

HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW?

Botanical inspiration informs the work of these four artists, who—working with a variety of media and materials—demonstrate the creative potential of this enduring art form and its unique power to provide visual delight as well as ecological awareness. By Anne Hevener

JEAN EMMONS SEEDS OF INSPIRATION

Artist and avid gardener Jean Emmons, of Washington state, describes botanical art as a fusion of art and science. “Botanical art grew out of botanical illustration, but their purposes are different,” she says. Emmons explains that botanical illustration is intended for scientific purposes—imagery that’s meant to support and enhance a botanist’s written plant description—while botanical art is meant to hang on a wall, to be appreciated for its aesthetic impact. The difference, she says, “is in the artist’s *intention*.”

Whether it’s illustration or art, for both types, “the emphasis is on the plant,” Emmons says. This points to the main distinction between botanical art and other flora-inspired art. “It’s an approach of extreme accuracy and detail, and reverence for the plant,” she continues. “The plant has to be botanically correct, at least to the species. You have to count stamens, petals, tepals, sepals, and understand how it’s pollinated.”

Even so, a botanical artist has more in mind than the mere description of a flower, seedpod or mushroom. “Every good botanical painting should have flawless technique and be scientifically accurate, but a truly exceptional piece—as with any art form—will go beyond the sum of its parts,” Emmons says. “It will evoke something more and take the viewer



OPPOSITE

Iris 'Superstition'

(watercolor on vellum, 8x6)

by Jean Emmons

RIGHT

Heirloom Squashes: *Cucurbita maxima*

'Sweet Meat', *Cucurbita moschata*

'Chirimen', *Cucurbita maxima* 'Red Kuri'

(watercolor on vellum, 14x17)

by Jean Emmons

BELOW

Dahlia 'Black Jack'

(watercolor on vellum, 8x11)

by Jean Emmons

METHODS & MATERIALS

Emmons works with drybrush watercolor on calfskin vellum. "It's the same technique medieval monks used to paint illuminated manuscripts," she says. "Unlike watercolor paper, the paint sits on top of the vellum and doesn't get absorbed. This keeps the layers of paint remarkably luminous, while the drybrush technique allows for exquisitely fine detail."

Another advantage to the vellum is that it affords an opportunity to remove passages that may have gone awry. "I can sand off portions of a painting—or even the entire thing. I can redo areas multiple times, as I change my mind," Emmons says. "This gives me a lot of flexibility."

into the sublime. It doesn't happen very often, and there's no formula for it. Sometimes the stars just align."

The starting point for Emmons begins in the garden. She has found that the surest path to artistic success is to begin with a subject she has grown herself. "The best paintings happen when I can observe a plant over many seasons, becoming familiar with its life cycle, its pests, its pollinators," she says. "Plus, gardening gets me away from my desk and outside. Time in the garden—even in the wind, rain and snow—clears my head, and I see unexpected and beautiful things."



The inspiration can spring from anything and at any time. "I'll be weeding and see something that stops me in my tracks—a backlit poppy, a metallic iris bud, the turquoise bloom on a plum, a green mandrake egg," says Emmons. So, it's not surprising that her planting choices are often driven with an eye for artistic potential. "I particularly enjoy both growing and painting plants of unusual color," she says, "such as black dahlias, cerulean squashes, sepia irises and gray poppies."

The artist has become a certified Master Gardener, but her entry point

to botanical painting began, not with gardening, but with formal studies of art. "I went to a traditional art school and received a good grounding in abstraction and color field painting," she says, but she was always fascinated by nature. "Most botanical artists come from either a botany background or an art background," she notes, "and their work reflects one end of the spectrum or the other." Emmons puts herself on the artistic end of that scale. "That said, both of my parents were scientists," she adds. They taught her something vital to both fields: "They taught me to look at things closely."



