

2026 Conference Keynote Speakers



George Coombs is the director of horticulture at Mt. Cuba Center where he guides the care and development of one of the preeminent native plant gardens in America. To date his efforts have focused on making Mt. Cuba's gardens more accessible to a growing number of guests as well as developing strategies to prepare and adapt the garden for a changing climate. Prior to his current role, George managed Mt. Cuba's trial program, publishing several research reports and helping to bring new cultivars of native plants to market.

CLIMATE-READY CANOPIES: USING PUBLICLY AVAILABLE TOOLS TO GUIDE TREE SELECTION

As climate change accelerates, we must now grapple with the challenge of identifying tree species that will thrive under conditions that are often expected to be dramatically different than today. Drawing insights from Mt. Cuba Center's Resilient Canopy project, this talk will demonstrate how to use publicly accessible tools and data to assess future climate suitability and resilience and how that information can be translated into tree species recommendations for our communities.



Jennifer Sterling is a master educator and lifelong environmentalist with a deep connection to the land, grounded in a career dedicated to conservation and environmental ethics. She earned her degree from The Ohio State University, which launched her journey in the field as a wildlife biologist with the US Forest Service in the Pacific Northwest. This role taught her the importance of observation, ecosystem balance, and community-driven conservation, shaping her understanding of the land ethic. Jennifer is currently the Programs Manager at the Aldo Leopold Foundation where her focus is on inspiring others to recognize their place in the natural community and embrace the responsibility of caring for the land that sustains us all.

OUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE LAND: ALDO LEOPOLD AND HIS JOURNEY TO THE LAND ETHIC

This presentation traces the pivotal moments in Leopold's life that shaped his evolving view of humanity's role in the natural world. Framed within the broader social and ecological changes of his time, the presentation culminates in a discussion of the Land Ethic as a philosophical idea and a foundation for intentional, holistic conservation action.



Ethan Tapper is a forester, digital storyteller, and the bestselling author of *How to Love a Forest: The Bittersweet Work of Tending a Changing World*. For more than a decade, Ethan has been recognized as a thought-leader in the world of ecosystem stewardship, winning numerous regional and national awards for his work. More recently, he has been recognized as a writer – since its publication in 2024, *How to Love a Forest* has been named the winner of the 2025 New England Book Award for nonfiction, and received international acclaim. Ethan's message of relationship, responsibility and hope reaches millions of people each year through his writing, social media channels with hundreds of thousands of followers, and the hundreds of walks, talks and keynotes that he delivers across North America each year. Ethan works, writes, hunts, birds and runs a small consulting forestry business from his home at Bear Island – his 175-acre working forest, homestead, orchard and sugarbush in Vermont – and plays in his punk band, The Bubs.

HOW TO LOVE A FOREST

What does it mean to love a forest? In this talk, Ethan Tapper, a forester, bestselling author and digital storyteller from Vermont, will draw from his work as a forester and his book *How to Love a Forest: The Bittersweet Work of Tending a Changing World* to discuss what it means to care for forests and other ecosystems at this moment in time. How do we respond to the harmful legacies of the past? How do we use our species' incredible power to heal rather than to harm? How do we reach toward a better future? In a time in which many believe that "protecting" ecosystems means protecting them from ourselves, Ethan argues that humans must take action to help ecosystems heal and to move into a more abundant future, and that to do so is an act of care and compassion – of love. Ethan's message is at once compassionate and pragmatic, clear-eyed and hopeful, sobering and inspiring – a powerful new vision for how we can build a world that works for all its ecosystems and all its people.



Tom Kimmerer is a forest scientist, tree physiologist, and plant biochemist. He holds a B.S. in botany from SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse, and a PhD in both forestry and botany from the University of Wisconsin. He spent much of his career as a professor of forestry at the University of Kentucky, during which he spent several years in Indonesia and Malaysia. His first book, *Venerable Trees*, is about the woodland pastures of the Bluegrass. His second book, *Our Trees*, is in progress. His popular newsletter about trees is also called "Our Trees". He is a consultant for landowners in the management of ancient trees and woodland pastures.

