

On November 11 the SCHS welcomed Matt Williams, a landscape architect and urban planner with the City of Detroit Planning and Development Department, to speak about the history of Black landscape designers and planters in America. His presentation included historical figures and contemporary notables in a variety horticultural fields, along with a description of some of their significant achievements.

Williams began his presentation by recognizing landscape architect Everett Fly, Harvard Graduate School of Design's first African American graduate. In 2014, Fly was presented with a National Humanities Award by President Obama in recognition of his work dedicated to preserving the integrity of African American places and landmarks. Fly's quote that "Black landscape designers have been present in America since the colonial days of this nation" served as the lead-in to Williams' program about historical representation.

During colonial times, African American gardeners had a presence on estates, including Wormley Hughes, an enslaved man who worked at Montecello for over 30 years, eventually becoming head gardener, and James Brown, an escaped slave, who worked as master gardener at Mount Gulian Historic Site, in New York. Once African Americans were allowed to own land, their contributions to landscape design developed along with the growth of Black settlements and towns.

One of the most recognizable names in advancing horticultural practices of the early 20th century is George Washington Carver, who studied - and later taught - at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. He is known for his varied research studies, most notably in the areas of crop science and soil health. In 1894, Carver became the first African American to earn a bachelor's degree from Iowa State University, followed by a masters, and it is his legacy to be credited as the head of the modern organic movement in the Southern agricultural system. He also collaborated with David Williston in the design of the "The Oaks," the residence of the president of the Tuskegee Institute.

Williston was a Cornell graduate, and during his 20 years at Tuskegee,

Williston helped plan much of the physical layout of that campus, and in 1930, he moved to Washington D.C. and established his own practice, believed to be the first African American-owned landscape architecture firm.

Williams next introduced us to the life of Anne Spencer, a poet, teacher, civil rights activist, librarian and gardener. Spencer's home in Lynchburg, Virginia, became known as a salon for many Black leaders and intellectuals during the Harlem Renaissance, including W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Marian Anderson and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "*Half My World*", written in 2003 by Rebecca Frischkorn and Reuben Rainey "explores the history and design of her garden and its influence on her as a poet."

Another notable Black botanist and teacher was Dr. Marie Clark Taylor, who was the first woman of any race to receive a doctorate in botany from Fordham University. She pioneered new ways of teaching plant biology, and her methods eventually became the national standard. She also organized science institutes for high school biology teachers to emphasize the benefits of using live botanical materials as teaching tools in the classroom.

This brought Williams to more contemporary Black leaders in horticulture, beginning with Will Allen, author of "*The Good Food Revolution*" and a 2008 MacArthur Genius Award winner. In 1993, Allen founded Growing Power, an urban agricultural organization in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which for the next 24 years aimed for sustainable food production, and the growth of communities through local gardens and community food systems.

Another urban farmer and educator is Los Angeles guerilla gardener Ron Finley. In 2010, he and the group L.A. Green Grounds began planting vegetable gardens around South L.A. to mitigate food desert conditions. In 2012 he established The Ron Finley Project to teach communities and individuals how to regenerate their lands into food sanctuaries and creative business models - work he continues to this day.

Another notable West Coast artist and designer that Williams cited as a personal influence was Walter Hood, based in Oakland, California. Hood works largely in the public realm and in 2019, he coedited the book *Black Landscapes Matter*, with Grace Mitchell Tada. He is the recipient of numerous awards,

designed the gardens at both the DeYoung Museum in San Francisco and the Broad in L.A., and is currently working on the International African American Museum in Charleston, South Carolina.

Williams concluded by highlighting some contemporary Black inspirational figures, including a mentor of his, landscape architect Diane Allen of New Orleans; Instagram plant stylist Hilton Carter; Detroit activist Malik Yakini; Glenn LaRue Smith, founder of the Black Landscape Architects Network (BlackLAN); and his own wife, landscape architect Ujiji Davis Williams. During the Q & A that followed, he also provided information about his career path, including serving as a board member for BlackLAN, a national nonprofit offering scholarship support to Black landscape students. You can learn more about the organization at www.blacklanetwork.org and find out more about Williams by following him on Instagram @matty_will313.

✎ Sabine Steinmetz

Photo provided by speaker.



Click on link below to view this presentation:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KdIMEXAUD0>

SCHS MONTHLY GARDEN SHARE

December is such a busy month - so let's slow down a bit on the chores!

- Finish planting any bulbs and sowing wildflower seeds.
- Make final adjustments to your irrigation schedule, hopefully for the last time until early spring.
- Begin winter-pruning roses toward the end of the month.
- Schedule annual tree-trimming for this month or next.
- Relax in your garden and start making plans for the New Year!

✎ Sabine Steinmetz

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