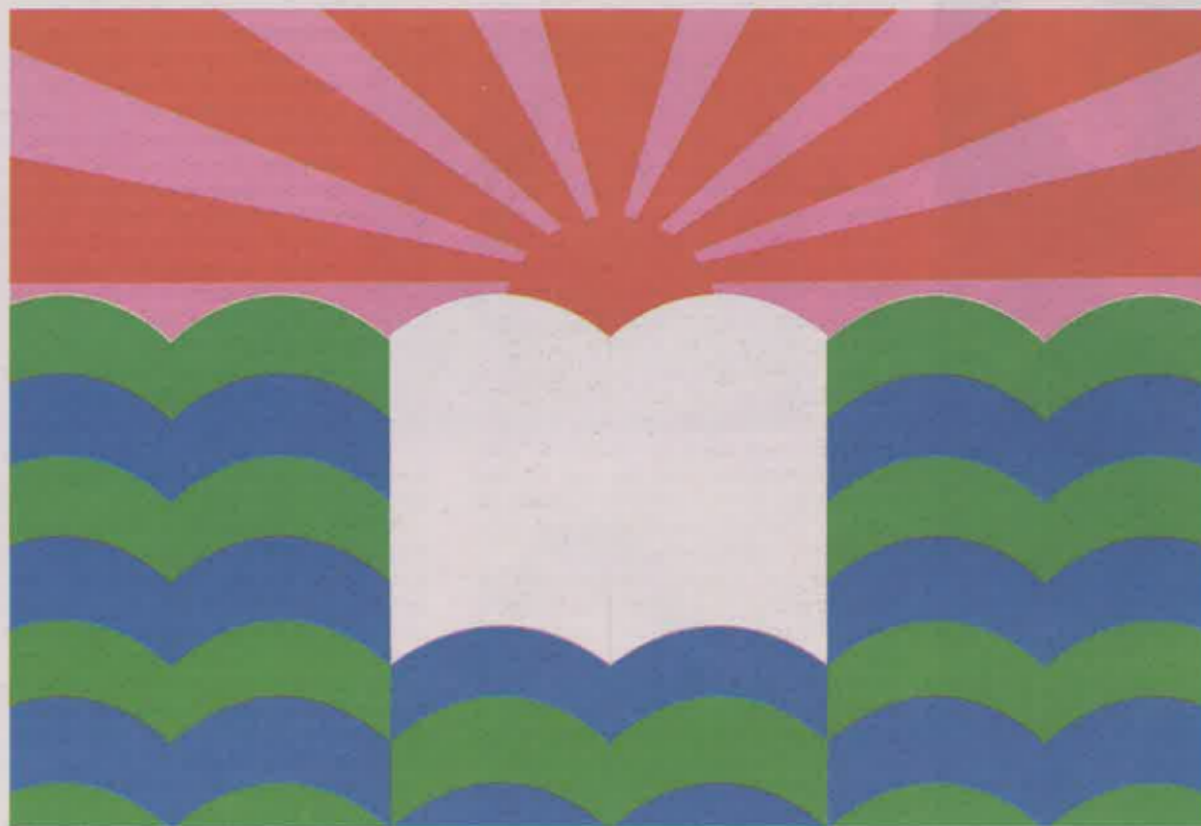


GREAT OUTDOORS

By DOMINIQUE BROWNING



OLIMPIA ZAGNOLI

MAYBE THE VIBE was in the air, during the anniversary of a long-ago summer of love, when I planted several irresistibly eccentric beauties. A nodding hippie of a plant, *Datisca cannabina* is a woody perennial with vaguely cannabislike foliage; it sports pendulous, shaggy, fragrant wands of flowers that set chains of love-bead seeds. It occurred to me that if I were gardening one toke over the state line, in Massachusetts instead of Rhode Island, I could have been digging the real thing. And just in time to help the bud tenders among us comes a weirdly fascinating volume, **THE LEAFY GUIDE TO CANNABIS: A Handbook for the Modern Consumer** (Twelve, \$27).

It was just a matter of time before a new generation caught up with the renegades of my generation, many of whom started getting high on gardening by tucking their herb among innocuous houseplants, hiding it in sunny corners of backyards or growing it under basement lights. Leafly, based in Seattle, calls itself “the world’s largest cannabis information resource.” Millions visit its website and mobile apps every month. The guide promises “clarity and understanding” of a plant that has been around since the end of the Pleistocene epoch.

There’s nothing laid back about Big Ag pot, a new kind of cultivated landscape that may soon stretch from sea to shining sea. In a paean to free-market capitalism, Leafly explains that legalization in some states has brought about a “vast expansion” in plant material — growers can now choose among hundreds of varieties, including White Widow and Durban Poison — as well as higher quality and lower prices, because of market efficiencies and competition. Indica strains are sedative, sativas are invigorating, and hybrids fall somewhere in between. What ends up in

your stash jar are the flowers of a female plant. The authors describe how cannabinoids “work their medicinal magic” (magic being a good marketing approach) and how THC affects us. The pot being smoked at Woodstock probably featured THC concentrations of around 3 percent; with today’s genetic modifications, “potent varieties clock in at nearly 30 percent.”

