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Plus: Our Favorite Conifers, Large & Small

JIMMY TURNER

A conversation with the Executive Director of Utah's Red Butte Garden

A TRANSPLANT from Dallas by way of Australia, Jimmy Turner arrived in Salt Lake City in March 2020. His leadership of the University of Utah's Red Butte Garden began in the midst of the covid-19 pandemic, but he is optimistic for the present and future of gardening both public and private.

SCOTT BEUERLEIN: I met you when you were at Dallas Arboretum. What was your background before that?

JIMMY TURNER: I've always loved horticulture. When I was six years old, I told the teacher I wanted to be a horticulturist. She didn't know what that was and sent a note to

my mother. Prior to Dallas Arb, I worked every form of horticulture—veggie farm, peach orchard, retail, wholesale, maintenance. I got my bachelor's degree from East Texas State; my master's from Penn State.

SB: You did a lot of plant trialing at Dallas Arboretum.

JT: That was started by my predecessor, Leslie Halleck, who is still around and one of my best friends. Leslie started the trial gardens by herself. Bare bones. One-woman operation. The fruition happened to come during my period. We were testing 2- to 5,000 new entries per

year. Two-and-a-half acres of plant trials. And at every place I have worked since, I've had a trial garden come quickly afterwards. We have a very small one here at Red Butte, but I'll be expanding it very soon.

One of the jobs of a botanic garden is not only to save and conserve plants for the whole planet, but also to tell your local constituents what does well in your area. Think globally. Act locally. And you get a whole group of people who have more success in gardening, so they're much more interested in what they can do.

SB: You grew a lot of annuals at Dallas.

JT: I love annuals. Now, that over-the-top Victorian design full of annuals? That's for public display gardens. To do that in your own garden, no. But a couple of flower pots dispersed here and there spices up your garden and gives you that little bit of change. Annuals are the throw pillows of the plant world and I think people like that. It's a simple and interesting color form that's changeable.

SB: Then you get the opportunity to go to Australia as Director of Horticulture Management over three botanic gardens and four parklands!

Left: Jimmy Turner assumed leadership of Red Butte Garden in March 2020. One of his goals is to expand the trial garden and continue identifying the best planting options for hot, dry climates.





Above: Red Butte Garden occupies 100 acres at the eastern edge of the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, in the foothills of the Wasatch Range. The Visitor Center and Orangerie, pictured here, back up to a series of 21 themed gardens as well as a natural area with walking trails.

JT: It definitely was a crazy moment. I started at Dallas Arboretum as Trial Manager and was the Senior Director of Gardens before I left, and really kind of maxed out my situation there. But Australia was definitely a different world. The Royal Botanic Garden in Sydney is probably one of the most visited gardens in the world. Five million plus a year.

SB: And an entirely new plant palette.

JT: It was like landing on a complete different planet. You think you know plants, and then you go to Australia. And they keep the good stuff to themselves. You get there and go, "I can't even tell you the plant family. Never even heard of the plant family!"

SB: What is Australia's relationship to gardening?

JT: They're definitely going down their own path. It really depends on the state you're in. Western Australia is very native focused, because it has one of the top biodiversity regions for plants. A lot of plants won't grow anywhere else in the world but there. Melbourne is very English.

**Annuals
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-Jimmy Turner

Colorful. Sydney is somewhere in between that and native because they've had so many droughts and not much else will live, so color has dropped off.

SB: And you just recently joined Red Butte Garden in Salt Lake City as Executive Director. It's a unique and beautiful garden!

JT: It is definitely an amazing place. It's only 30 years old, so it's still a baby in the botanic-garden world. It's come to the age where it needs

