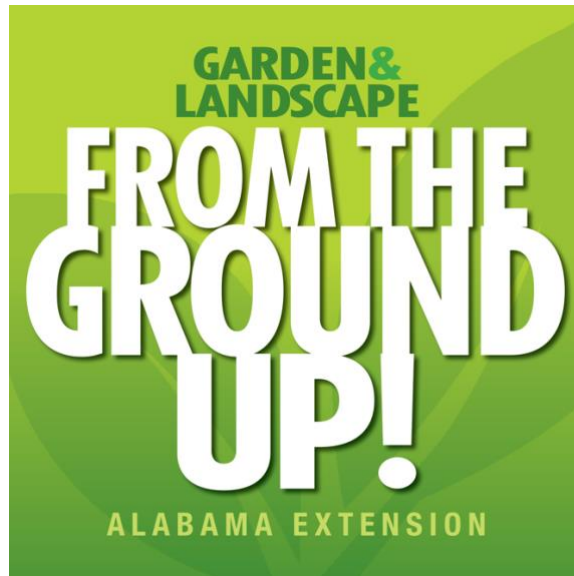




Season 2 Episode 7— Brie Arthur the Plant Lady

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Narrator

From the Ground Up, a podcast of the Alabama Extension Home Grounds team educating you about home landscapes gardens and home pests.

Brian Brown

Brie Arthur, otherwise known as Brie the Plant Lady is a horticulturist, bestselling author, social media influencer and contributor to the Emmy Award winning PBS show Growing a Greener World. Her books Food Scape Revolution and Gardening with Grains are a new way of thinking about how we treat our landscapes and blend the two worlds of vegetable gardening and landscaping together.

Brian Brown

So, Brie thanks for being on the podcast.

Brie Arthur

Well, thank you for having me. This is such a treat.

Brian Brown

Well, tell me how you got here. You are all over the place. You're doing your social media, your YouTube, all the things you're speaking, engagements, you speak all around the country. Tell me how you got to where you are.

Brie Arthur

It's all because of Extension. So thank you for your service. I was introduced to horticulture from being a 4H'er in southeastern Michigan, and without that, I would never have known that I could study horticulture in college and have a thriving career. And so I just have endless gratitude for everyone working in the Extension service, because you guys really are you are the ultimate influencers in agriculture, and we can't live without you.

Brian Brown

Well, I appreciate that. I hope that other people feel that way. So you, Where did you where did you go to school at?

Brie Arthur

I studied at Purdue University. Did, my major was in landscape design with a minor in entomology and made my way down to Raleigh, North Carolina, first as an intern, and that fell in love with the southeastern climate and have been here now for the past 23 years. So I'm almost native to the south at this point.

Brie Arthur

Every now and again I catch myself saying all y'all.

Brian Brown

And it grows on you. So your book Food Scape Revolution, tell me about that.

Brie Arthur

So my first book was, was actually like, nothing I do is seemingly intentional. I'm just not a very well-adjusted plant enthusiast, but I bought my first house in the subprime market back in 2006. I was working full time as a propagator, a grower at a nursery, and it just wasn't earning enough money to pay my bills and also eat.

Brie Arthur

So I started growing vegetables in my front yard and got into a scuffle with my homeowner's association, which I had no experience with because I grew up out in the country and that never had anybody telling me what I was allowed to do with the land I was paying for. And I quickly realized that my confrontational attitude wasn't going to solve my problem.

Brie Arthur

So I, I joined the HOA board, and it was a really humbling experience because, you know, I entered thinking that those people had no background in horticulture and they had no business, you know, putting out these laws. And then within the first week, I realized that they really weren't wrong. We as American vegetable gardeners, have not always been trained to grow in a very esthetically pleasing way.

Brie Arthur

Sometime in our lives, we have been brainwashed into thinking that lumber is a prerequisite. And that the only way you can vegetable garden is to build a box bed, which I now lovingly but somewhat accurately call plant coffins. And you know, they, they had a point that when you rip out your landscape and you install a bunch of raised beds and then it gets to be a thousand degrees in the middle of July and you go on vacation and lose interest.

Brie Arthur

What you have created is an eyesore, and all of your neighbors are the ones having to deal with it. And I thought, well, I never actually thought about it from that perspective. And I saw example after example of what they were trying to prevent from happening is basically making our property values less because of the way that people were gardening.

Brie Arthur

And I thought back to a book that I had read when I was a teenager in 4-H, I actually did a project on edible landscaping by Rosalind Creasy. And if you're not familiar with Ros Creasy's work, you all should Google her immediately. She's written 23 books on this subject. She's absolutely brilliant. And I started taking advice from her very literally.

Brie Arthur

I tore out the raised beds, and I started integrating the vegetables in with my ornamental trees, shrubs, perennials. And all of a sudden, I won yard of the year.. Which came with a \$500 gift certificate to a grocery store, which literally in that moment, like solved all of my 20-something problems. Like I cannot express how valuable that at that not only the experience, but that gift, because the gift certificate was because I could suddenly go grocery shopping and I, I felt so empowered.