MARY DILLON

BOTANICAL LOVE LETTERS

Mary Dillon, of Ireland, says that some of her earliest memories take place in the garden, with her father. "I can see the damp clay mounded into ridges as he planted potatoes," she says. "He loved the soil, and the seeds and plants he placed in it." Dillon picked up that appreciation for things that grow and has channeled that delight into art.

The artist credits a number of other people, too—teachers, friends and colleagues—for inspiring and furthering her pursuit of art, and botanical art, in particular. It was

a retired teacher of botany who first introduced her to a hand lens. "Looking at the world as it was revealed through my hand lens was such a 'Wow!' that I was compelled to explore painting the detail I was seeing," she says.

Much of Dillon's work is done in a larger format. She tips her hat to Georgia O'Keeffe for this revelation. "O'Keeffe was asked why she painted her flowers so large," Dillon says. "Her answer was, 'Because I want people to see what I see.'" Painting larger than life provides Dillon with space to try things. "I love to explore the magical play of light hitting the surface of a fruit or a petal," she says, "and to delve deeper into the layers of nuanced color that I see."

Like other artists, Dillon is attentive to light, form, color and other artistic elements that will enrich aesthetic appeal in any artwork, but she's also careful to remain true to the science of the plant subject. In her experience, the most common misconception about botanical art is the idea that it's no different than botanical illustration. "I aim to respect the truth of the specimen," she says, "but for me, it's the connection that I make with my subject, on every level—cognitive, emotional, spiritual, sensual—that's the driving force compelling me to paint."

To further this connection, Dillon makes a point of really getting to know each subject. "Looking closely, smelling, touching, using all of your senses

OPPOSITE

***Phormium tenax* New Zealand Flax**

(watercolor on paper, 15x22)

by Mary Dillon

RIGHT

***Acanthus molis* Wintering Out**

(watercolor on paper, 22x30)

by Mary Dillon

BELOW

***Nigella damascena* Love in a Mist**

(watercolor on paper, 15x22)

by Mary Dillon



and researching—all of this helps build a connection,” she says. Her starting point is always the plant itself. “I work very slowly, sometimes over a number of months, or even a year or two, so falling in love with my subject is a prerequisite. That can sometimes mean love at first sight or a connection that grows over time,” she says. “This slow time, when I observe all the details, is very satisfying to me, and my painting becomes like a love letter—honest, true and deeply expressive.”

Dillon always works from life at the start, beginning with loose gestural drawings to get a feel for the movement and flow of the subject. This is followed by a measured drawing which she often will enlarge to scale. “Recreating the dynamic quality of the plant is a theme that permeates my work, so getting the composition right takes time,” she says. It often requires references to color notes and even plant dissections.

Once the drawing has been traced and transferred, the artist is ready to paint. “I keep my subject refrigerated, if I can, to help prolong its life into the painting phase,” Dillon says. “But the nature of plants is that they change and fade and eventually die, so keeping a good photographic record of the plant is important. Capturing the essence of the living subject at the very beginning makes all the difference in the finished painting.”

METHODS & MATERIALS

Dillon loves working in watercolor. “I appreciate the spontaneity of the medium—its fluidity and luminosity,” she says. “I particularly enjoy working with a limited palette of warm and cool transparent colors. Getting to know color so intimately that no matter what color I see in nature, I can replicate it using a mix from my simple palette is so satisfying.”

Dillon also notes the important part that color temperature plays in furthering the impact of a painting. “I like using cool blues to influence depth of field and perspective,” she says, “or, alternatively, using a warm yellow, like Indian yellow, to bring a certain element to the fore.”

She works with artists'-quality, transparent watercolor paints, primarily Winsor & Newton. Although she sometimes works on Kelmscott vellum, which she gets from Cowley's, in the U.K., the majority of her work is done on a 640 GSM, hot-pressed extra-white paper, like Fabriano Artistic or Saunders Waterford. “I work in layers, beginning with wet and damp layers, which gradually become more dry,” Dillon says. “The heavier paper is more forgiving and less likely to buckle when working with so many wet and damp layers. The smooth surface of hot-pressed paper allows for accurate details.”

