

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Paradise Under Glass: The Education of an Indoor Gardener
By Ruth Kassinger

Longwood Gardens Community Read, March–May 2025

The Longwood Gardens Community Read is designed to encourage reading for pleasure and start a conversation. Focusing on literature about gardens, plants, and the natural world, we feature an exceptional book annually (paired with a similarly themed younger readers' book) through a variety of programs, discussions, and lectures across all community partner organizations. For more information about the Community Read, go to www.longwoodgardens.org/community-read.

For our Community Readers we hope this discussion guide helps to spark your thinking and ignite a conversation.

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Why *Paradise Under Glass: The Education of an Indoor Gardener*?

Do plants and gardens inspire you and spark your imagination? Our 2025 Longwood Gardens Community Read selection is about one woman's journey to creating a beautiful indoor garden at her home as a place of learning and sanctuary after an inspiring visit to a public garden conservatory. What a perfect companion for our [Longwood Reimagined / A New Garden Experience](#) opening November 22, 2024, which includes a stunning new conservatory, beautiful new gardens, and preservation of a historic indoor garden by acclaimed Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx, among other features. *Longwood Reimagined* reflects our founder Pierre du Pont's vision to share the joys of beauty and horticulture with all.

We are pleased to share Ruth Kassinger's *Paradise Under Glass: The Education of an Indoor Gardener* with our Community Readers. Kassinger is a science and health writer with other publications including *Slime: How Algae Created Us, Plague Us, and Just Might Save Us* and *A Garden of Marvels: The Discovery that Flowers Have Sex, Leaves Eat Air, and Other Secrets of The Way Plants Work*. She found herself in need of a positive path after the death of her sister, her home becoming an empty nest, and her own battle with breast cancer. A resident of Maryland, she visited the conservatory of the U.S. Botanic Garden in Washington D.C. and was inspired to add a much smaller-scale conservatory to her home. "It occurred to me that adding a conservatory to our house was just what I needed," Kassinger says. "Warm and humid, beautiful, ever-green, peaceful, and still, a conservatory would be the perfect antidote to the losses and changes of middle age. It would be my personal tropical paradise where nothing unexpected lurked in the landscape."

Kassinger was definitely not a skilled indoor gardener before taking her conservatory leap. As an experienced writer and researcher, she knew she needed to learn about indoor gardens and how to grow indoor plants if she was to be successful—the results of which she shares in *Paradise Under Glass*. This wonderful combination of warm humor, personal anecdotes, and fascinating history makes for a terrific read. We've provided a **discussion guide** and a list of additional **recommended resources** for use in your book groups and other programs.

We truly hope that you enjoy this book as much as we do. Please reach out and share your thoughts! Email library@longwoodgardens.org or post on Facebook, X, and Instagram using **#CommunityRead**. Tell a friend or colleague about the book. Think about planning an event or book discussion. We hope you will visit *Longwood Reimagined* when it debuts in November 2024!

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Community Read
Read. Think. Engage.

Quotes From *Paradise Under Glass* For Social Media (Use #Communityread) Or To Spark Discussion

“Enjoying a garden and creating one, however, have always been completely unrelated activities to my mind ... No, I have always been perfectly content to appreciate the expert efforts of others. The urge to pick up a trowel, much less a shovel, or even a pair of clippers never struck me, at least not until recently. So what inspired me to build a conservatory?” (p. xii)

“Gradually, it occurred to me that adding a conservatory onto our house was just what I needed. Warm and humid, beautiful, ever-green, peaceful and still, a conservatory would be the perfect antidote to the losses and changes of middle age. It would be my personal tropical paradise where nothing unexpected lurked in the landscape. I determined to have one.” (p. xvi)

“...it was far more likely that, after my first rush of enthusiasm, I wouldn’t provide enough care; that once I stocked my conservatory, my attention would move elsewhere, to some new unexplored subject, and I’d be left with a roomful of withered memento mori. My plants were more likely to die, not from drowning, but from distraction.” (p. 9)

“I noticed, with satisfaction, the dirt under my nails and began to feel that I might become a gardener.” (p. 95)

