, and plant communities. She covers all of the basics on plant structure, propagation techniques, seed development and dispersal, pollination, as well as provides lists of plants to attract wildlife. She continues to write and self publish editions of her propagation manuals.

She officially retired from her nursery in December 2016 and she now works as a volunteer with the Native Plant Group at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens teaching propagation. She has also offered to help Ruffner Mountain and Turkey Creek Nature Preserves. With leftover stock from her own nursery, she shares with these groups to help build inventory for the native plant nurseries. The new plants are then sold at annual sales to benefit the centers where they are grown. And

many plants are donated to various organizations and habitat gardens around the region – pollinator gardens, butterfly gardens, urban bird habitat gardens, restoration areas and conservation plots, etc.

I visited the native plant group at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens back in December for the last workday before the holidays. In their green aprons, they all looked like elves. In an assembly line, they were huddled in around the tables mounded with soil and pots, putting their green fingers to work. "I thought I was coming here to teach," Jan said, "but I'm learning a lot working with this group." Being the student as well as the teacher makes her a comrade, and she gives credit instead of taking it.

She says she is not a gardener, but I don't know any other gardeners who can do what she does with plants. Her contributions and support to conservation groups, to botanists, ecologists, native plant conferences, to gardeners and to gardens are invaluable. ♡

Michelle Reynolds is a native plant enthusiast on a mission to teach people how to put nature back into the urban landscape. She lectures, writes, and consults on gardens in and around Birmingham.