

GARDEN DISRUPTORS

The Rebel Misfits Who Turned
Southern Horticulture on its Head

Augustus Jenkins Farmer III,
Author of *Deep Rooted Wisdom* and
former Curator of Riverbanks Zoo Botanical Garden

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Biography

Jenks Farmer brought a vision to life while creating the two largest botanical gardens in South Carolina. Born and raised on a rural farm, he left at 18 to travel and study around the world. But as an adult, Jenks returned to build gardens, write, and inspire plant lovers in his home state. Although he holds degrees in plant science and museum sciences, Jenks most values lessons from self-taught gardeners.

He has written three books, many professional articles, and an engaging weekly newsletter called *PlantPeople*. Additionally, he fills his time on the lecture circuit, giving lively and thought-provoking presentations to garden groups ranging from the **Smithsonian Institute, Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, North Carolina State Museum, to his grand-mother's Allendale Ladies Afternoon Reading Club.**

Jenks, a 10th-generation South Carolinian, and his husband Tom now design creative private gardens and run a pioneering mail-order nursery specializing in the world's biggest bulbs. They host a few thousand guests yearly on their organically managed funky little flower farm.

Other Books by Augustus Jenkins Farmer

Crinum: Unearthing the History and Culture of the Biggest Bulbs in the World (2022)

Funky Little Flower Farm (2019)

Deep-Rooted Wisdom: Skills and Stories from Generations of Gardeners (2014)



Jenks Farmer lives, writes, and gardens in Beech Island, South Carolina, on the Savannah River near Augusta, Georgia.

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Press Release

As Steve Jobs liked to say, “Here’s to the misfits and the rebels...the ones who think they can change the world are the ones who do.” As recently as 10 years ago, Southern horticulture styles were hanging onto the vestiges of the past. A creative crew of “garden disruptors” set out to change that while building one of the most visited botanical gardens in the South.

Meet the members of that trail-blazing crew in this colorful, funny, poignant adventure as they turn tradition on its head, changing the gardening world while being changed by that very world at the same time.



Young Jenks and Tommy Cave precisely planting trees on the Garden construction site in 1991.

Synopsis

Jenks Farmer left his rural childhood home to find city lights and love. In the '90s Seattle grunge scene, he fell in love and found home in the Emerald City. He vowed never to return to the Deep South.

As fate would have it, the chance to spearhead the design and construction of a massive new Botanical Garden at Riverbanks Zoo drew him back. Ego trumped love.

He planned a cross-country adventure home. An old queen friend decided to ride along. Their cross-country drive back to the Deep South took them face to face with Vacation Bible School teachers, rednecks, Southern Party Girls, and all the demons thought left for good.

On the isolated construction site, the “garden disruptor” crew grew to include closeted teachers who found real love in the camellias, military widows, Black topiary artists, bonsai lovers, and feminists. For a small Southern town, to put this crew in charge was a huge statement. It set the course, the freedom to become a national showcase for new styles, one that HGTV Secrets of Great Gardens featured as one of America’s best, calling it “pioneering.”

But garden club presidents and gentlemen donors pulled the strings, and young Jenks found ways to include their goals as he settled back into small-town life. Join his journey and crew of “garden disruptors” as they brazenly challenged elitist rules of old-school, polite Southern gardening and unveil a hidden history of marginalized people- and plants.

Please contact us at bulbmen@gmail.com with any questions about the soon-to-be-released title from Augustus Jenks Farmer: Garden Disruptors.

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Available on Amazon and JenksFarmer.com***

Talking Points for Garden Podcasts and Interviews

US horticulture changed dramatically in the 1990s. What were some of the catalysts for these changes?

As the South moved from extreme poverty to growth, there was a desire to upgrade things that hadn't been touched in decades. For example, prior to building Riverbanks Botanical Garden, no botanical garden had been established since 1950 and since the mid-1800s before that. There were also changes in the climate: a disastrous freeze wiped out plants, and horticulturists sought plants from Florida. This ushered in a new world of trucking and nursery supply-line from Florida into the South.

You refer to some plants as being disdained or carrying racial stigma. What does that mean?

There are two related issues at play here. First, simple trends and economics. As Southerners left impoverished farms, they left behind certain things, styles, and habits to demonstrate that they were moving up socially. We all do this. Some plants got left behind in that race to modernize. On top of that, segregation and Jim Crow laws set out to justify differences. So everything from food and behavior to clothes gathered stigmas. Some plants did, too. In fact, some plants suffered both disdain and the effects of racial stigma.

