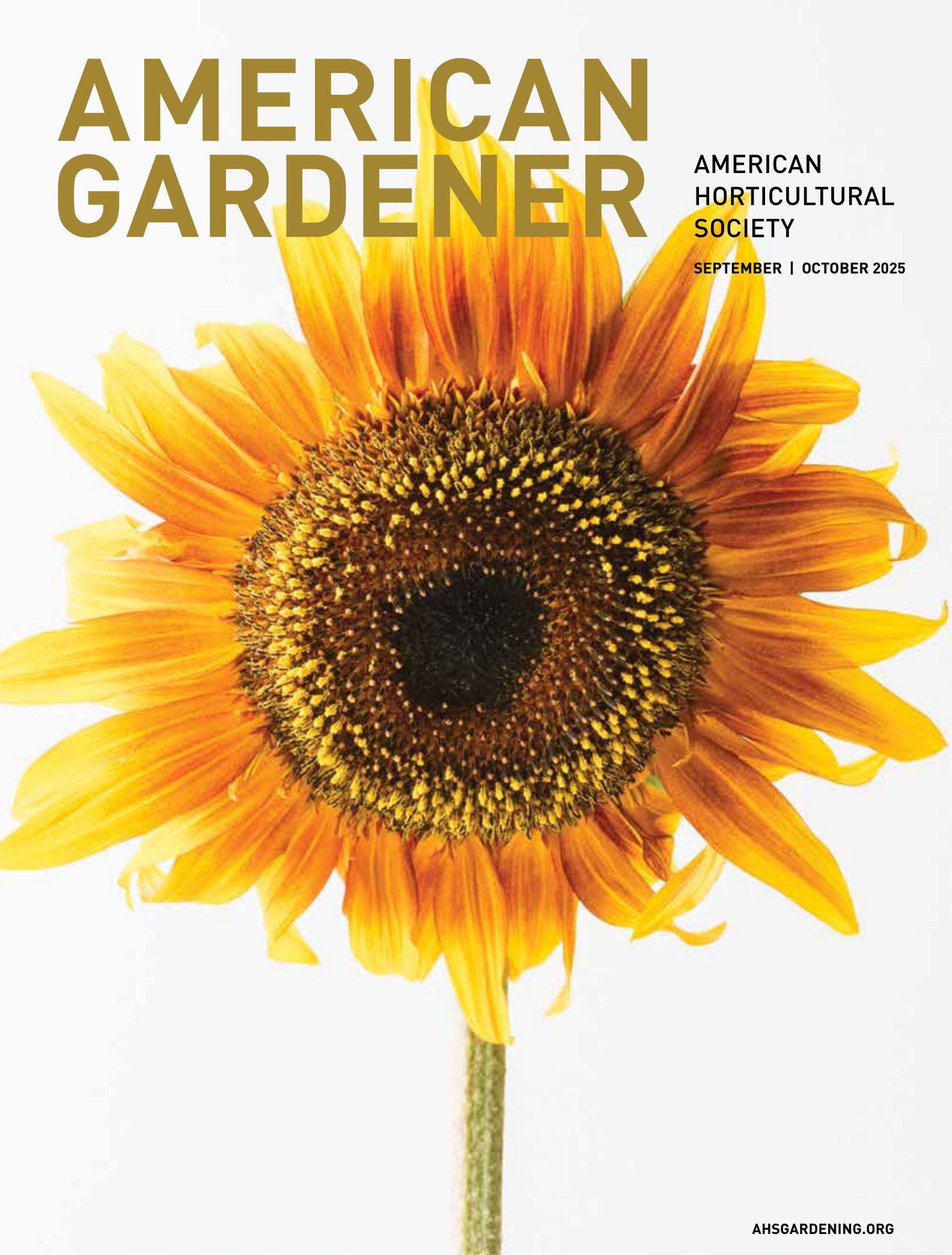


AMERICAN GARDENER

A close-up photograph of a large, vibrant yellow-orange flower, likely a Black-eyed Susan, with a dark brown center. The petals are layered and show some darker orange streaks. The flower is set against a plain white background.

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Pittsburgh's gardens emerge from dramatic geography—steep hills, deep river valleys, and native woodlands shaded by hemlocks and birch. Each spring, trillium and mayapple unfurl in ravines, while tidy vegetable plots cling to backyard slopes. From terraced vegetable beds to fern-filled rain gardens, Pittsburgh landscapes reflect a city shaped by hard work, adaptation, and pride in place.

BY CHRISTOPHER BARRETT SHERIDAN

PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

FLORA WATCH: WHAT TO SPOT IN PITTSBURGH

Redbud (*Cercis canadensis*)

Redbuds & Dogwoods

(*Cercis canadensis* and *Cornus florida*)
Each April, Pittsburgh's hills glow with the pinks and whites of redbuds (*Cercis canadensis*) and dogwoods (*Cornus florida*)—trees locals watch for like a promise kept. Thanks to the Pittsburgh Redbud Project, thousands of native trees now trace brilliant ribbons of blooms across the city. Redbuds bloom straight from the bark—a trait called cauliflory, as if the tree is blooming from its heart. Dogwoods glow at dusk like lanterns hidden in the understory. Long seen in Appalachian lore as symbols of resilience and renewal, they are a fitting emblem for a city shaped by reinvention. Find them in Frick and Highland Parks, and along the Three Rivers Heritage Trail.

Oaks (*Quercus* spp.)

