

Riz Reyes: Rising Star

BY MARTY WINGATE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK TURNER



Widely considered one of American horticulture's rising stars, Riz Reyes poses here with artichoke agaves planted in the desert garden he designed at the McMenamins Anderson School in Bothell, Washington.

A precocious plant geek, 30-something Riz Reyes has been heating up the horticultural hotbed of the Pacific Northwest since his early teens.

THE NORTHWEST Flower & Garden Show (NWFGS) is perhaps *the* major event on the gardening calendar in the Pacific Northwest. The annual show, held over several days each February at the Washington State Convention Center in Seattle, is where the region's garden geeks converge to create fabulous plant exhibits and floral arrangements, listen to lectures from national and international gardening legends, and get a foretaste of spring.

only about 10 feet square. So he met with Barbara Flynn, who coordinated these displays for the NWFGS. Their conversation ended abruptly when Reyes told Flynn he had to leave, because he had homework to do. Homework? she asked, thinking he was perhaps a college student. "Well, I'm only 13 years old," he replied.

Still, Reyes made time for the show, and Flynn made sure the enthusiastic teenager had the proper support. "Barbara was a matchmaker of sorts," he re-

and guidance as Reyes created his first vignette, a display that represented plants of the Philippines—where he was born—as well as the Pacific Northwest.

He designed other vignettes in subsequent years that showcased his growing knowledge and experience. Then, in 2013, he designed a show garden titled "The Lost Gardener—A Journey from the Wild to the Cultivated," for which he received the show's top award, the Founder's Cup. By then, Reyes's accomplishments were gaining widespread attention. He was one of six "next-generation stars of horticulture" profiled in a 2013 article by Ken Druse in *Organic Living* magazine.

Despite his extraordinary talent, colleagues say it hasn't gone to his head. "He has such a passion for plants," Fisher says, "and yet he's never boastful."

EARLY INFLUENCES

Reyes's family immigrated from the Philippines to the United States in 1989. Reyes was seven at the time and his head was full of memories of his tropical homeland. As he and his family put down roots, Reyes began to "seriously get into plants." He haunted the floral section of the local stores, learning the names of the flowers and watching as the six-packs of annuals arrived in spring. A neighbor gave him a handful of leftover dahlia tubers that he grew with mixed success, prompting her to give Reyes that age-old gardener's advice: "There's always next year." So he kept on experimenting and learning.

After high school, Reyes entered the University of Washington (UW) to earn a bachelor's of science degree in Environmental Horticulture and Urban Forestry. His studies placed him within the realm of the UW Botanic Gardens, which comprises the Washington Park Arboretum as well as the Center for Urban Horticulture and the Elisabeth C. Miller Library. Reyes, of course, was familiar with the botanic gardens' resources for students and the public long before he attended college, because the complex is a hub for many local organizations, including the Northwest Horticultural Society and the Northwest Perennial Alliance. Upon graduation, the Center for Urban Horticulture offered him a part-time position as head gardener of the Orin & Althea Soest Herbaceous Display Garden on site, a position he held for eight years.



As a boy, Reyes assembled a diverse array of plants on the balcony of his family's apartment.

It's also a place where rising horticultural stars like Rizaniño Reyes—better known as "Riz"—have a chance to test their mettle. Reyes's first opportunity to do so came in 1994 when he entered the amateur flower arranging competition sponsored by the Washington State Federation of Garden Clubs. "I remember going up those escalators and there would be these huge displays right as you walk in. I thought, this is it—the world, the career, I belong in," recalls Reyes.

When that competition was discontinued the following year, Reyes decided to try creating vignettes, small displays