How did you bring some of the plants back to the spotlight?

Primarily through botanical garden work. Most any museum will have a core collection. Good botanical gardens are no different; they should have a core collection of plants where they focus resources, research, and promotion. I established that 30 years ago for Riverbanks Botanical Garden, and the current staff has followed suit. My personal passion also played a role in bringing these types of plants back into the spotlight. I share plants with people. The focus of my collection wasn't grown outside of the South 30 years ago. To combat that situation, I sent it around. Now, it's in Denver Botanical, Philadelphia parks, Pittsburgh Zoo, and even in Indiana.



Tom Hall and husband Jenks Farmer flank Jenks's mother Gloria Farmer. Jenks returned to his roots, where his Momma taught him to love plants and to create a specialty lily nursery on the once ramshackle farm in Beech Island, South Carolina.



What do you mean when you say gardens for the new South must be different?

The South is filling up with new Southerners. We need them and want them, and they should bring their styles and taste to new Southern gardens. However, I want them first to understand our soil, our humidity, our fungus issues, and seasons so they'll succeed. A person has to understand biology before successfully being able to establish a vision for a garden. Also, we're leaving out an important group of people who, ironically, are the ones caring for most of these new South gardens: Latinos. We must actively seek out their input and tastes and wisdom so they don't become just another ignored, though essential, group in the same way Black people have been for decades.

Elements of old Southern gardens like this bay hedge frame the more modern style ushered in by the Garden Disruptors. This planting includes flowers and vegetables like Elephant garlic, which is appropriate to Zone 8 & 9.

Why did you decide to make this such a gay book?

It's an especially important lens in this current age of judgment and hate. Gay men have had a profound influence on horticulture for centuries, but they were closeted. Even in the late 1980s, lots of the gay men I knew, who should have been my role models, were closeted. Gardening was an acceptable, masculine way for them to indulge in a love of color, art, and beauty. Gardening groups served as places where they could fit in and hide. When a family-oriented entertainment complex like Riverbanks hired two out gay men to head up the botanical garden project, they were making a statement. Those older men, like the closeted camellia grower in my book, made it possible for me to take the botanical garden in a bold, new direction. I think their stories need to be told.

Horticulture Presentations Inspired by the Book

Gardens for the New South — Delve into Jenks garden design process and thought-provoking ideas about how modern gardens can grow inclusive gardens.

Crinum Lilies & Pass-Along-Plants — Once maligned, these massive bulbs find beautiful homes in modern gardens across the US. Jenks shares his experience using them in tiny, jewel box gardens, public plantings and everywhere in between.

Birthing a Botanical Garden — Thinking of starting a garden? Hear the pitfalls and underlying considerations of living museums and enjoy stories from construction and planting of South Carolina public gardens.

Excerpts from Garden Disruptors

Chapter 1. In Love and Leaving the Emerald City

On the folded-down back seat of my VW Fox, Robert had set up a little bar. AAA maps and trip ticks spilled from his Christian Louboutin porte-document case. He'd never done anything tacky in his life. ("Well, nothing I can recall at this moment," he'd say, with a long, slow, sideways glance and a finger on his lips.)

On our first stop, just over the Cascades, we wandered around Dick and Jane's Spot among towering walls of bedazzled bicycle wheels spinning in the arid winds. The Corn Palace and motor courts on Route 66 would be his slum finale.

On the Fourth of July, a long day of driving left us tired, but we couldn't pass Yellowstone without a glimpse. We illegally parked on a remote northern overlook, and Robert made us martinis in a silver shaker. Sunset painted itself in purples and golds. "It's a Remmington painting," Robert said, "Pass the pimento cheese." We said goodbye to our West with a toast, and it started to snow. For southerners, this wonder, snow in July, subdued any sadness.

A day later, we pulled over and stood waist-deep in a Dakota field of waving grain. Looking into the powerful infinity and the majesty of this country-blue air as far as you could see, we cried like babies. "For the majesty," we told ourselves, after a deep, long cry full of loss more than hope, bounty, and spacious sky.

I dropped Robert off with an art collector friend in New Orleans. As I drove away under bent live oaks of Louisiana, I pulled over onto a narrow highway shoulder, a rough field of black-tipped Bahia grass, the sun rising in my eyes from the east. I cried into my steering wheel. If I'd ever had a hope chest, it was now in a dumpster behind a motel on Route 66.