WHAT IS THIS TREE DOING?

We often think of trees as rather static and still. That is simply because they live in a different time frame than we do. Trees are constantly active, acquiring resources, growing, and interacting with their environment and all the organisms around them. We will look at the world as a tree does and will come to an understanding of their complex lives.

Featured Speakers



Don Cipollini is a professor of Biological Sciences at Wright State University. His research program addresses many issues impacting plant and forest health, including the ecology, impacts and management of invasive plants, insects, and diseases. He has authored or co-authored 121 papers in the peer-reviewed literature and his research program has been funded through many federal, state and regional agencies. He is an avid fan of wild nature, likes big trees, and is a bonsai enthusiast. He hosts the interpretive walk-and-talk-show "The Naturalist" on YouTube and received a Wright State Presidential Award for Faculty Excellence in Community Engagement in 2025.

PAWPAWS: THE STATE FRUIT OF OHIO

Don will discuss the interesting biology of pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*) trees, including notes about their growth, morphology, and distribution, their breeding system, their associations with pollinators and herbivores, and their sometimes-problematic biochemistry.



Tom Hissong has been an Interpretive Naturalist/Environmental Educator in Dayton area for nearly 41 years. He retired from his position as Education Manager at the Aullwood Audubon Center and Farm in 2017. Previously he worked with Five Rivers MetroParks and the Dayton Museum of Natural History.

The World of Native Plants and Birds

Birds use native plants for food resources, nesting materials, nest placement, year-round habitats to live in and much more. In turn, birds provide plants with a means to spread their seeds, protection from hungry caterpillars and insects, and other factors of ecological importance. The many interesting connections between plants and birds are strong and well developed. Tom will present a program on the fascinating relationships between native plants and birds and how often one group could not exist without the other. A special focus will be on the use of native plants to enhance our home landscapes for birds.



Dani Parisi joined the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden as an intern in 2021. She earned an Environmental Engineering degree from the University of Cincinnati in 2023 and now works as a horticulturist at Bowyer Farm. Dani began working with trillium in the spring of 2022 and is now in her fourth year researching the genus. In addition to her work with trillium, Dani has also assisted with the propagation of *Trifolium kentuckiense* (Kentucky Clover) in collaboration with CREW and Kentucky Nature Preserves. Outside of her work with these special plants, Dani also assists with many other projects at Bowyer Farm, most recently, the development of an additional 12 acres of wetland through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

Adventures in Native Plant Trialing and Propagation

From trillium to oaks and everything in between, finding the coolest native plants to share takes time, patience and a bit of creativity. Dani's talk will explore methods for evaluating and growing natives that are rarely seen in cultivation and attempts at improving propagation methods for some of the most common and most loved species.

Saturday Repeating Breakout Sessions

NATIVE GRASSES: THE FOUNDATION OF EVERY GREAT POLLINATOR GARDEN, Jennifer Smith

Often overlooked, native grasses play a crucial role in native gardens and landscapes. In addition to providing habitat, food and shelter for wildlife, native grasses are an essential design tool in creating a garden and landscape that beautifully transitions from a summer to a winter garden. Learn how to elevate your garden with native grasses. Jennifer Smith is an award-winning pollinator garden designer with Wimberg Landscaping. Her gardens include a wide variety of native plants, often, the first native plants to find a home in clients' landscapes. Jennifer is an instructor at the University of Cincinnati's Horticulture department, a columnist for "Hyde Park Living Magazine", an instructor at Baker Hunt Art and Cultural Center, a member of the Horticultural Advisory Committee for Spring Grove Cemetery and Arboretum, and an avid gardener for more than 25 years.

GROWING A MOON GARDEN, Courtney Denning

Learn how to create a garden that comes alive at night with white flowers, silvery foliage, and night-blooming plants. Moon gardens can be designed for visual appeal or to attract nocturnal wildlife such as moths and bats. This talk covers which native plants work best for a moon garden, how to layer plants for continuous bloom, and tips for planning a garden that is both beautiful and wildlife friendly. Participants receive a handout with a Moon Garden Native Plant List to help plan their own nighttime landscape. Courtney has a background in plant ecology and has been studying wildlife since childhood. Her work spans environmental education, library programming, and digital communications, including launching the Piqua Seed Library. At Deeply Rooted Landscapes, she designs gardens, consults with homeowners, and manages web and social media content. At home, she grows more than two hundred Ohio native plant species on less than one quarter acre.