Her preferred paintbrushes are from Winsor & Newton, Series 7; Rosemary & Co.; and spotter brushes from L. Cornelissen & Son.



CHRISTIANE FASHEK

SEEING THE UNSEEN

Colored pencil artist Christiane Fashek, of New York City, emphasizes that, when it comes to subject matter, botanical art is about so much more than flowers. It's a point that's well supported in her body of work, which focuses on paintings of fungi and lichens, a somewhat niche branch of the genre. "These subjects can be as intriguing, beautiful and worthy of becoming a work of art as any plant," she says.

Fashek's goal, when depicting any

botanical subject, regardless of its place in the scientific kingdoms, she says, is to "create a piece that conveys the unique characteristics or 'habit' of the subject—how and where it grows, reproductive elements—and, in the case of lichens, that illustrates differences between dry and damp states that affect the color and form."

The artist's excitement was launched, not surprisingly, in the woods. "The tiny, orange, bushy growths on twigs that I encountered on family hikes—which I learned are golden-eye lichens—were my gateway to botanical art," she says. She enrolled in the New York Botanical Garden's Botanical Art and

Illustration program to learn how to draw and paint plant specimens. "Along the way, I became captivated with colored pencils, and—utilizing my architectural skills to enlarge these miniature organisms—I highlight unusual forms and textures."

The artist selects her subject from specimens she has gathered herself. "I start the process by identifying the species," she says. "That may mean using dichotomous keys [what, where, how identification guides], taking reference photos under the microscope, and sometimes sending specimens to lichenologists or mycologists."

Her next step—before she can build a palette or determine scale and perspective—is to decide whether to depict the lichens dry or damp. The artist uses an orthogonal grid to enlarge her subjects from five to 20 times the original. "The result is a 'botanical cartoon,' in which I've assigned symbols to different species, quickly added value to show depth and curvatures, and annotated essential characteristics," she explains.

Next, she transfers the cartoon to her paper using a graphite underlay. "While painting, I reference my photos and the specimen itself, under magnification, for information on texture and color," she adds.

Fashek notes that lichens are notoriously tricky to identify, so that can be one of the most challenging steps in the process. "On the flip side, it's pretty awesome when I pull back from a painting, and the forms 'pop' off the page, revealing aspects of the organism unfamiliar to most viewers." That gets to the whole reason the artist is drawn to the subject in the first place. "I paint lichens *because* they're ubiquitous and yet mostly overlooked," she says. "And there's so much to learn. If my art intrigues the viewer, perhaps they'll delve into this wondrous world, too."

METHODS & MATERIALS

Fashek enjoys colored pencil, which allows her to control the pressure of application and the shape of the point, leading to a wide range of textural effects. “I can make changes easily,” she adds, “and I never have to stretch paper. Plus, colored pencils play well with other media.”

For her scale drawings (when the subject is being enlarged), Fashek works at a drafting table and makes use of a Mayline parallel straightedge, drafting triangles, graphite pencils, Ecobra proportional dividers (which she calls “essential”) and tracing paper on drafting vellum. “My stereo microscope, Luxo magnifying lens and my phone’s camera help me look more closely at subjects,” she says.

For the final substrate, Fashek opts for Legion’s Stonehenge Aqua or Bristol paper for smaller pieces. For bigger works, she uses large sheets of Arches 300-lb. hot-pressed watercolor paper.

Her stash of colored pencils includes a range of brands, most notably Caran d’Ache Luminance, Faber-Castell Polychromos and Prismacolor Premier. “Other necessary tools include a helical crank sharpener, and white plastic and kneaded erasers,” she adds.



