



Melanie Choukas-Bradley, Chronicler of the City's Trees

by Kathy Jentz

Melanie Choukas-Bradley is the author of **City of Trees: The Complete Field Guide to the**

Trees of Washington, DC, which is a tremendous resource for area nature lovers, tree huggers, and gardeners alike. We caught up with her when she gave a talk on historic local trees for the Silver Spring Garden Club.

Q Tell us about yourself and your personal background.

A I grew up in Vermont, where I developed a love of trees and wildflowers. My friends and I would steal sweet ice from the sugar maple sap buckets lining our dirt road on our way home from school and some of my earliest summer memories are of lying in the soft moss of white birch groves. Every April, my sister and brother and I would trek into the woods to find the early blooms of hepatica, trout lily (which we called dogtooth violet), Dutchman's breeches, and "stinking Benjamin" trilliums.

Although I love gardening, my real passion lies in wandering the woods. My most contented moments today are the ones spent in the wilds near home — searching for the first Virginia bluebells along Rock Creek or the earliest shadbush flowers on Sugarloaf Mountain. But just opening the front door in the morning gives me a thrill. How does the air feel and smell? Is there wind or mist? What flowers have sprung into bloom since last night? Who is at the feeder or visiting the milkweed? And during winter, my first hopeful thought: Is it snowing? We haven't had a real blizzard since 2003 and I'm ready.

I've lived in the Washington area with my husband Jim since 1977 and both our children (Sophie, who is pursuing a PhD at UNC, and Jesse, a Dartmouth freshman) were born here. They all share my love of flowers and garden-

grown herbs and vegetables, with the exception of ripe raw tomatoes, which the three shun. All the more for me!

Q How did you come to write **City of Trees**? Tell us a bit about your other work and books as well.

A When Jim and I moved to the Capitol Hill neighborhood in the late '70s, he was starting law school at Georgetown and I was looking for a job as a journalist. I had been the news director for a radio station in New Hampshire, but I soon discovered that this credential didn't dazzle employers in Washington pressrooms. However, while job-hunting, I became more and more enamored of the city's trees. They were impressive, they were historic, and they were botanically baffling. I spent weeks trying to figure out the identity of an elm-like tree growing in Garfield Park across the street from our basement ("garden") apartment. It would turn out to be an Asian zelkova, not featured in native field guides. I thought someone ought to write a book for everyone like me who came to Washington, fell in love with the trees, and went crazy trying to figure out what the heck they were. So I lured my longtime friend Polly Alexander down from Vermont to work with me on the project.

I was an English major at the University of Vermont and Polly was a UVM botany major who had already illustrated two books by the age of 25. Together we explored the city and collected hundreds of herbarium specimens (leaves pressed in newspapers and fruit collected in egg cartons), which we schlepped to the National Arboretum, where extremely patient botanists and horticulturists helped us identify them. I also pored through the stacks at the Library of Congress and talked with historians and horticulturists at the White House, Capitol, Smithsonian, Mount Vernon, Dumbarton Oaks, and other locations.

When Polly and I updated our book recently (**City of Trees**' third edition was published in November 2008), I again

crisscrossed the city and conducted two years of field research. Polly executed some beautiful new pen-and-ink drawings and some accomplished photographers contributed new pictures.

In addition to **City of Trees**, I've published two books about Sugarloaf Mountain, MD, working with another talented artist and close friend, Tina Thieme Brown. She and I write and illustrate the "Wildflower in Focus" column for the Maryland Native Plant Society. I have also authored numerous feature stories, op eds, and personal reflection pieces for the *Washington Post* and other publications. During the summer, I teach a wildflower identification class at Woodend in Chevy Chase, MD, as part of the Natural History Field Studies program that is co-sponsored by the Audubon Naturalist Society (ANS) and the Graduate School. And it is my great joy to lead nature walks and field trips throughout the year for ANS, the U.S. Botanic Garden, Casey Trees, and many other organizations. I also enjoy lecturing about regional natural history.

My current project is a manuscript recording a year at Boundary Bridge in Rock Creek Park. I'm working with another talented friend — the photographer, author, and playwright Susan A. Roth. We met along a trail in Fern Valley at the National Arboretum, where we were both taking pictures. Susan contributed photos to the new **City of Trees**, including two of the cover shots.

Q What is a typical work day like for you?

A When I'm working on a writing project, before settling down at the laptop, I go through my morning rituals, which include pulling a few weeds, filling the bird feeder, and taking a walk through the neighborhood. I try to ignore household tasks as much as possible in the morning, always a challenge when you work from home. On a good day, I've settled down to serious work by nine or so and I usually have three to four really good writing hours in me. If the current project doesn't require too much creative thought, I can write for eight to 12 hours or more when I'm on deadline.

