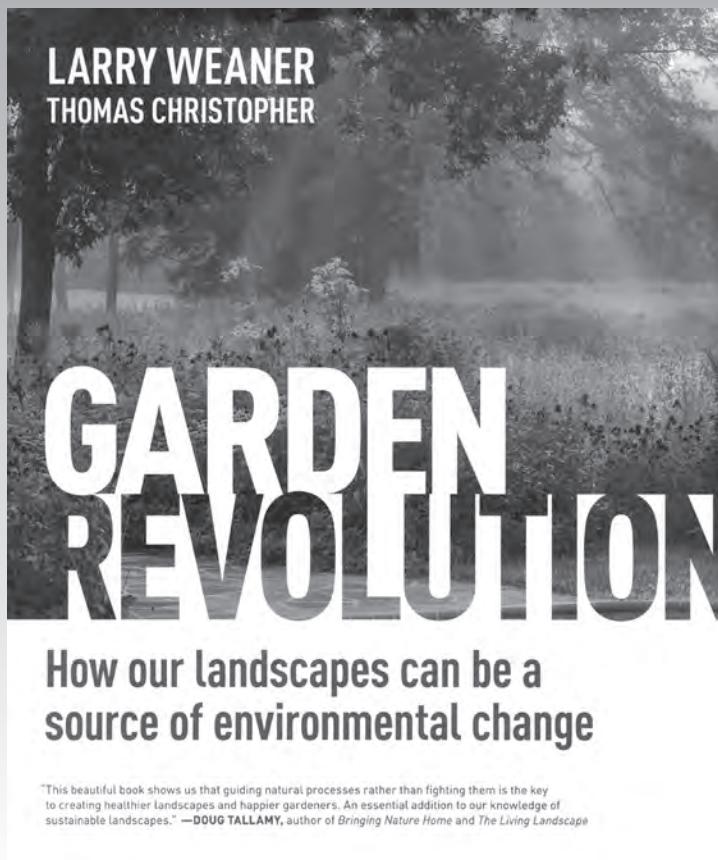




Palmetto





Review by Ginny Stibolt

I attended Larry Weaner's presentation at the 2017 FNPS conference and was so taken with his philosophy that I bought this beautiful book. While Thomas Christopher is listed as the coauthor, he explains that even though the point of view is Larry's, they both worked on the organization and the actual writing of the book. For this review, I continue their scheme and refer to the ideas as if they were Weaner's alone.

The book is filled with gorgeous color photos, the vast majority of which are of huge meadows – many 20 acres or more. There are studies of several meadows with photos in different years to illustrate the changes in plant populations. In fact, the best description of this book is that it's a meadow-building tutorial. While Weaner's plant palettes are for New England and the Mid-Atlantic states, there is much Floridians can learn here about how to design and maintain meadows, while reducing weeds – mostly without pulling them out of the ground.

This is accomplished in several ways, such as mowing and other cutting methods, done when it will most damage weeds, but minimize damage to desirable plants. Also key is paying attention to what the existing landscape has to offer instead of imposing an agenda on the landscape. This is characterized as a “brains over brawn” approach – spend

BOOKS of NOTE

Garden Revolution: How our landscapes can be a source of environmental change

Larry Weaner and Thomas Christopher

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time with a site, evaluate what is already present, and research and observe what the site was used for in the past. Then before planting a whole meadow, test your proposed plan in several ways to see what happens as you move forward. For instance, it's a good idea to test for what sprouts on its own from the seed bank and deal with those volunteers first, depending on whether they are desirable plants or not. By working with the site (including its soil), you create the meadow by working with nature. Weaner advocates not enriching the soil, but planting what will be happy in the existing soil and timing the planting so that weeds are at a disadvantage. This is a huge step beyond simply installing plants that are native to the general region.

The book is organized into three separate sections:

The Learning Process:

This section covers how important it is to really know the life cycles of plants, with special emphasis on timing, so meadow seeds can be planted at the best time for the desirable plants and the worst time for weeds. This section also includes *The Garden Ecologist's Primer*, which points out how landscaping strategies differ when the ecosystem is considered. It includes discussions on these topics: ecoregion, native, habitat, microhabitat, plant community, niche, novel ecosystems, generalist vs. specialist species, ecotypes, competition, succession, disturbance, r and K selected species (these relate to a plant's reaction to disturbance), colonization, senescence, and initial floristic composition. Yes, even though it's beautiful, this is a serious textbook.

