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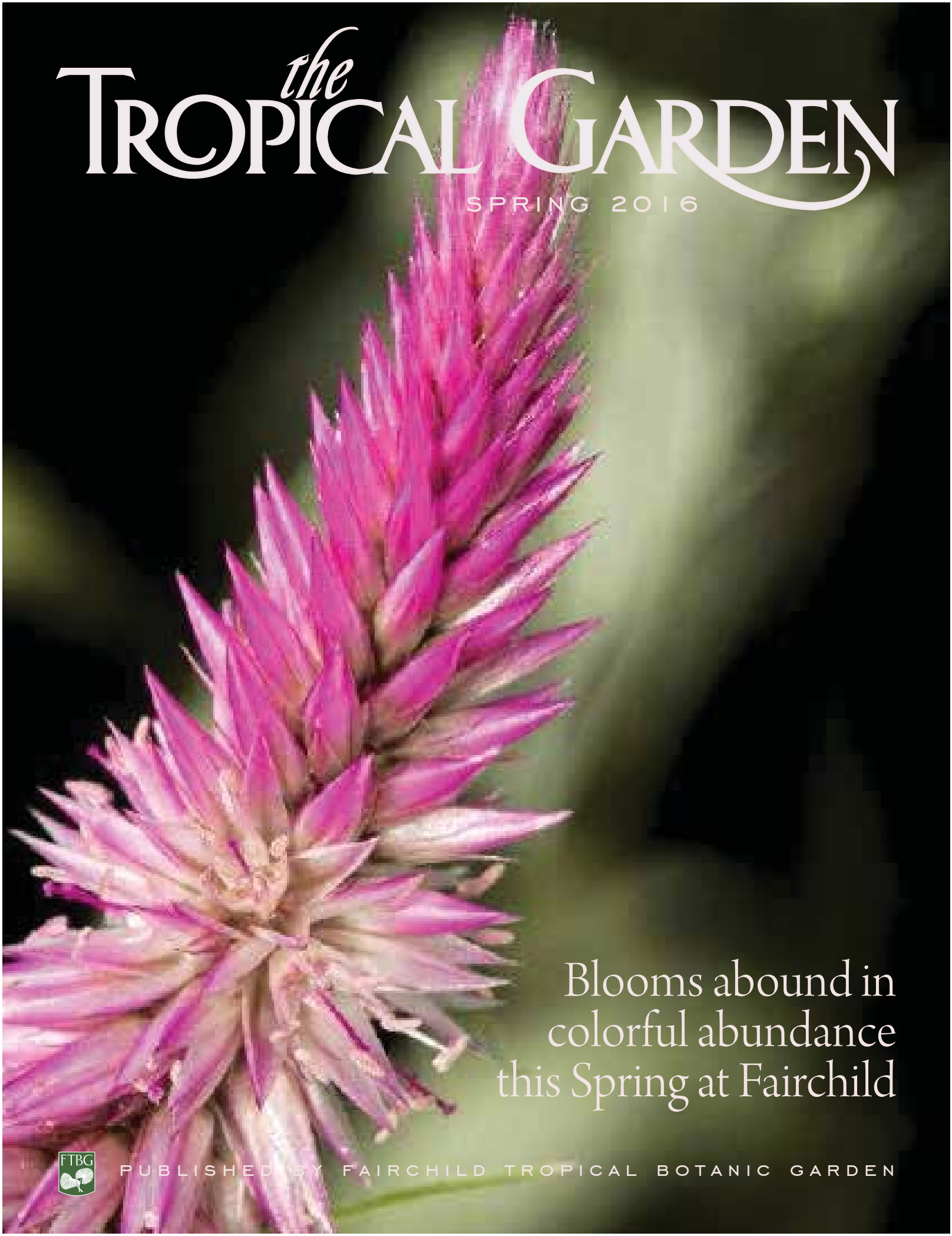
SPRING 2016