Brie Arthur

You know, when I was getting the threatening letters from the HOA, I really was feeling quite bad about myself and very disillusioned. And you know, what am I doing with my life and what did I do buying this house? And when this full circle moment came, I really wanted to make it my mission to share this experience with others.

Brie Arthur

And it just happened to be at the same time that social media was coming on, and people were really getting excited about sharing information and I'm very grateful for that formidable experience that I had in my 20s that has really allowed me to, I know, lead by example and and show the power that a suburban landscape can offer.

Brie Arthur

We have a lot of square footage devoted to turf, grass and ornamental plantings that, you know, they serve a purpose. But we could do more with that space. And I want homeowners to feel engaged with the land that they're stewarding and growing. The vegetables that you like to eat is a really, powerful experience to have, and

certainly something that I think the next generation deserves, to have when they're children, so that when they grow up, they won't be intimidated by growing plants.

Brian Brown

Yeah, it's definitely a new way of thinking about your landscape. And there's there's a lot of vegetables out there that it's actually very ornamental. If you want to call it that. And pretty and you don't realize that. And, and maybe it's just the stage of growth sometimes, but it is definitely a new way of thinking about how you're going to design your landscape and what you can integrate in that.

Brian Brown

So what piece of advice would you give somebody who wants to integrate more fruits and vegetables in their landscape?

Brie Arthur

Be practical. You know, the thing is, and I really I think we all saw this in the pandemic. People went nuts and planted like enormous vegetable gardens, and they got really overwhelmed and didn't necessarily realize how much time and energy it takes to not only cultivate the crops, but then to harvest and then prepare and preserve all the stuff that you grow.

Brie Arthur

And so my recommendation always is like, write down what you have cooked in your kitchen for the last two weeks, and find a handful of vegetables that recur over and over again. So, like in my case, every meal that I start, it's olive oil and onions. Garlic. Potatoes. Peppers. And find a way to grow those things in a really meaningful way.

Brie Arthur

So when you're harvesting you can skip that at the grocery store. And then you actually change your spending habits. So the time and energy that you're spending in your garden really does feel like it's meaningful. When you plant one of everything, you can't even cobble one complete meal together. I always encourage people, you know, start small, start practical.

Brie Arthur

Like I always say, garlic and potatoes will make you feel like a superhero. Tomatoes are going to hurt your feelings on every single level, particularly for those of us gardening in the South where our climate is terrible in the summertime, you know, as we're getting into fall, you have a really wonderful opportunity to lean into cool season gardening because even though we still get cold, it's not frozen.

Brie Arthur

It's not like it is in the north and you can grow food crops all winter long in the south, and that's the time of year when it's actually pleasant to be outside. So, you know, if you're a kale enthusiast, now's the time to start buying

some packs of kale seeds. And, you know, think about broccoli, cauliflower and cabbage and, you know, some of those cool season crops that don't necessarily take as much maintenance and also look really beautiful when they're integrated into your actual landscape.

Brian Brown

There's a lot of pictures that you can find online of this. And so that if you want good ideas, you can always just, you know, look up pictures online and do image searches and just say, integrate or what would you look for?

Brie Arthur

You know, edible landscaping food ideas, you know, ornamental edibles. That's like a whole new category that plant breeders actually making selections for. You know, I, you know, I the cover of Foodscape Revolution is like an eggplant loud and proud. You only need but a couple of eggplants because they're very, very productive.

Brie Arthur

My local food bank has just told me to stop bringing the eggplants. And I only planted eight this year. But, you know, they are a beautiful element. They're not super high water needs. They have good disease resistance. You know, other than flea beetles don't really have a lot of pest problems with them. But for southern gardeners and especially for transplants from the North, which I fully relate to gardening in the South is like being on a different planet, and everything that you used to do is the opposite.

Brie Arthur

And so take it in small bits, learn from Extension, join the Master Gardeners, because you really are starting from scratch. I mean, I've lived this firsthand myself, but I've also seen my parents who retired from Michigan down to South Carolina, and everything that they do is the opposite of their Michigan schedule. And it takes some getting used to.

Brian Brown

Yeah.

Brian Brown

For sure. Yeah. And there have been a lot of people that have moved from up north, down south, especially in Alabama. North Carolina is growing like crazy, especially where you're in the Raleigh area that is just blown up. Nashville everywhere in the South is blowing up right now. So lots of people calling me as an Extension agent with questions.

Brian Brown

Well, I didn't have that up there. Why can't this tomato grow when it's 98 degrees outside? Well, you know, let's start with something easy, first. You know?

Brie Arthur

I always say tomatoes. And I hate that there're the gateway in the vegetable garden because they will give you such a complex like I. I question my ability as a horticulturist every single year because of tomatoes. They hurt my feelings more than anything else on this planet. I still love them. But. Garlic. Garlic, now.