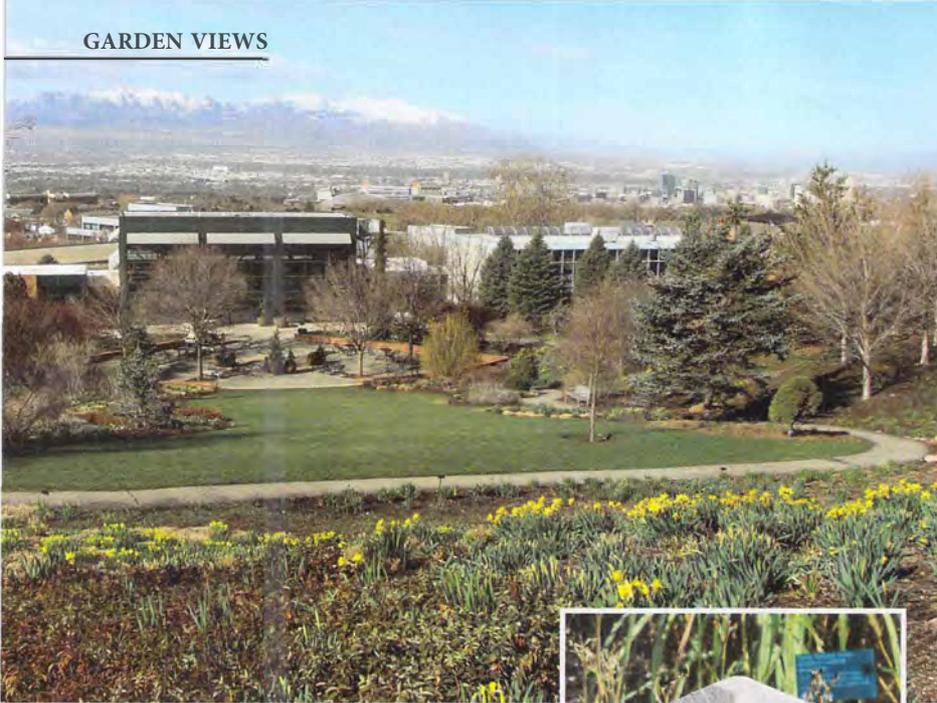
to decide what it's going to be. It's had really great leadership. Mary Pat Masterson, currently Executive Director at Atlanta Botanical Garden, was one of the first directors here. Dr. Gregory Lee just retired and left it in great financial shape. We have 100 acres, including beautiful vistas of the city and mountains. A great climate with no humidity, and we have seasons.

SB: I especially enjoyed the garden that showed the different degrees of water needs.

JT: Our Water Conservation Garden has specifically marked areas we only water three times a week, twice a week, once and not at all, so you can see the difference in what you can do with those areas. It just won an Award of Excellence from the Texas branch of the American Society of Landscape Architects. And now we're up for a national award, hopefully.

SB: What are you hoping to accomplish at Red Butte?

JT: One, I want to put it on the map for expertise on low-water-use gardens. I think that's a good option



Above: The Four Seasons Gardens showcases the year-round colors of conifers and seasonal delights like daffodils. **Right:** Signage in the Water Conservation Garden.



for this area. Plant trials for no water/low water use and high desert, which is what we are. There are not a lot of new plant introductions for this type of area. Most new plants are for higher rainfall areas. We have a good opportunity and hopefully some funding to actually go to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and other areas that have like climates, and see what we can find there that we're not using now in the U.S. that would improve gardens. That's one of the opportunities.

SB: What's got you excited about gardens these days?

JT: Everything-you know me. I'm a magpie when it comes to gardening. Botanically, at the moment, I would say bulbs are always my number-one focus. We're a National Daffodil Society Garden, and daffodils are actually my favorite flower, so I'm happy about that. I want to improve our bulb collection, because they do so well here in the high desert.

Right now, I'm learning a lot here at the garden about our desert

natives. Penstemon! I think Utah and Colorado are ground zero for penstemon biodiversity. I'm running around going, "Another one? Another one?"

SB: Great plants and such vibrant colors.

JT: And pollinator rich. A lot of them have obligate pollinators. Our conservation department has done a lot of research on that.

A cool plant I'm interested in is *Solanum jamesii*. It's the native potato. From northern Mexico up through to here. My Director of Conservation has just discovered it and has actually cultivated it. We're working on proof that the Native Americans of Utah cultivated it 7,000 years ago, and trying to reintroduce it to local indigenous gardens and turn it back into a crop. An extremely drought-tolerant plant with potatoes about the size of your thumb.

SB: Quick and easy to peel?

JT: Yeah. No!

SB: Where do you think horticulture should be headed?

JT: I think we should be headed toward lower input. People have smaller yards. Less time. And I think lawns are something we'll see whittle down slowly but surely. Since the 1950s the lawn has been a measure of one's masculinity and social status, but now people wonder what else can they can do. What colors can they get?