Blooms abound in colorful abundance this Spring at Fairchild

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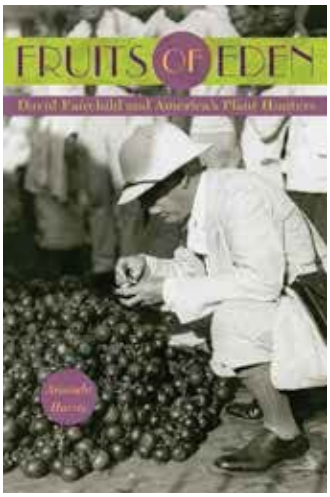

Fruits of Eden:

David Fairchild and America's Plant Hunters, by Amanda Harris

By Kenneth Setzer @KennethSetzer

Author Amanda Harris helps ensure some amazing stories of plant explorers will endure. She also shows how plant explorers really were trailblazers in many senses, bringing nutrition, variety and food supply safety to a young America's table—often risking life and limb in the process.

Dr. David Fairchild wrote a lot—which is quite fortunate for us. He wrote four books, regular bulletins for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), kept journals and published research. He compiled a lot of information, and Harris makes it easier for us to know Fairchild's life by combining all these sources and presenting them anew. We read of Fairchild's boyhood move to Manhattan, Kansas, and how hearing Alfred Russel Wallace talk of his trips to the exotic Malay Archipelago fired young Fairchild's desire to see the world. Fairchild was in many ways a small-town Midwestern boy, but from his youth on, we glimpse his intense curiosity and intelligence. His friend and benefactor, Barbour Lathrop, quipped early on that Fairchild was "a worker, if nothing else." He quickly became much more than just a hard worker.

Lathrop's connections and adventures—as a journalist he covered the Indian wars after the Battle of the Little Bighorn—and a large inheritance from his father, allowed him to pursue his passion of traveling the globe in high style. Harris explains how he grew tired of travel without purpose, and so supported Fairchild's desire to explore for useful plants and introduce them to America. Fairchild was initially out of his element—for instance, he lacked formal attire—and Lathrop let him know it. Though Lathrop teased him as an older sibling would, he similarly looked after Fairchild's best interests. Harris relates that he once even brandished a revolver to stop a hotel owner from removing a typhoid-stricken Fairchild from his bed in Kandy, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka).

Fairchild adapted quickly, winning over nearly everyone he encountered, with only some minor difficulties. Harris shows it was often challenging for Fairchild to prove the value of his work: His boss, Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson, stressed he wanted plants to grow in the American northern plains to help farmers, not Fairchild's exotic tropical fruits. One story goes that in 1898, when Fairchild proudly presented Wilson with a mango, he passed it on to a friend, who gave it to his gardener, who in turn fed it to his chickens. The chickens refused it.

The book also offers much for those already familiar with Fairchild, covering his plant explorer contemporaries while always interweaving them with Fairchild and the USDA. For instance, Fairchild's introduction to Alexander Graham Bell, and subsequent marriage to his daughter Marian, expanded his network of scientists and like-minded individuals exponentially. Marian is herself shown to be no shrinking violet; she was a devoted art lover and sculptor, and lived unchaperoned with a friend in New York to attend art instruction—an unusual move for a woman at the time. She was also the first licensed female driver in Washington, D.C.

I was also pleased to see much information on Frank Meyer, one of the greatest plant hunters, and too often forgotten today. Meyer's death left Fairchild struggling to replace him with a new explorer in Asia; he feared that if the position were vacant, its funding would be withdrawn. Fairchild finally sent Joseph Rock into the field. Like Meyer, Rock was a European with wanderlust, eager to make a name for himself in his new country.

With World War I increasing Americans' xenophobia—including that of plants—while also draining government coffers, a death knell sounded for Fairchild's beloved USDA Office of Seed and Plant Introduction. Tired of battling bureaucracy, Fairchild retired in 1935; Harris reminds us that, by then, Fairchild's office had introduced nearly 112,000 seeds and plants to the U.S.

Always the explorer, after retirement Fairchild and science-minded philanthropist Allison Armour sailed in 1939 aboard the ship *Cheng Ho* in Southeast Asia. War would once again cut short Fairchild's travels. Having contributed incalculably to the U.S. economy and American agriculture, and perhaps having achieved one of his greatest wishes—to open American minds and mouths to new foods—the last of the Victorian plant hunters embarked at 85 on his ultimate journey, at home in his beloved Kampong in Coconut Grove. TBG