With prominent community names like Oakland and Oakmont, it's clear oaks belong here. These generous giants shape Pittsburgh's identity, from street names to shaded neighborhoods. Chatham University's Arboretum hosts 10 species, with many more across city parks and woodlands. In many Appalachian and eastern towns, planting an oak was seen as staking a claim—a sign you intended to stay for generations. Entomologist Doug Tallamy calls oaks "our most essential native trees"—they support hundreds of insects, countless birds, and entire food webs. Bring binoculars—an oak canopy rivals any museum for wonder and life.

Mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*)

A classic Appalachian ephemeral, mayapple unfurls twin leaves like a pair of green umbrellas, sheltering one waxy white flower beneath. Look for its spreading colonies in Pittsburgh's wooded ravines—especially Frick Park—a sure sign that spring has arrived. Though the small green fruit was called "ground lemon" by some locals, it's dangerously toxic until fully ripe, and the rest of the plant can numb your mouth. Native Americans used it for medicine and deterring agricultural pests. Box turtles still seek out the golden fruit once it softens.

PITTSBURGH BEGAN AS A FRONTIER OUTPOST where the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers meet to form the Ohio River—hence the nickname, The Three Rivers City. Pittsburgh became a global powerhouse in the 19th and early 20th centuries, earning its nickname "Steel City," when it was the industrial heart of America. That era's ambition and innovation left an indelible mark on the city's architecture and cultural DNA.

Industrial titans like the Carnegie, Mellon, Frick, and Heinz families helped shape public life, funding world-class universities, museums, libraries, and civic gardens. Beautiful Victorian and Gilded Age parks and cemeteries took shape alongside grand estates. Some of America's most celebrated architects and designers worked here—Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater remains a pilgrimage site for admirers of modern design.

Pittsburgh's hills create winding neighborhoods, microclimates, and sweeping views—especially from Mount Washington, where the Duquesne Incline (a funicular) offers a classic introduction. Those slopes foster a distinctive garden culture: terraced plots, backyard vegetable beds with altitude, and public staircases known locally as "stair-streets."

Italian, Irish, African-American, and Eastern European roots are visible in the city's churches, neighborhoods, and beloved pierogi shops. Locals even affectionately call small backyard plots "Pierogi Gardens," a nod to their roots and the tradition of growing food in modest spaces. In the mid-20th century, Pittsburgh weathered urban decline before reinventing itself as a flagship of post-industrial revival. Former steel mill sites have become green corridors and innovation campuses. Today, this spirit of renewal fuels Pittsburgh's embrace of sustainability and community-based design. From repurposed steel mills to humble backyard plots, gardening here isn't just about beauty—it's about practicality, pride, and a knack for transforming what's left behind into something that works.

At the **NATIONAL AVIARY'S GARDEN SPACES ON THE NORTH SIDE**, birds meet botanicals in curated outdoor habitats and pollinator plantings. The rooftop garden and habitat zones are designed for both avian visitors and plant lovers.

The **MEXICAN WAR STREETS**, a historic 1840s neighborhood, is now a vibrant arts district. Randyland is a joyful outdoor museum; the Mattress Factory hosts cutting-edge, immersive art from around the world.

At **PITTSBURGH BOTANIC GARDEN**, spring dogwoods bloom above former coal mines, where meadows, woodland paths, and an evolving plant palette create a vivid case study in post-industrial restoration.

The 35-mile **THREE RIVERS HERITAGE TRAIL** is ideal for walking, biking, or skating, especially during golden hours. Stop at the Duquesne and Monongahela Inclines—historic cable cars with bird's-eye views of the landscape.

Relive your favorite childhood field trips at the **CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY**, with dinosaurs, ancient cultures, and vast collections of plants, animals, and fossils.

Mountain Laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*)

Pennsylvania's state flower is a showy May bloomer, with pink to white bell-shaped flowers that attract butterflies and ruby-throated hummingbirds. Although toxic when ingested, the dense wood was carved into utensils and combs by early settlers, who called it "spoonwood."

Indigenous peoples used it for pipes and tools. Though it grows abundantly—sometimes forming thickets so dense that loggers dubbed them "laurel hells"—locals still wove it into wedding garlands and memorial wreaths. A long-lived myth claimed it was illegal to pick, born from the idea that something so beautiful must surely be rare.

HIGHLAND PARK is a Victorian-era park built around a city reservoir, with formal entry gardens, fountains, strolling paths, and the Pittsburgh Zoo & Aquarium. The surrounding Highland Park neighborhood—a historic streetcar suburb—features architectural gems from the 1860s to 1930s and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

ALLEGHENY CEMETERY feels more arboretum than graveyard. Established in 1844, its long views, mature trees, and Victorian sculpture show how beauty and mourning have always shared the landscape.

MELLON PARK WALLED GARDEN in Shadyside is a romantic formal garden hidden behind a bustling city block. Don't miss the fiber-optic art installation embedded in the lawn.

THE FRICK PITTSBURGH'S working 1897 greenhouse still grows flowers for the café, but the real charm is wandering from clipped borders to carriage houses, where garden and estate museum blur in the best way.

PHIPPS CONSERVATORY is a Victorian glasshouse fantasy, where a Fern Room and a Sunken Garden still echo 19th-century tastes, while the LEED-certified landscape next door proves that classic beauty and green innovation can thrive together.

CHATHAM UNIVERSITY ARBORETUM, on the historic 1869 Shadyside Campus, includes parts of the original Andrew Mellon estate designed by the Olmsted brothers, and other Gilded Age properties. Its self-guided tree tour showcases over 100 species.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Frank Lloyd Wright's **FALLINGWATER** is perched over a stream in the 5,100-acre **BEAR RUN NATURE RESERVE**. A mature hemlock forest and other habitats host over 500 plant species and 53 bird species. Wright devotees can also tour his designs at nearby **POLYMATH PARK**.

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