“Maybe we’ve all been conditioned by those advertisements of happy couples and families frolicking in a tropical location, and unconsciously presume that good times are going to happen in a tropical conservatory. Or maybe, lingering deep in our primate psyche is the sense that there is safety in a place that feels like the high treetops.” (p. 145)

“In fact, what I’ve come to love best about the conservatory is its constant alterations: the comings and goings of family and friends; ...old plants that need to be pruned and repotted; new plants that catch my eye ...; a new generation of bugs to be battled; the rearrangement of the landscape from summer, when the fruit trees move outside, to winter when they come back in... the conservatory reminds me every day that I can live with life’s inevitable losses, both small and large.” (p. 327-328)



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Paradise Under Glass* is a mix of memoir and history. What was your experience reading this mixed genre book?
2. Kassinger was inspired by a visit to the Conservatory of the U.S. Botanic Garden in Washington D.C. to build a conservatory onto her home, learn all about houseplants, and become an indoor gardener. She had been through many “losses and changes of middle age” and thought this project would provide some healing.
 - a. How did you feel about Kassinger’s choice of project to help her heal?
 - b. What was your expectation for Kassinger’s success in her education, or even completing the project?
 - c. What would you have done in her shoes?
3. In chapter 3 (*Construction*), the construction of the conservatory attached to Kassinger’s house encounters some challenges. Faced with several changes to fit neighborhood regulations, Kassinger decides not to follow the requirement to modify her roofline. She mentions that she is going against her nature and “channeling Joanie,” her late sister who always followed her own path.
 - a. Why do you think it was important to Kassinger to do this?
 - b. What would you have done?
4. In chapter 4 (*Plant Hunting*), Kassinger’s friend Edie at the garden center gives her some advice: “I know it’s easy to get attached to a plant,’ and she fixed me with a penetrating, knowing look, ‘but remember this: a *Peperomia* is not a puppy. If it’s not working, throw it out, and get something that will” (p. 71–72).
 - a. What do you think about this statement? Do you agree with Edie? Why or why not?
5. In chapter 4 (*Plant Hunting*), we learn about plant explorers and collectors in the 18th century, the plants they brought home to Europe, and the worldwide expansion of plant exportation throughout the next century—showing that native plants were no longer the only choices for ornamental display and food production.
 - a. How has the world been affected—good or bad—by plant exploration?
 - b. What are the drawbacks to moving plants out of their native habitat?



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6. In chapter 5 (*Beyond Foliage*), Kassinger visits some passionate houseplant growers/retailers to find plants for her new conservatory. One of them says that “when he gets something really rare ... he always divides it or gives cuttings to at least one other grower, out of fear he’ll fail with it and it will be lost forever” (p. 119).
 - a. Why do you think this is important to him?
 - b. What is our human responsibility for flora and fauna?

7. In chapter 6 (*Entertaining*) Kassinger describes the 18th and 19th century passion for conservatories among the wealthy, with the meaning of “conservatory” becoming “an aesthetically pleasing structure where people enjoyed the company of plants while also enjoying the company of one another” (p. 137–138). Her plant-filled conservatory is a draw for family, friends, and neighbors: “Whatever the reason, the fact is that guests walk in the front door and immediately head to the plants” (p. 145).
 - a. Please explain what you think Kassinger’s goals were in building her conservatory. Did she want to share it?
 - b. What do you think it is about plants growing in a beautiful indoor space that appeals to our humanity—is it something ingrained in us?

8. In chapter 9 (*Ferns*), Kassinger details popular house plants of different eras—from orange trees in the Renaissance, to pineapples and palm trees in Regency England, to ferns for the Victorian middle class. Succulents could certainly be described as the popular and trendy house plant of the early 21st century.
 - a. What do you think it is about our current society and culture that makes succulents appealing?

9. In the book’s conclusion, Kassinger says she started out wanting a “perfect green refuge, an unchanging paradise” (p. 327) where she could find peace. She grew to realize that she appreciates the constant change in the conservatory, reflecting the true natural world. She says that a true paradise is “a place where there is always something new under the sun and I wonder each day: ‘what next?’” (p. 328).
 - a. How do you feel about Kassinger’s view of paradise?
 - b. Was her original goal realistic?