OPPOSITE

Spiraling 16x

(colored pencil and watercolor
on paper, 26¼x20½)
by Christiane Fashek

ABOVE

Up, With a Twist 20x

(colored pencil and watercolor
on paper, 24x18½)
by Christiane Fashek

RIGHT

bonne Maman 8x

(colored pencil and watercolor
on paper, 22x25¼)
by Christiane Fashek



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
Three Dandelions With Bud
 (black walnut ink on
 heavyweight cotton
 paper, 16x12)
 by Margot Glass

Two Dandelions With Bud
 (14k gold on prepared
 paper, 12x9)
 by Margot Glass

Lady's Thumb 1
 (black walnut ink on
 heavyweight cotton
 paper, 16x12)
 by Margot Glass

Large Dandelion 8
 (acrylic and pigment
 on heavyweight cotton
 paper, 30x20½)
 by Margot Glass

designer, as well as a gilder and decorative painter. She has become well acquainted with the extensive use of botanical imagery in the decorative arts, and that stylization of natural forms is another strong influence. "I bring all of these inspirations and ideas into my compositions," she says.

Much like traditional botanical artists, Glass's process begins with the collection of visual reference—subjects gathered outdoors, on walks. Her eye is often drawn to some of the plant world's less exalted subjects—the humble dandelion, for instance, as well as clover, thistles and foxtail. "I try to work out whether there's a way to convey something that I see, that I want others to see," she says. "I want viewers to slow down and share in the beauty and wonder of the subject—however modest the plant may be."

Because of the ephemeral, seasonal quality of her subjects, Glass takes a lot of photographs. "I make sure to have a lot of reference for each painting or drawing," she says, "but these images are simply a jumping-off point—to establish a familiarity with the structure of the plant." From there, her compositions are totally invented.

MARGOT GLASS

BEAUTY, MODEST AND FLEETING

The work of Massachusetts artist Margot Glass, although inspired by grasses, flowering plants and other wild things, doesn't categorize as botanical art under the strictest of terms. Still, you can see the influence of the genre very much at work in her art. Glass sees "indisputable artistic value" in botanical work that aspires to scientific description and accuracy, but her background in textile and surface design has led her to take a somewhat different approach. "I'm

inspired by decorative arts and all the different ways in which the theme of nature has been interpreted through visual representation," she says.

One source of inspiration for the artist is her ongoing fascination with illuminated manuscripts. "I love the exquisite depictions—the jewel-like quality and precise rendering of natural subjects in that tradition," she says. Glass grew up in New York City, where she made regular visits to The Morgan Library & Museum and The Metropolitan Museum of Art to peruse their collections of illuminated books and manuscripts.

The artist has worked in the design sector as an embroidery and print



METHODS & MATERIALS

In terms of media, Glass feels most at home with drawing. “While I love working with brushes for watercolor, oil and ink-wash painting, I find that I’m most myself when I’m drawing,” she says. Among her favorite drawing media are metalpoint and ink. “I make my own black-walnut ink from organic material I collect on hikes around my home in Western Massachusetts,” she says. “Collecting the nuts and making the ink feel integral to the drawing process for me, and the pigment variations and richness of the medium inspire me.”

Metalpoint—in which a drawing is created by applying a stylus to a prepared surface—is a technique that allows Glass to approach drawing a bit differently. “The slow pace allows for a meditative, quiet process that lets me focus in a way that’s comfortable to me,” she says. In *Two Dandelions With Bud* (above), the artist used a stylus of 14k gold on prepared paper.

Although technical constraints can add challenges to both of these techniques, Glass finds that the limitations add to the experience. “Metalpoint requires an attention to surface that can be difficult, and many—at least half—of my drawings in this medium don’t make it to completion,” she says. “In spite of this, I find unique beauty in the medium.”

For ink drawing, there’s a necessity to maintain precision and a clean surface. “At a certain point, I start to feel very much at home—and clear on what I want to do,” Glass says. “Somewhere between sorting out the composition and the more meticulous finishing work, there’s a rhythm that I fall into—if I’m lucky—and that’s a great place to be.”