The last couple of years it's pretty clear that people are interested in producing their own food. It doesn't take much space to do that. A hellstrip [along the curb] can feed a family of two easily, if done correctly. Food gardening, obviously, isn't low input, but you get your input back. I would say today's giant perennial and shrub borders are probably done for most suburban homes. Now, people are asking, what can I do with my patio or my little 10 by 10?

SB: What books are you reading?

JT: A lot of things from [publisher] Chelsea Green. Mostly my books right now are about gardening for food or cooking. I'm big on low-input cooking at home. I make my own bread, kombucha, ginger beer.

SB: Please invite me for dinner!

I have to tell you. We've had over 200 speakers present at our Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden symposiums. You and Carol Reese (University of Tennessee Extension, Jackson) were the best for combining great information with real entertainment.

JT: Carol Reese is one of my all-time favorite speakers. No one else can talk about sex in the garden and not offend everyone. I've seen her in a room full of Southern Baptist ladies and they're all hysterically laughing

TURNER'S TOP PICKS

These all did great in Texas and Sydney, Australia, and they're also doing well here in Utah. They all have one thing in common: They are vigorous. I'm not a fan of stunted, puny flowers. I love plants that fill in and cover the garden with color, like a seasonal duvet cover for the flower bed.

and I'm in the back row, literally on the floor. I'm lucky I come from a family in Texas that knows how to tell stories, but also genetically I don't have a filter. I think people want to hear the truth. They want to hear your opinion. It doesn't mean it's gospel. People sometimes take gardening too seriously. So I tell them I did this, and I screwed up that. Or I over-fertilized my yard one time and burned the whole thing off. Gardening is about the act, and not about the finished product. The act of gardening, there is no end.

SB: I feel like if I've gone to a talk and gotten good info, go home with new ideas and I've laughed, it was a great talk.

JT: If you're not making them laugh, you're not engaging them. I'm looking forward to getting back out there. I would say the thing I missed most about the U.S. were all my plant-geek friends at Garden Writers (GardenComm) and at the Perennial Plant Association. Those are my family!

SB: With the pandemic, more people are gardening. Will they continue?
JT: You can grow plants. It's not that hard. And it's not like you're a bad person if you kill a plant. Plants are going to die. I have a saying: "The success of my garden is built on the compost of my failures." You learn how to garden by killing things. And when you do grow something and it's beautiful or you can eat it or watch the butterflies coming to it, or your neighbor compliments you on it, that's the moment when you have a gardener for life.

SB: Your thoughts on the role of botanical gardens in general?

JT: A botanical garden is the kind of wonderful place where every part of horticulture overlaps. Retail. Landscape design. Creativity. Marketing. Botanic gardens have



O *Supertunia* series

I swear this plant is part kudzu, because Supertunias grow huge almost overnight. Unlike other petunias, they stood up to the heat and humidity of Sydney and Dallas.

x*Petchoa* SuperCal series C

The best of both parents (*Petunia* and *Calibrachoa*)! These plants handled the alkalinity of Dallas soil and they were among my favorites for containers.



O *Lobularia* Snow Princess

It covers the garden in fragrant, soft white flowers. It does equally well in baskets, pots or the ground. This isn't your grandmother's alyssum!

Echinacea Double Scoop series C

Bright colors, big flowers and tough as nails. What isn't to love?



O *Ce/osia argentea* Intenz

Glow-in-the-dark bright cerise flowers appear right up until frost, on plants that hold up to extreme heat and humidity.

Salvia Mystic Spires Blue }

One of the best blue flowers on the market that anyone can grow. Like a magnet to pollinators, too.



O SunPatiens series

These are the only impatiens that hold up in the heat of Texas and Sydney. They need a lot of water but can't be beat for flower power.—Jimmy Turner



a potential for connecting people to being healthy. What's behind the emerald curtain? What plants can save the planet?

How we do that depends on each garden. There's not one right way or wrong way. We just have to get people to engage with the actual world. Sometimes it's with a show.

Sometimes it's with an interesting one-of-a-kind experience. Sometimes it's just giving people a quiet time outdoors. To me, that's part of my job. How to get somebody new in. What can I do to bring in other communities? The non-gardener? Get people excited and the garden on the map. ♪