Excerpts from Garden Disruptors

Chapter 7. Pearl, Jenks and Other Men with Odd Names

The zoo was empty at night. The attendees parked in staff spots and walked through the chain-link security gate, past the dark Flamingo Gift Shop. Siamang apes howled. Besides animals, we had the whole place to ourselves. People would drop by after work, hear and see some gardening info, and still have time to move on to their family or dinner plans.

Pearl did his first-ever public presentation in this humble setting. From up in the audio/visual booth, I showed a few slides of his garden. Pearl stood with his back to the audience and pointed at things in his yard, talking to the screen. Then when he switched gears and turned around, he said “I just wanted to get that yard-of-the-month sign. I knew they’d never give it to me.” He didn’t say who they were, or why they’d never give him an award. “Now, look at me up here on a stage! Busloads of children coming to see my yard! Can you believe it?”

People fell in love. Pearl explained that he spoke through plants. He spoke to the poor, country, Black children. He spoke to the children in all of us. The audience sat enrapt.

About forty minutes in, I pulled two giant potted junipers onto the stage. He told us what he saw in each shrub. He pruned by hand a few minutes, releasing some inner beauty that only he could see. Then Pearl circled and said, “I see love in this bush. Here’s how I start.” He picked up his gas-powered hedge shears, cranked them, and went to work.

It’s fascinating to watch an artist at work. People stood up and gathered round him. But we hadn’t considered this demonstration thoroughly. Within minutes, no one could see anything as the gas-powered shears huffed out clouds of exhaust. The auditorium filled up with blue smoke. People choked and ran out as I opened all the fire doors. Pearl got a paper cup of punch. “Farmer, I swear I didn’t know that would happen. Can you believe it?”

Over the next 25 years Pearl Fryer never once called me anything but Farmer. All through his career, he would call me up and say, “Farmer, I am going to Tokyo, Japan. Can you believe it?”

Excerpts from Garden Disruptors

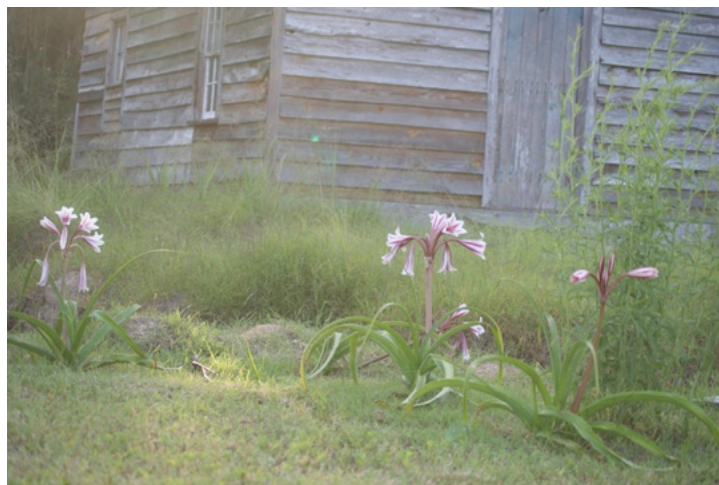
Chapter 15. Coming Out with Crinum Lilies

Choosing crinum for Riverbanks' core collection revealed the rebel in all of our staff.

We knew that the sentiment of the woman who called them black people's plants or po' bukra' plants represented a large segment of "cultured" Southern gardeners. We enjoyed the controversy and of course the win of choosing a commoner's plant over those long esteemed camellias and azaleas. Crinum may never win their hearts, but at least they were thinking, reacting, having emotional responses, and remembering bits of history simply by seeing our plants.

One morning, a tour group from Columbia College, a local women's college, followed me around. Before I got to my spiel on collection plants, a very Southern, blond, sporty-looking woman piped up, "My grandmother had those." I asked if anyone knew the flower's name. Immediately a Black woman said, "I don't remember its name, but my grandmother did, too." That same afternoon, leading a Master Gardeners' tour, an Indian woman said, "These are your lilies? My grandmother had them."

We were building bridges, making connections, and engaging all sorts of people. Old-fashioned crinum, treated with respect in a new, spiffy garden seemed to span geographical and human divides while bringing forgotten memories to mind.



As Southerners moved off rural farms, certain plants like crinum lilies, were left behind, became disdained, old fashioned, and associated with poverty.



Photo credit: Mark Albertin