Review of *A Garden of Marvels: How We Discovered that Flowers Have Sex, Leaves Eat Air, and Other Secrets of Plants*, by Ruth Kassinger

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creasingly aware of her own complicity in the “planned depletion” of the aquifer and the deep divide between her concerns and Ward’s defense of unabated water use. The inevitable reckoning comes for Julene, Bruce, Ward, and the Bair farm. She realizes how much water the farm uses in a year. Knowing that other farmers use just as much or more and that the fossil water of the aquifer will never be replaced, she asks herself, “Did I need to become an activist? . . . As long as my family was part of the problem, what legs would I have to stand on?” Julene opts for activism, Bruce tires of making complicated decisions concerning the farm, and their faithful on-site manager is ready to retire. Keeping the farm becomes impossible, but selling—to a corporation that turns even the pastures into irrigated corn—brings deep, deep pain. It’s a conundrum that farmers up and down the arid High Plains face as they draw millions of gallons of water to raise the corn to feed the cattle to support the beef industry that sustains the region’s economy. Those concerned about the continuing viability of the High Plains and the family farm and those who enjoy a good story by a gifted writer will value Julene Bair’s account of love and reckoning along the Ogallala Road.


Given how vitally important plants are to our very existence, it continually amazes me how cavalierly most humans treat them and how little we really know about them and how they work. Most of us have only vague notions remembered, if at all, from our past education about the development of plants as they grow, interact with one another and their environments, and reproduce.

I took college introductory biology and botany courses. Before writing this review, I looked over those courses’ textbooks. The biology course text does not tell how biologists came to their understanding of how plants worked. The botany text does not either, but does describe the lives of plants in such detail that the mind (at least my mind) boggles! My course profes-
Kassinger traveled widely during her research, going as far afield as a citrus nursery in Florida, the Land Institute in Kansas, and the University of California Riverside. What she came up with is a book that any gardener or other interested person with a modest background in plant biology can understand. It covers all plants, so even the “rots and spots” guys on Backyard Farmer and their fans will find something of interest here.

Kassinger’s book is great fun. So much so that I decided to read it a second time. One can’t give an author a much greater compliment than that. I especially liked her tale of her pursuit of a citrus cocktail tree for her conservatory. For the uninitiated, like me, this tree is a concoction of various types of citrus grafted onto a hardy rootstock species, in this case a Hamlin orange. No local nurseries or garden centers near her home carried or grew such trees. She called places in Florida and eventually was led to a nursery there where the owner agreed to start one for her. All fine and good, but after having the grafts take and the tree ready for delivery she discovered that she couldn’t legally take it out of Florida. She had the tree but couldn’t take it home. The solution to this problem was to leave it in the care of her mother, who lives in Fort Meyers, Florida, and to visit it and her from time to time.

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