

# CONVERSATIONS

## WILLIAM CULLINA: Curating Plants Along the Maine Coast

by Jane Roy Brown for COGdesign

*In 2008, the award-winning horticulturist, plant propagator, author, lecturer, and consultant joined the staff of the new Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens, in Boothbay, Maine, as Director of Horticulture and Plant Curator. Bill Cullina left behind his work at the New England Wild Flower Society and swapped his home in northeastern Connecticut for Southport Island (year-round pop. 700) – an hour north of Portland and three hours from Boston – and added “volunteer firefighter” to his bona fides.*



**Between 1995 and 2006 you developed the native plant nurseries at Garden in the Woods and Nasami Farm for New England Wild Flower Society. How does the size of the Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens operation compare?**

I'm director of horticulture, not the director of a nursery, but you could say I have a much smaller nursery and a much larger garden. This site has 248 acres, which include 18 acres of intensively cultivated gardens. There is also a mile of salt-water frontage and several miles of walking trails. NEWFS is a venerable organization where the gardens haven't changed much for a long time, and here everything is new and changing. In 2008, when I got here, we had only a quarter of the cultivated acres we do today.



**Is there a nursery or propagation component of your job?**

I am starting a propagation program and training someone for that. I don't foresee having a public nursery here on the scale of NEWFS, but we are propagating from our collections for use in the gardens and also for an annual two-day plant sale. I could see that growing. I'd also like to get back into plant selection and breeding.



**What does a plant curator do?**

Curators give direction about the development of collections. I'm the first one here. We are developing reference collections, such as Solomon's seal and dogwood, which represent a wide spectrum of the species for scientific reference. Our main constituencies are our members and visitors, and my primary goal is to show them how to use Maine natives and other cold-climate plants in ornamental ways.

Garden photos courtesy of Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens, Boothbay, Maine.

## Such as?

*Linnaea borealis*, or twinflower, is a woodland groundcover that we are bringing out of the woods to use as an under-planting in our gardens.

## Was your home on Southport Island a summer get-away before the permanent move?



No, the island is completely new for us. My wife, Melissa, grew up on Mt. Desert Island, farther up the coast, and this really reminds her of where she grew up, only smaller.

## Is your house on the water?

We're about 500 feet from the ocean. We can't see it, but we can smell it, and we hear the bell buoys and see the fog rolling in. I've always wanted to live near the ocean.

## How large is the island?

It's five miles long and about a mile wide. We have our own K-6 school with 28 kids, a volunteer fire department – I'm a volunteer fireman now – and we have a little store and a couple of churches. In the summer, the population goes up to several thousand.

## Tell me about your commute.

It takes eight minutes by car. I cross four short bridges – the island is one of several at the mouth of the Sheepscot River, and I just island-hop across. Ours has a swing bridge, which opens for boats every half-hour in the summer. Sometimes early in the season I forget and get stuck, but it's a small price to pay for living on an island.

## What is the island like in winter?

It's very quiet. I've never lived in a touristy place before, and the coming and going of the tourists is a strong reminder of the seasons. In the winter you pull inward, and the islanders start talking again. There's a bond among those of us who live here year-round – there are the summer folks and everyone else. In spring you start getting busy, and summer is totally frenetic, so by fall you're ready for quiet again.

## You sound like you don't miss much about living in Massachusetts and Connecticut.

I'm pretty happy here. And I sure don't miss the traffic and the crowds.



## About Jane Roy Brown



Jane is a writer, editor, and landscape historian. Her writing has appeared in the *Boston Globe*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Garden Design*, *Landscape Architecture*, and other publications. She works part-time as the director of educational outreach for the Library of American Landscape History. Jane was recently awarded a Gold Award from the Society of American Travel Writers Foundation. She lives in western Massachusetts with her husband, photographer Bill Regan, who took this colorful photo of Jane.