When I lead field trips I always scout the trail beforehand so I can draw up a

plant list for participants and be ready to share botanical information in a fresh and meaningful way. Truth be told, I spend a lot of time frantically studying plant families, genera, and species before each field trip or class. Over many years, I've learned that the secret to success and joy in writing, teaching, lecturing, and leading field trips is to be over-prepared so that I can relax and enjoy the moments I spend stringing words together and addressing groups.

Q What mistakes and triumphs have you encountered in your work?

A Sharing my love of nature on the page or in the field brings me such joy. When someone says, "Your book got me interested in trees many years ago." or "I'll never forget this field trip in the pouring rain," well for me, that's as good as it gets. It's hard to regard anything I've done as a "mistake," since missteps usually lead to greater knowledge and often the detours I've taken have brought me through unexpectedly fertile terrain.

Q What advice would you give to beginner/amateur gardeners in the greater DC area?

A Focus on native plants as much as possible and think "ecology" at all times. The birds who come to dine on your native viburnum or shadbush fruit and the butterflies who fly in to sample nectar from your summer flowers will bring you as much joy as the plants themselves. Work with the habitat you have and don't be afraid of a little wildness. And above all, do no harm. Everything you use in your garden will find its way into Rock Creek or Sligo Creek or one of the other streams in our precious and fragile Chesapeake Bay watershed. Learn your "watershed address." I start most field trips by asking the group to share theirs. Mine is: Coquelin Run, Rock Creek, Potomac River, Chesapeake Bay, Atlantic. That's where my yard waste goes. There is a storm drain at the corner of our property down which everything flows straight into Coquelin Run and then into Rock Creek and beyond.

Q What trees are your favorite to use in the greater DC area?

A I'm on the tree ordinance board in the town of Chevy Chase and we have a list of native "canopy trees" that we encourage people to plant in their yards. It includes oaks, maples, and American beeches. I'm in favor of planting large canopy trees whenever there is space for them and I'm personally very partial to our native oaks. A large tree cools and cleans the air, soaks up stormwater runoff (protecting the Bay), and absorbs CO₂ (mitigating climate change). However, if space is limited, there are a number of smaller native trees that I love. The native shadbushes or serviceberries have creamy spring flowers and edible fruits. The river birch, which grows wild along area creeks and rivers, has become a popular cultivated tree in recent years and its cinnamon-colored bark is stunning. We planted a native redbud in our yard about five years ago and I adore its purplish-pink spring blooms and heart-shaped leaves. A few golden ones still cling to the tree's branchlets in December.

Q Conversely, what trees would you advise others to avoid?

A Invasive species such as Norway maple, Paulownia, and Ailanthus. Not that anyone is apt to plant an Ailanthus!

Q Any funny garden stories you can share?

A My son Jesse, teenage master of the creative oxymoron, describes our current landscape design as "feral topiary." When we moved to our



Melanie Ortolikas Bradley leads a walk at Sugarloaf. Photo by Dan Weil.

house in the town of Chevy Chase several years ago, the former owners had planted and maintained some severe, contorted, and probably expensive dwarf forms of conifer and maple. Some of my friends were horrified and said, "Rip them out." Even some of the neighbors weighed in. However, I have never been a ripper. I hate killing anything (my least favorite part of gardening is thinning young vegetables) and, over time, I grew to love this odd landscape, especially when everything started needing a haircut (that would not be forthcoming) and we had planted flowering perennials and annuals amongst the twisted trees. Today the Joe-Pye-weed is taller than any of the dwarf trees. This is clearly a yard that would never be featured in the *Washington Gardener*, but we love it dearly and the birds, butterflies, and squirrels feel right at home.

Q What garden (or tree) myths and misunderstandings do you frequently encounter?

A People are often baffled by the origins of Washington's cultivated trees. Why are some magnolias deciduous and early-blooming? What is the difference between the sycamores I see along the Potomac River and the plane trees growing down the street? In my books, articles, lectures, and on my field trips, I try to help people sort it all out. Washington's trees come from all over the world and some of the non-natives are near dead-ringers for the natives. The Himalayan pine looks very much like our eastern white pine. Deciduous magnolias from Asia, which blossom before the new leaves appear, stand side by side with native magnolias — some deciduous (bigleaf and umbrella magnolia), some evergreen (southern magnolia), and some in between (Sweet Bay magnolia). The plane tree down the street is probably a London plane, hybrid of the Oriental plane and native sycamore. It can be very easy to become confused and not know what you're looking at, and my email inbox almost always contains a tree question. But botanical mysteries can be great fun, especially in Washington where they are the name of the game!

Profile continued on page 27