

Get to Know Scott Stewart



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With a deep passion for connecting plants, people and places, Scott Stewart's heart lies in the world of public gardens and parks as settings to teach about the natural world.

He sees himself as an odd-bird in the landscape industry. "My education and training is, primarily, as a restoration ecologist with a specialization in rare/endangered species reintroduction. I found my way into the world of horticulture through restoration ecology – acting as intermediary between ecologists and plant producers, educating the plant producers about important ecological concepts such as genetic fidelity and teaching ecologists about mass plant propagation techniques."

✖ Since January 2015, Stewart has led the team at Lurie Garden in Chicago's Millennium Park, responsible for its overall management, programming, outreach and planning. The garden has become a top attraction in Chicago and is considered one of the country's best examples of sustainable horticulture in a public, urban setting.

Prior to Lurie Garden, Stewart served as manager of the Oak Park Conservatory, a research and development team leader in the plant biotechnology industry and a field ecologist in southern Florida for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

Stewart has several years of teaching experience as dean and faculty member of horticulture and sustainable agriculture at Morton College and director of horticulture and agriculture programs at Kankakee Community College, both in Illinois.

An accomplished author, Stewart is currently writing his own book about using ecology and natural areas management techniques in the management of public gardens and parks, of course featuring Lurie Garden. He is also co-authoring a book on the scientific history of the native orchid conservation movement

in North America. He has more than two dozen scientific and popular articles under his belt on a variety of industry topics, from grassroots plant conservation to plant propagation techniques.

Proudest moment in the landscape business: Choosing one moment is always difficult. One of my proudest moments is having the opportunity to moderate a panel discussion among Piet Oudolf, Roy Diblik, Shannon Nichol and Laura Ekasyta. Piet, Roy and Shannon were visiting Lurie Garden for their every-other-year review. This panel discussion was the first time in the garden's 13-year history that the lead landscape architect (Shannon), perennial plant designer (Piet), plant producer (Roy) and horticulturalist (Laura) were gathered in one location to discuss the history and future of Lurie Garden.

Biggest challenge: Developing broader acceptance and understanding for the garden's design style. Interpreting the mixed perennial designed plant community design of the garden to both the casual visitor and horticulture industry veterans can be a challenge when, in many instances, both groups view the garden as "weedy" or "messy." Add the challenge of developing an understanding of the ecologically based management strategies needed for a garden such as Lurie Garden, and the business of being a designed plant community and designed public garden can seem too daunting.

Best sources of landscape design/build inspiration: A walk through any natural area is my best source of inspiration. I like to visit the same natural areas throughout the year – several times during each season – with an eye on gathering ideas, conversing with land managers and remaining connected with nature. After all, the plants we install in any landscape all originated from natural places... so a visit to nature is akin to visiting these plant's hometown. What better way to know a plant than to visit it in its hometown?

Favorite plant or plant combination: This question is like asking a parent to choose their favorite child. Most plants I encounter in the garden or nature are candidates for being a favorite. A favorite plant represents a plant or planting combination at a specific moment in time in the garden. For example, the spring brings the combination of taller Tulipa 'Hakuun' and 'Maureen' with an understory of Tulipa urumeinsis and T. bakerii 'Lilac Wonder.' Then for summer, the interplanted combination of Calamintha nepeta ssp. nepeta with Gentiana andrewsii is spectacular. Come fall, I find the combination of Eryngium yuccifolium with either Perovskia atriplicifolia 'Little Spires' or Sporobolus heterolepis 'Tara' is irresistible. For winter, I love the sound of ornamental grasses blowing in the brisk Chicago wind, such as Schizachyrium scoparium 'Blue Heaven,' Pennisetum alopecuroides 'Cassian' or Panicum 'Shenandoah.'



Monday morning motivation: Each Monday I arrive at work by 5 a.m., well before the staffs of either Lurie Garden or Millennium Park begin their days. I spend the first hour of each Monday walking both the garden and park – not necessarily looking for broken lights or needed landscape repairs, but to simply take a personal moment to appreciate the splendor of it. Walking the

garden and park gives me the opportunity to make a purposeful physical connection with the plants and structures, almost as if I am taking their pulse in a manner of speaking.

Worry that keeps you up at night: The lack of an educated, well-trained next generation of ecologically informed public garden professionals. I interact with numerous students at Lurie Garden, particularly landscape architecture and horticulture operations students. Few of these students are learning even basic ecological or sustainability concepts as they apply to the public garden industry. As more ecologically inspired public landscapes are constructed, I worry that their long-term management, and therefore their long-term artistic and ecological integrity, will suffer from the lack of qualified and skilled professionals.

Landscape design/install mentor: Two people at the top of both lists are Larry Richardson, who recently retired as a wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and Roy Diblik, of Northwind Perennial Farm. Larry taught me the importance of making plants relatable to the general population and was famous for saying: "You've got to make plants warm and fuzzy, like bears and cats; otherwise, taxpayers will pay you to plant more of some rare little plant that looks like a roadside weed." And, Roy's influence in garden design is well known in perennial plant circles. There are just too many Roy stories to share!

Favorite landscape design book: "Planting in a Post-Wild World" by Thomas Rainer and Claudia West. This book brings much of the ecology-horticulture overlap I have espoused for some time now into the limelight for discussion and experimentation. Gardens must reflect the temporal history and potential future of a given site, be it from a hyper-local perspective or across an expanded urban complex. Gaining a deeper understanding of this big concept has led me to reading Edward Glaeser's "Triumph of the City." This is a great read that helps relate human development to the development of urban centers, which is an underpinning of designing public landscapes.



Landscape design/installation project that makes you smile every time you drive past it: While working for the Park District of Oak Park, I oversaw the design and plant selection for two projects that remain close to my heart: a teaching/demonstration bioswale and a landscape renovation along the north side of the Oak Park Conservatory. Both projects were significant additions to a tired, outdated landscape at the conservatory, but more importantly both projects were examples of my philosophy of bringing plants and people together in a place around teaching, learning, and discussion of how urban landscapes can be both aesthetically pleasing and ecologically functional.

Describe where you see yourself and the garden in five years: I see Lurie Garden strengthening its position as the standard-bearer for the designed plant community in public landscapes. The garden has tremendous potential to become a center for learning within the horticulture industry about the design and long-term management of designed plant community landscapes. I plan to remain a part of Lurie Garden and the exciting work happening in this

space, but do foresee my role expanding as interest in landscape renovation planning in Millennium Park begins to develop.

Connect with Scott Stewart and Lurie Garden:

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