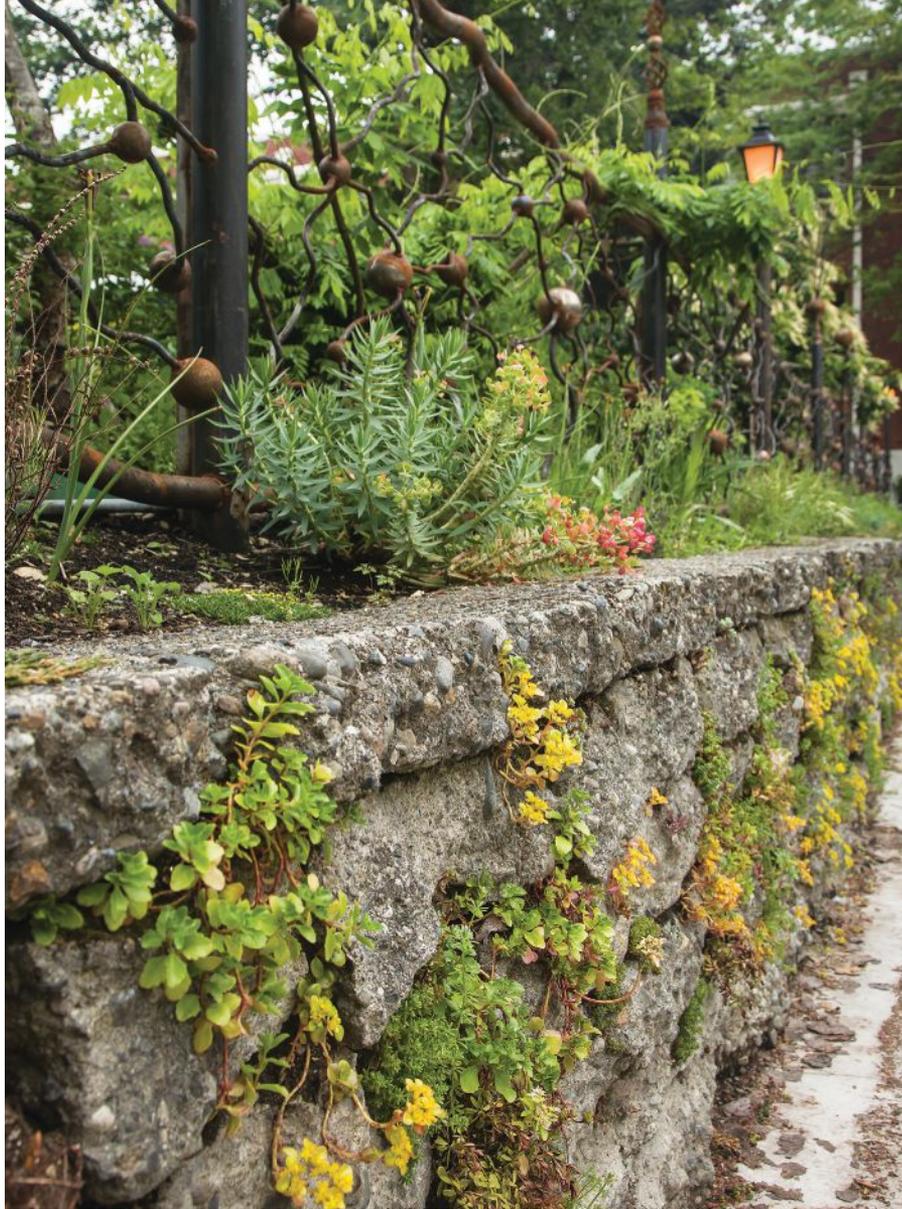
calls. She introduced him to Mary Fisher, owner of Cultus Bay Nursery on Whidbey Island, just north of Seattle, and Bob Lilly, who became Reyes's gateway to local organizations and plant study weekends, among others.

"Barbara called me one day," Fisher says, "and said I have this young guy and he wants to have a display at the flower show. I thought of you, because you love children and your nursery has a booth." Fisher visited Reyes at his family's apartment, checked out the plant collection he had established on the balcony, and recognized true dedication when she saw it. She provided plants



As head gardener at McMenamins Anderson School—a former school that now contains a pub, restaurants, and hotel—Reyes is responsible for designing and maintaining the elaborate gardens, which include a meadow, above, desert garden, below left, and formal streetside border, below right.





Reyes's gardens around McMenamins Anderson School include subtle touches, such as sedums growing in the crevices of a dry-stack wall composed of repurposed concrete, and wisteria growing along a fanciful metal trellis.

The Soest garden, which opened in 1998, was designed to showcase the best qualities of plants when they are sited properly according to their soil, light, and water needs. The small landscape quickly became a popular spot not only for plant identification classes, but also for anyone seeking a sunny (or shady) bench upon which to enjoy lunch. By the time Reyes took the job, he had a mature landscape on his hands, one that required continual evaluation and editing and also coming up with unique and educational planting schemes—on a limited budget. As many gardeners do, he fashioned a full-time career by adding on design and maintenance clients as well as floral design work (see sidebar on page 24).

Despite his evident aptitude for his chosen profession, Reyes's career path ini-

tially caused some consternation within his family. "I don't think very many Filipinos would aspire to become a gardener as a profession," Reyes says, "as it is often categorized as menial manual labor requiring little knowledge and skill."

That's a stereotype Reyes has experienced from both sides. "It's happened that people see me working in a garden and they think all I know is how to use the blower."

Regardless of which direction the misconception comes from, Reyes continues on his path, unafraid to "do the dirty work" to show what he is capable of. "My cultural upbringing has kept me grounded to always remember that you work for everything. Nothing is just given to you," says Reyes.

GATEWAYS TO HORTICULTURE

In the world of professional horticulture, "Riz absolutely shines," says Kirk Brown, who lectures on historic and horticultural topics and is president of GWA: The Association of Garden Communicators. Brown met with Reyes in 2014 as part of a series of interviews he scheduled with rising stars in the gardening industry to better understand what drove them. "The information Riz uses and passion that he demonstrates are part and parcel of who he is," says Brown. "Riz has led the perfect horticultural gypsy's life. He's taken a little bit of this and a little bit of that, and he's made a life."