Kief, terpenes, decarboxylation and vaping concentrates: There’s more evocative fetishistic language attached to these buds than most others in a farmer’s world. You’ll find cooking hints and beauty tips, even recommended munchie pairings. The health effects of smoking are lightly covered: There’s no clear link to lung cancer, but definite “physical airway damage” and compromised cardiovascular function. I don’t see how health nuts groove on lungfuls of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons. The book could have included at least a paragraph about the effects of marijuana on the developing brains of adolescents. But that’s a bummer. For those interested, I recommend Kevin P. Hill’s “Marijuana: The Unbiased Truth About the World’s Most Popular Weed.”

I find my bliss in Japanese gardens, and books about this refined and evolving form of art keep coming and coming. Sophie Walker’s **THE JAPANESE GARDEN** (Phaidon, \$69.95) is an ambitious survey, set in a framework that’s both historical and thematic (“Death, Tea and the Garden,” for instance, which sounds like something Thomas Mann would have enjoyed). Its elegant photographs are accompanied by impressively eccentric essays. In one of my favorites, the architect John Pawson writes about the ability to “feel an intimate connection with boundless landscape — as though it is passing through you and you through it” — in the smallest of the Kyoto gardens that entranced him. He captures, exquisitely, the balance and rhythm of moving through these rigorously controlled spaces. The sculptor

Anish Kapoor weighs in with thoughts about gardens that don’t just reveal meaning but instead “come into” meaning. And the mathematician Marcus du Sautoy gets really far out with the power of fractals in those ferns and rocks so carefully set in the Japanese garden — all of this tied to the Pixar classic “Up.” I wish this book could be three times as long and as large.

If that Strawberry Cough strain in the “Leafly Guide” has loosened your tongue, it would be very cool to recite a litany of the quirky collective nouns we’ve bequeathed the animal kingdom. Study up with **A CHARM OF GOLDFINCHES: And Other Wild Gatherings** (Ten Speed, \$14.99), by Matt Sewell. Beguiling watercolors depict land, air and water creatures, including an obstinacy of buffalo, an unkindness of ravens and a smack of jellyfish. Sewell’s descriptions are marvelous — explaining when gaggles of geese become skeins of geese, or why swirling hawks suggest boiling water in a kettle. I can just hear him shouting to his wife and daughters that “we have a bellowing of bullfinches on the bird feeder, quick!” This is a book of delightful oddities, and don’t we all need more of those in our lives?

To that end: In the ‘60s and ‘70s, J. R. R. Tolkien’s 1937 classic, “The Hobbit,” was part of every self-respecting freak’s portable library. The father-and-son team of Walter S. Judd, a biologist, and Graham A. Judd, an artist, enjoyed the “Lord of the Rings” cycle together, “immersed in Middle-earth . . . transported to a wondrous land.” But in **FLORA OF MIDDLE-EARTH: Plants of J. R. R. Tolkien’s Legendarium** (Oxford, \$34.95), the Judds make the case that these tales offer more than an escape from reality. Instead, they’re meant to have an influence on “how we interact with other individuals and with the world in which we live — including the landscapes of our natural environment.”

What follows is an exhaustive accounting of the trees, shrubs, herbs and other plants in Tolkien’s Middle-earth — the plants of our world and those, like the White Trees of Gondor, of the elven world. Tolkien was a writer who confessed to being “much in love with plants and above all trees”; the Judds note that plants appear on nearly every page of “The Hobbit” and “The Lord of the Rings.” I found myself transported by their discussion of “plant communities, as altered by hobbits, humans, elves or angelic beings.” Those Hobbits were “good agriculturalists,” growing hemp for its fiber, maintaining lawns and gardens and also struggling with weeds. Take heed, ye great corporate polluters of today, lest you lead us to the gates of the defiled land of Mordor. I’m with the young Ent called Quickbeam, who considers trees to be “beautiful friends with cool and soft voices.” This volume, with its handsome and haunting woodcuts, is best appreciated in small doses. It’s heady stuff, quite concentrated. But it made me blow the dust off my copy of “The Silmarillion” and add it to my stash of winter reading.

Get your head into the clouds with **AERIAL GEOLOGY: A High-Altitude Tour of North America’s Spectacular Volcanoes, Canyons, Glaciers, Lakes, Craters and Peaks** (Timber, \$29.95). What better way to introduce geology to any reluctant science student than a book full of breathtaking “who knew?” moments. Luckily, the writer and mountaineer (and, appropriately enough, resident of Big Sky, Mont.) Mary Caperton Morton knows. Take in the natural splendors of the view from an airplane window: This generously photographed volume even offers flight patterns that will reveal our earthly treasures.

The world’s largest piedmont glacier, Alaska’s Malaspina — which is, of course, shrinking as our world dangerously warms — is still so heavy “that the bottom has sunk nearly 1,000 feet below sea level.” The Teton Range in Wyoming is “North America’s youngest mountain range, made of some of the continent’s oldest rocks.” Three-hundred-

DOMINIQUE BROWNING, the founder and director of Moms Clean Air Force, works at the Environmental Defense Fund.