Design:

The design section includes ideas for site analysis keeping the local ecology in mind, creating a master plan and a master plant list. Growth time is included in the plans and lists because Weaner suggests using vigorous annuals, biennials, and short-lived perennials that will keep out aggressive weeds for the first few years. These plants will eventually be replaced by long-lived perennials that need more time to become established.

The site analysis section includes six detailed diagrams and a number of photos of one relatively complex site. This illustrates what a thorough study really looks like and why it's important to do preliminary work so the project can be more successful in the long run.

In The Field:

This section provides specific examples of how to create prairies or meadows (and defines the difference between the two terms to be regional – meadows in the east, prairies elsewhere), creating shrublands, and even creating woodlands. The most interesting part of this section is “Setting the ecological processes in motion” because creating a relatively permanent landscape feature takes place over the years. One tactic covered in this section is locating mowed paths through the meadows so that they surround shrubby areas where sprouting or suckering is likely to occur. The mowing keeps the suckering to a minimum and contains the shrubs to a defined area.

Weaner's recommended strategy for meadows does not include pulling weeds because of the disturbance in the soil. He also claims you can cut four weeds by hand in the time it takes to uproot one plant. I love that he included the story of Rose, a client with a relatively small landscape who couldn't stop weeding. She dutifully pulled all the weeds up by the roots, which initially allowed more weeds to get a start. In looking at her landscape seven years later, Weaner realized that the plants coming up in the disturbed areas were native plants that had not been planted. So is disturbance good or bad? The answer, he admits, depends, “An ecologist would say that in a healthy landscape dominated by native plants, disturbance is good. It allows new individuals to enter the system and prevents what might be termed ‘group senescence,’ an overall aging of the plants within the garden. To avoid too much instability, however, disturbance events are most beneficial when small, scattered, and infrequent, like Rose pulling the occasional weed in her entry garden.”

Another story called “A do-nothing attitude” related an initial meeting for a large meadow project to be installed near a new house in Connecticut. The contractors asked these questions: “Should we bring in topsoil?” Although the

soil was bony and infertile, Weaner's answer was “No.”

“Should we fertilize?” – “No.”

“Some compost at least?” – “No.”

“Do you want the field tilled?” – “No.”

“What kind of irrigation do you need?” – “We don't need any irrigation.”

“When do you want to plant this thing?” – “July.”

After this exchange, Weaner imagined the contractors thinking – “Sure, you're the golden boy now, but if this becomes a weed field, you'll be out of here faster than a dandelion puffball in a hurricane.” – so he explained his rationale. Despite their skepticism, the meadow project was a success.

I find this type of storytelling an engaging way to make a point and to make technical information more memorable.

Should Floridians buy this book? A definite maybe.

I love the overall premise that landscapes should look natural and that there are ways to make this work, such as not enriching the soil, and really learning the life cycles of plants – both weeds and desirable plants. I recommend it for people who are designing native landscapes and working to install large meadows, but I think that some of his strategies might be more difficult to implement successfully in Florida. Our seasons are not as clearly defined and many of our weeds are more exuberant than those in the Mid-Atlantic states and New England. I gardened for many years in those regions, and Florida gardening was a total surprise to me when we moved here in 2004. It took all types of adjustments in my gardening methods to be successful. While I think there are many innovative ideas from this beautiful book that are worthwhile and good lessons to be learned, they will need to be adjusted for Florida. So take Weaner's advice with a grain of sugar sand to make it work for you and your Florida landscape.

About the reviewer: Ginny Stibolt is a lifelong gardener and she earned a M.S. degree in botany at the University of Maryland, but gardening is different in Florida. She's been writing about her adventures in Florida gardening since 2004. She wrote *Sustainable Gardening for Florida* (2009), *Organic Methods for Vegetable Gardening in Florida* with Melissa Contreras (2013), *The Art of Maintaining a Florida Native Landscape* (2015), and *Step by Step to a Florida Native Yard* with Marjorie Shropshire (2018) – all published by University Press of Florida. Also, she co-wrote *Climate-Wise Landscaping: Practical Actions for a Sustainable Future* with Sue Reed (2018), published by New Society Press. In addition, she manages a “Sustainable Gardening for Florida” Facebook page and writes the blog www.GreenGardeningMatters.com.