While his own passion for plants is innate, Reyes believes "there are so many gateways" for drawing successive generations into horticulture and gardening. "The most common is food," he notes. Putting vegetable-shunning little hands into the dirt can turn a life around. "As a kid, you're outside and playing and you're exposed to your environment. And we have to remember that whatever food fad comes along—pomegranates, goji berries—it always goes back to horticulture."

Reyes thinks that something as simple as a Mother's Day bouquet or the receipt of a potted plant can spark interest in gardening. "People know flowers —people get that. And that means opportunities for education are everywhere," he says.

EVER-INCREASING OUTLETS

Although Reyes doesn't currently have a garden of his own, he looks forward to a time in the near future when he will own a house and be able to dig in. In the meantime, he has found another opportunity: a new job as head gardener of the grounds at the Anderson School in Bothell, a city just northeast of Seattle. Anderson School, originally a junior high that opened in 1931, is now part of the McMenamins group of hotels and pubs, which are located in Oregon and Washington. McMenamins properties are known for their landscapes, which incorporate original elements with innovative art and exciting plants.

"I was at Anderson School early in its development," Brown says. "It's entirely unlike any other commercial landscape in the area. Hortaholics will be amazed."

For this job, Reyes brings together all the skills he has acquired through both

A HORTICULTURAL TAKE ON FLOWER ARRANGING

Rizaniño “Riz” Reyes’s formal entrée into flower arranging began at age 12, when he entered the Washington Federation of Garden Clubs floral competition at the Northwest Flower & Garden Show, and his interest has never diminished. Since Reyes has no formal floral design training, he looks to the plants themselves for ideas on just what to put in a vase. “Horticulture taught me how to arrange flowers,” he says.



“Riz is a unique floral designer—he is completely breaking the mold in floristry, because he isn’t traditionally trained,” says Debra Prinzing, a California-based author and founder of Slowflowers.com, which promotes locally grown flowers.

Although Reyes’s horticultural work comes first, he often helps out friends—and friends of friends—with floral arrangements for weddings and other special events. At the Anderson School, the Easter table this spring included branches of red-flowering currant shooting out of a low container. They were in bloom, you see, and so Reyes *had* to use them. “His style is very much in line with the naturalistic look in wedding design,” Prinzing says.



Reyes designs his floral arrangements to make use of whatever catches his eye in the garden. Here he cuts dogwood branches, above, for one of his hand-tied bouquets, left.

“I like working with branches and vines, and I prefer a looser, what they call romantic garden style,” Reyes acknowledges. “Riz is in love with whatever is in season,” Prinzing says, “a bud unfurling, wacky bark or pods. He’s got that full-

use mindset about floral arranging.”

Flower arranging is, for Reyes, really quite simple: “Give me a vase with water and let me cut things from the garden.”

—M.W.

traditional and independent study and his personal experience. For now he must not only choose, site, and tend plants according to their needs, but also cater to the needs of the guests. Understanding how people will use this landscape of about two-and-a-half acres will help dictate design.

Ever the plant geek, Reyes rattles off a few of his favorites that are already nestled into the Anderson School landscape: checkered lily (*Fritillaria meleagris*) in the meadow; a manzanita (*Arctostaphylos densiflora*) for the hot spots; sausage vine (*Holboellia coriacea* ‘Cathedral Gem’) well-placed for those in the courtyard to enjoy the fragrant flowers. He has used soft shield fern (*Polystichum setiferum* Plumoso-Divisilobum Group) for texture in shade and the remarkably hardy *Schefflera taiwaniana* for an exotic effect.

Although his job at Anderson School is full-time, Reyes has retained a select number of private clients, including Brian Coleman, whose Seattle home in the Queen Anne neighborhood has delighted both neighbors and visitors for many years. Here, the trees and shrubs—such as the clipped variegated English hollies (*Ilex aquifolium*)—form the bones of the garden. Each year, Reyes generously supplements them with a wild and colorful array of coleus, dahlias, fancy-leaved pelargoniums, and castor bean (*Ricinus communis*).

His accomplishments also extend to writing and speaking. “Riz is a sponge for learning new things,” says C. Colston Burrell, a garden designer and author who lives in Virginia. Reyes met Burrell in 2007 when he took a writing workshop led by Burrell and Lucy Hardiman, a Portland, Oregon-based designer and writer. Since

then, Reyes has written for a variety of publications, including *Fine Gardening*, *Pacific Horticulture*, and *Garden Notes*, a bulletin of the Northwest Horticultural Society. Plans are brewing—at least in his own mind, for now—for a book. He also shares his considerable knowledge through lectures at venues such as the GWA annual symposium, the Northwest Flower & Garden Show, and the Perennial Plant Association symposium.

“I know it’s unusual for someone so young to be so dedicated,” Reyes says of his early interest in plants. “But the reason I’ve stuck around with horticulture is the encouragement I got early on.”

A resident of Seattle, Washington, Marty Wingate is the author of several garden mysteries. She frequently leads tours of gardens in the United Kingdom and the United States.