



THE GARDENER OF VERSAILLES
My Life in the World's Grandest Garden
 By Alain Baraton
 Translated by Christopher Brent Murray
 Rizzoli, \$26.95.



What an eccentric and charming memoir. Baraton has been gardening at Versailles for nearly 40 years. He knows every vista, every bosquet, every fountain on its 2,100 acres.

He lives on the grounds, in what was once Molière's house; he is on intimate terms with many trees, trusting them with secrets even his closest friends don't know. Imagine his horror, then, when he was awakened by a storm on Dec. 26, 1999, that ravaged the grounds of the palace, felling ancient giants that might have watched Marie Antoinette play shepherdess at the Petit Trianon. The French government helicoptered in a battalion of soldiers to begin a restoration financed by donations from all over the world.

Baraton's book is sweet and breezy, more illuminating on matters of society and class than of horticultural history. He rants admirably against the torrent of pesticides he's forced to use and explains that he has campaigned for the return of horses to replace noisy, polluting tractors. He's also a lively observer of those with whom he shares the park: grandmothers who steal flowers, teenagers who steal kisses. He's particularly intrigued by an elegant woman who sits motionless on a bench for an hour every day. After the storm, she insists on accompanying Baraton to a remote corner of the park. Thinking to leave her in peace, he turns away to light a cigarette. When he looks back, she is naked, her coat around her feet, her gaze "at once mystic and threatening."

A GARDEN OF MARVELS
How We Discovered That Flowers Have Sex, Leaves Eat Air, and Other Secrets of Plants
 By Ruth Kassinger
 Morrow/HarperCollins, \$25.99.

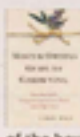


Most gardeners don't really understand how plants absorb minerals, how water travels through them, how transpiration works or even how, exactly, roots work. We don't

have to know — until, say, a favorite tree gets droopy. Kassinger decides to combat her ignorance with a journey that spans centuries and covers much ground. First, she has a mission: She wants a citrus cocktail tree, which grows limes, oranges, lemons, grapefruits and kumquats all at once. No, it isn't magic; nor is it that third whisky sour. The secret is finding someone gifted at grafting, and when Kassinger succeeds she begins to learn what's going on inside a plant.

To know how roots work, she takes us to visit the founding father of phytoremediation, a process in which a plant pulls chemical contaminants out of the soil. (The brake fern, for instance, was put to work removing arsenic from soil in Washington, D.C.) In Salina, Kan., we meet scientists trying to conserve water, topsoil and fertilizer by breeding deep-rooted perennial versions of annual grains. And in Leamington, Ontario, Kassinger finds a tomato farmer who is switching from coal and oil to burning *Miscanthus giganteus*, an enormous and sterile hybrid grass, to heat his greenhouses. (This biofuel has such potential that BP recently invested \$500 million in miscanthus research.) We tend to think technology will come to our rescue in these times of climate crisis. But it looks more and more as if plants will help us save our — and their — world.

MISTER OWITA'S GUIDE TO GARDENING
How I Learned the Unexpected Joy of a Green Thumb and an Open Heart
 By Carol Wall
 Amy Einhorn/Putnam, \$25.95.



People have roots too, and many of us wither under stress. Wall found herself in a stage of life some might describe as pot-bound. With her children grown up and out of the house, herself frail and ill and with aging parents, she couldn't shake a constant feeling of dread and anxiety. That, and the worst-looking yard on her block, left her feeling wilted. Then she met Giles Owita, an immigrant from Kenya who was struggling to support his family in Roanoke, Va., by bagging groceries and doing yard work.

Wall's life changed dramatically. So did her garden when Owita took over its care. Before long he was tending gardens all over the neighborhood. As they haggled about azaleas, an unlikely friendship began to bloom, and over its course Wall confronts startling moments of comeuppance. She learns that the man she assumed was an uneducated worker has a doctorate in horticulture from Virginia Tech and had been a college professor in his homeland. Yet, mysteriously, he has never been able to find academic employment in the United States. His wife, working as a nurse, has a Ph.D. in nutrition.

You won't learn much about gardening in this beautiful book, though it seems Owita worked miracles on some unloved yards. But you will put Wall's memoir down with a new appreciation for how far roots can travel for nourishment, especially those that spring from our hearts.

FROM THE GROUND UP
A Food Grower's Education in Life, Love, and the Movement That's Changing the Nation
 By Jeanne Nolan
 Spiegel & Grau, \$26.



"Is this what happens when a potato loves a blueberry?" a little girl asks Nolan, holding up the blue potato she has pulled from the ground. How they came to be standing in the middle of a bountiful Chicago public garden is Nolan's story, one of the most intelligent, surprising and impressive garden memoirs I've read in a long time.

Nolan grew up in suburban Chicago, a bright, hard-working, high-achieving child. Suddenly, nearly inexplicably, she became alienated from her family's values. In 1967, when she turned 18, she joined three dozen people in a farming commune in rural California that turned out, "for all intents and purposes," to be a cult. When, after 17 years, she finally broke free and returned home, she was the single mother of a toddler, utterly bereft, underweight and hollow-eyed.

Nolan learned many things as she began to build a new life for herself in the loving but baffled embrace of kind, compassionate parents. But despite all the harrowing heartache of her life in the commune, Nolan learned a few useful things there: Organic farming. The value of hard work. Perseverance and collaboration. In a few years, she re-establishes roots in Chicago, becomes an important figure in the urban farming movement and creates a thriving business planting private gardens. And she marries and has another child.

Nolan's memoir is radiant with hope and love. Her achievement — and her gift to countless visitors to that public garden — is its own best argument for why anyone would bother to plant a blue potato.