SUSTAINING NATIVE INSECTS WITH SOFT LANDINGS, Patty Shipley

Native insects contribute significantly to the food web. While planting native plants is critical to insect survival, they also require habitat to complete their life cycle. Attendees will leave with a deeper understanding of how small, thoughtful choices—what we remove, what we leave and how we design our gardens—can dramatically increase the ecological function of our landscape. Patty Shipley is the owner/operator of Leaves for Wildlife, a native plant nursery in Sunbury, Ohio that prioritizes biodiversity, sustainable growing practices and ecological education. She serves on the board for the North Central Ohio Pollinator Pathway.

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT: THE MAGIC OF CAMOUFLAGE, MIMICRY, & HIDDEN FIGURES IN NATURE, Judy Semroc

This program will present and discuss examples of how animals and plants mislead and deceive to survive in Nature. Revealing patterns, coloration, behavior and much more will attest to the astounding world of Nature. Be prepared to test your observational skills! Judy has spent more than 30 years chasing, observing, and marveling at the amazing natural history found in Ohio & other states. She is the founder of "Chrysalis in Time," the first Ohio chapter of the North American Butterfly Association (NABA). She has co-authored two natural history guides, *Dragonflies & Damselflies of Northeast Ohio* and *Goldenrods of Northeast Ohio: A Field Guide to Identification & Natural History*. As a former Petroleum Geologist and science teacher, Judy loves to learn about and share her passion for the natural world. Learn more about Judy's latest adventures at www.naturesparkohio.com!

NATIVE TREE WALK, Tim Kimmerer

Tom Kimmerer, a forest scientist and one of our conference speakers, will tour Bergamo's native trees, explaining their characteristics and importance. With expertise in tree physiology and biochemistry, he offers valuable insights into how trees reproduce, grow, and thrive.

THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT, Tom Borgman

As we walk the grounds at Bergamo, the many native and non-native shrubs and vines will be identified. We will discuss the part they play in the ecosystem and if they will fit in your home landscape. Tom is an experienced landscaper and naturalist, so he will be able to address any questions you have about landscaping with native plants. After a 42-year career as a naturalist and natural resource manager, Tom enjoys landscaping with native plants and sharing his excitement for creating habitat for all types of living creatures.

BUGS, BIRDS & BUTTERFLIES, Kim Banks

Join a guided group walk with Kim, a knowledgeable naturalist, through beautifully restored grounds featuring native plants. She will help you spot a diverse array of wildlife and offers a wonderful opportunity to connect with nature and observe the thriving habitats that native plants support. Growing up spending summers in the Ozarks sparked a lifelong interest in nature with a fondness for insects. A naturalist for over 20 years, she worked for various county parks throughout Ohio. In retirement, she enjoys volunteering for organizations, like MWNPS that help connect people to the native flora and fauna surrounding them.

DIY GROWING NATIVE PLANTS AND MEEC NURSERY TOUR, Michele Banker

A walking tour with a behind-the-scenes look at the Marianist Environmental Education Center (MEEC) native plant nursery tour. The outdoor workshop will introduce the steps taken in native seed propagation including basic tools needed, proper seed collection and handling, various cleaning techniques, soil mixes, protection from animals, and the challenges of weather conditions. While it is an investment in time and patience; you too can propagate, perpetuate, and promote native plants throughout your home landscape. Michele serves as the Land Resource Coordinator for the Marianist Environmental Education Center (MEEC). As steward of the 100 acres of natural areas at Mount Saint John, she has led the establishment and management of tall grass prairie, non-native invasive plant monitoring and management and installation of a bioretention pond for storm water runoff control. During the past 17 years she has led service learning, educational programs, ecological research, and land restoration projects. Michele also gives presentations and provides land consultations for homeowners.