



South Carolina Botanical Garden's People

By Ellen Vincent, Clemson University Environmental Landscape Specialist

The floods of July 2013 may have washed away the topsoil, bridges, and newly constructed Heritage Trail; but it did nothing to dampen the passion of the zealous people who work the 295 acre botanical garden. The annual 400,000 visitors have never stopped coming—they have merely been temporarily redirected to undamaged areas. The annual plant sales run on schedule and seasonal pleasure is abundant. The SC Botanical Garden (SCBG) staff consists of two full time horticulturists; one nursery manager; the director, one facilities manager; one temporary horticulturist; and twelve part-time student workers. The people behind this environmental masterpiece are intriguing, approachable, and perfectly suited to public garden work. They value people and plants and hard work. And they all believe that education is the key to sharing their personal passions with others.



John Bodiford
 Title:
 Senior Horticulturist
 Length of time at SCBG: 28 years in August
 Job duties: Oversees daily operations and projects of 295 acres
 Inspired by: Harry Bodiford (father) and John Muir, wilderness preservation advocate
 Favorite plant:

Oconee Bells, *Shortia galacifolia*
 Wish for the future: For the SCBG to be respected and recognized “It is a jewel.”

John Bodiford was raised on a farm in Walhalla, SC where he acquired a firm work ethic. His favorite activities all happened outdoors; and included backpacking, biking, canoeing, and kayaking. His father taught him plant names and was the first person to ask him to identify a plant (*Iris cristata*) he’d discovered along the trail by using a book. In retrospect he admits to being a closet naturalist as a youngster who wanted nothing more than to travel to distant places. After graduating high school he spent 10 years exploring the United States—he worked for landscape companies; in forestry; and even owned his own landscape/nursery company. He came to realize that there was no place that could compete with the ecology and beauty of upstate South Carolina and he returned home. He was and still is passionate about sharing his love of nature and plants. The public garden was his perfect destination. He admits, “There is nothing else I can do—I love nature and I love plants. The public garden allows you to share your education. If you can’t share it what is the point in having it?” Bodiford believes the SC Botanical Garden is another word for “jewel.”



Kathy Bridges
 Title:
 Landscape Manager
 Length of time at SCBG: 6 years in May
 Job duties: Maintain color beds, new installation & all maintenance for 295 acres
 Inspired by: Nature
 Favorite plant:
 Hawaiian jade vine, *Strongylodon macrobotrys* and weeping blue atlas cedar, *Cedrus atlantica* ‘Glauca Pendula’

Wish for the future: “More funding and more staff so we can add polish to our work.”

Kathy Bridges grew up in Europe (Italy, France, Belgium, Germany, and England) where her mother, who was an avid gardener, exposed her to classic gardens and horticulture. Her family moved to Cincinnati when she was in high school and she spent quality time with her grandfather, who, she reports, “was a crazy good gardener.” She attended Cincinnati Tech and earned a degree in ornamental horticulture and engaged in two internships. She spent 10 years as horticulturist at Keowee Key in upstate SC before moving to work at the SCBG. “I thought there was no better job in the world when I worked at Keowee Key; but this (SCBG) is even better. My husband notices that I go to work smiling and come home smiling.”

Bridges places high value on her ability to redesign a space and create something new, wonderful, and exciting. The discovery experience she creates for visitors makes work meaningful. “Every step should enable someone to discover something new, and with Patrick [and his plant acquisitions] we can do this.” She also values the good team atmosphere and strong work ethic that permeates the Botanical Garden.



Eric Soto
 Title:
 Facilities Manager
 Length of time at SCBG: 8.5 years; 23 years total at Clemson
 Job duties: Repair and maintain vehicles, roads, utilities, building, and equipment
 Inspired by: Jesus; “the very best person to follow after”

Favorite plant: Japanese maples, *Acer palmatum* (two specific ones at the SCBG that have brilliant fall color)

Wish for the future: More staff. “The garden is a great place with so much potential.”

Eric Soto grew up on land that has been in his family for over 150 years. “I love the upstate” he reports. “It’s like no other place—the mountains, lakes and rolling hills.” He always had a knack for mechanics—he took things apart and put them back together again as a child. In high school he worked on cars and after graduating joined the National Guard. He has worked for Clemson for 23 years total—first in the Grounds Department, then Building Maintenance, then with Recycling. His current position is utopian because he is able to roll all his former work experiences into one at SCBG. He works with heavy equipment, building maintenance, and mechanics.