ROOTED IN TRADITION

Botanical art has a long history. In fact, Egyptologists have found naturalistic tomb carvings that date back 4,000 years. This type of work has always been vital for people, whether ancient or contemporary, as a way to correctly identify plants for the purposes of food, medicine and the economy.

The history of the art form is peppered with wonderful, brave characters, many of whom traveled the world to document new plant species. Sidney Parkinson (Scottish, 1745–71) sailed with Captain Cook on the HMS Endeavour. The conditions would have been rough. Just imagine trying to draw on a rolling ship, while seasick. Parkinson managed to make 1,000 drawings before succumbing to dysentery.

In the 1600s, at a time when caterpillars were associated with the devil, not butterflies, 12-year-old Maria Sibylla Merian (German, 1647–1717) was raising silkworms in her bedroom. This was risky behavior, but Merian continued to pursue her entomological interests, later traveling, on her own, to Suriname, and then publishing a book about insect metamorphosis.

“I like to think of botanical art as old, but not old-fashioned.”

—JEAN EMMONS

In the 20th century, Rory McEwen (1932–82), a rich, handsome member of the Scottish nobility, put aside a career in music and television to pursue botanical art. Many consider him the best botanical artist of all time.

In recent years, the American Society of Botanical Artists (ASBA), an organization formed 35 years ago that has grown into a thriving, international community of artists, has been sponsoring “themed” art shows. The themes—which entertain various topics ranging from native plants and economic botany to endangered pollinators and crop diversity—are particularly relevant to our world now.

—Jean Emmons



***Darlingtonia californica*, *Drosera rotundifolia* Cobra Lilies and Sundews**
(watercolor on vellum, 24x14) by Jean Emmons

NOW ON VIEW: The current ASBA show traveling the country is called “Curious Allies: Mutualism in Fungi, Parasites and Carnivores.” The exhibit shines a spotlight on fungi, lichens, mosses and all the life that happens underground. It’s notable that most plants—trees, in particular—need beneficial fungi in the soil to successfully adapt to climate change. After stints in New York City and Tucson, the show heads next to the Bell Museum, in St. Paul, Minn., where it will be on view from September 27 to January 4, 2026. It then travels to the Oak Spring Garden Foundation, in Upperville, Va., before making its final stop at the Denver Botanic Gardens, in the fall of 2026.

► FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF BOTANICAL ARTISTS AT ASBA-ART.ORG.



Jean Emmons, of Vashon Island, Wash., has earned top awards from the American Society of Botanical Artists (ASBA) and the Royal Horticultural Society. Her artwork has been featured in numerous books, including Plant: The Art and Science of Botany (Phaidon Press) and Botanical Art Techniques: A Comprehensive Guide, published by the ASBA.

► FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT JEANEMMONS.COM.



Mary Dillon lives in Kilkenny, a medieval city in Southeast Ireland, with her husband and two daughters. She enjoys membership in the ASBA, the Watercolour Society of Ireland, the Irish Society of Botanical Artists and Society of Botanical Artists, UK. She has served in various teaching roles with institutions such as Trinity University, in Dublin; the New York Botanical Gardens; and the Chelsea School of Botanical Art, among others.

► FOR MORE ON THE ARTIST, VISIT MARYDILLONBOTANICALART.COM.



Christiane Fashek is a member of the Colored Pencil Society of America and the ASBA, which recognized her with the Lizzie Sanders New Artist Award, in 2023. In 2022, Fashek was awarded the ASBA's Esther Plotnick Artist Grant to teach primary school students about lichens and botanical art.

► TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ARTIST, VISIT CHRISTIANEFASHEKBOTANICALART.COM.



Margot Glass has studied art at The Art Students League of New York, Brown University, Rhode Island School of Design and Fashion Institute of Technology. Her art, which explores the ephemeral through still life, nature and botany, has been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions. Glass was selected for the 2025 Oak Spring Garden Foundation Interdisciplinary Fellowship and Residency, in Upperville, Va.

► TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ARTIST, VISIT MARGOTGLASS.COM.