Soto values the beautiful environment he works in (how many Facilities Managers are located in the middle of a botanical garden?) He also is grateful for the team atmosphere that exists. “Patrick gives me the freedom to take care of things as I see fit. I am glad I have a supervisor with confidence in my judgment and my talent.” On January 25 of this year he will be deployed with the National Guard for 15 months before returning to the SCBG.



Jeanne Briggs is Nursery Manager who started working for SCBG 20 months ago. She is responsible for running the nursery, supporting the propagation of plants for the SCBG landscape and all aspects of the plant sale. She trains students, provides valuable support and mentoring for interns and work-study students and teaches creative inquiry classes. Briggs was unavailable for the interview due to holiday travel.



Griffin Westbrook

Title: Children's Garden Manager
 Length of time at SCBG: 5 months (temporary position)
 Job duties: Maintain 2 acres of garden that contain 3 interactive specialty gardens
 Inspired by: Christine Drais (floral designer at Heartwarmers in Seneca, SC). "She can take things and create unbelievable arrangements."

Favorite plant: Live oak, *Quercus virginiana*, specifically the Angel Oak on Johns Island
 Wish for the future: "Specific funding for the new design and installation which will increase the interactive components for the Children's Garden."

Griffin Westbrook grew up in Walhalla, SC and became captivated with horticulture in high school when she unexpectedly took a greenhouse production class. She graduated from Clemson with a horticulture degree in 2012 and gained valuable experience working at Head Lee Nursery in Walhalla and at Bartlett Tree Experts on Hilton Head Island. She is clearly grateful to be working at SCBG and announces that "My joy is through the roof to be here doing this work." Westbrook values the opportunity to be creative, "I am allowed and encouraged to be creative" she reports. "I like taking things that shouldn't go together and making them work. I like pushing the envelope." She is also convinced that plants bring comfort and joy to people and that makes her work very satisfying.



Patrick McMillan

Title: Director
 Length of time at SCBG: 3 years, 2 months
 Job duties: Vision planning and implementation; fundraising and relationship building
 Inspired by: Mark Catesby-English 18th C naturalist adventurer who walked to Clemson in 1722 and documented his travels and the plants.
 Favorite plant: The genus *Trillium*
 Wish for the future: A great big fat endowment and more people [staff].

Patrick McMillan was born and lived in Naples, FL as a young child, right across the road from Caribbean Gardens, a zoo and botanical garden. His family moved to Sparta, NC in 1976 where his grandmother, a talented amateur botanist and gardener, created a 2-acre rock garden that contained 2,000 native plant species. He knows the numbers because he tended the garden with her while she was alive and he inherited the garden after she was gone. McMillan attended Surry Community College earning his first degree in Greenhouse and Nursery Management. He moved on to earn a bachelor's degree in Biological Sciences and Chemistry from University of NC Chapel Hill and then his Ph.D. from Clemson University. He first worked at Clemson University as Curator of the Herbarium and an instructor in the BioSci department before assuming leadership at the SCBG. He is also well-known for his role as host, writer, producer and editor of "Expeditions with Patrick McMillan" series shown on PBS stations across the country.

McMillan knows the SCBG is a good work fit for him because he is a true plant geek; perfectly suited to a botanical garden. He cherishes the opportunities and situations the botanical garden provides him to help people realize their connections with the world around them and subsequently make good choices. His purpose at work and in life involves these connections. Whether he is recreating ecosystems in the garden or working on educational experiences for visitors that involve natural heritage, cultural heritage, and new plant discovery-he is pursuing connections that deepen awareness and result in more informed decisions. He says, "We are really pushing the boundaries of plant materials for South Carolina. You can see over 1,000 species of native plants here plus plants unknown to the southeast such as 134 species of agave and three species of orchid tree." You are likely to find him weeding or operating a blower as he stays connected to the physical space he cherishes.

The SC Botanical Garden is home to the one of the premier plant collections in the state. Commercial growers and landscape professionals can stay ahead of the curve by visiting the garden to see new plants with potential and see mature specimens of familiar favorites to refresh their visual palette. The natural, not formal, design and maintenance of the garden will be a welcome respite for the green industry professional who is seeking to recharge or to be inspired. Entrance remains free to all and the damage from the floods are being quickly repaired thanks to donations of labor and cash. For a video that explains the flood damage and the diligent response you can visit <http://www.clemson.edu/public/scbg/>.

Footnote: With two full time landscape professionals and 295 acres, you would expect the atmosphere to be grim and dreary. But it is not, each individual I interviewed was positively overflowing with joy. The only thing I did that elicited a unified stressful response was ask the question "What is your favorite plant?" Bodiford frowned and looked away into the distance. Bridges quipped "You're killing me." McMillan's response cannot appear in print.