Brie Arthur

And actually, as we're filming this garlic is a good thing to be thinking about ordering, especially if you're looking for a very specific cultivar. And I think in your region, you're pretty similar to me. Do you do both hard neck and soft neck?

Brian Brown

I think so. I'm I'm not I'm not a I'm more of an ornamental person, so...

Brie Arthur

Well, I think in North Alabama you can do both, but it's for people in southern Alabama, you really could only do soft neck. And that's really not the garlic that grocery stores sell. So you would need to order your garlic from a seed supplier. Because the hard neck garlic actually does need more cold chill that one like coastal Alabama would receive.

Brie Arthur

And these are the nuances that make gardening in the South a bit more complicated.

Brian Brown

Yeah, I think down in the Mobile, down near Gulf Shores, I think they're actually zone nine now. So they're, they're definitely a and you know, I honestly Baldwin County in Mobile County completely different than just a, you know, 100 miles north of there. So do a little bit of research. Reach out to local Extension agent. We can help you figure out those things.

Brian Brown

And, you know explore Brie's website. She's got lots of and YouTube channel. She's got lots of great info on how she does things. And, you know, there's there's plenty of resources out there, but reach out to someone who knows, don't don't trust YouTube and not saying YouTube, you're on YouTube, you know.

Brie Arthur

And I'm always keen to point out how hyper regional gardening is. Right. And like you said, the difference between Mobile and Birmingham, it it could be a different planet and it's the same thing here. What I do doesn't translate to Asheville. And so this is why Extension is so incredibly valuable. Because you are county by county. And those resources are, they're just so critical for being successful.

Brian Brown

So what about someone living in a small apartment or duplex? What kind of options do they have? Do they have any options?

Brie Arthur

Oh my gosh. Yes. Yeah. They have endless options with Container Gardening. It's actually my favorite thing in the whole world is container gardening. So you actually have total control over everything. You have control over the pot, over the soil that you put in it. Your only limitation is your ability to water. That's it. That's that's it. If you're smart, put in a drip irrigation system.

Brie Arthur

You can actually go on vacation and still keep your plants alive, right? Well, I don't have a drip irrigation system. I pay a ten year old neighbor to take care of my pots when I'm away. But I do. Everything that you grow started in a pot. Period. You know, you. There's nothing that can't be container grown. And my favorite container system is actually an aeroponic, so it's it's a hydroponic system that has a timer that turns on and off, and it's actually a tower, so in three square feet.

Brie Arthur

I can have 24 different plants growing. The tank holds 20 gallons of water, so I'm really only having to add water maybe every other week. Even in the heat of the summer. Wow. It's a closed system, so it works really, really well. And it's definitely my highest yields of all time. Right now it's filled with cucumbers and I'm harvesting about 20 cucumbers a day.

Brian Brown

Wow.

Brie Arthur

So, you know, I highly recommend looking especially for people with limited space if you're really interested in growing stuff where you're getting a lot of harvest. The aeroponic systems are extremely effective. They're very, very user friendly. They tend to come in a kit where you get everything that you need. And I've had my tower garden now for 12 years.

Brie Arthur

I growing it year round, and it's hands down my favorite system to grow it. I've tried everything I've done aquaponics and traditional hydroponics. And, the tower remains the supreme being.

Brian Brown

I mean, we teach a lot of bucket gardening, classes here in Alabama. That's one of the things we we really. It's a cheap way to do it. A five-gallon bucket you can pick up just about anywhere any hardware store is going to have them, and just put some holes in there for it to drain. That's really important.

Brian Brown

But that's something that is very, very cheap. Just get you a bag of potting mix. And and put your put your seeds in there and start from there or seedlings or whatever you what do you have. And start with a five-gallon bucket. That's an easy way to do it.

Brie Arthur

I love that idea. And actually it's funny because somebody at a recent presentation called me the Trash Can Gardener. And, you know, my main goal is to make gardening is accessible to people as possible without it being super expensive. And and also getting people over the fear of failure because you're going to fail. Yeah, it's not the worst thing that can happen to you, but you could take a trash can and don't drill drainage holes in it and grow your own rice.

Brie Arthur

Yeah. And it's the coolest thing you'll ever do. And, you know, obviously if you have one trash can, it's not going to be enough to, like, never buy rice from the store. But the experience of growing it is so valuable because once you've done that, you appreciate what you buy, right? And pretty much everyone that I've ever spoken to, everyone has eaten rice, but very few people have ever actually seen it growing or physically grown at themselves.

Brie Arthur

And so every spring when I'm doing presentations, I'm on a rice growing mission and I'm just like, buy a garbage can, buy a five gallon bucket, do this experiment, and I think your life will change for the better.

Brian Brown

So let's talk about grains. Your second book is Gardening with Grains, and I was really fascinated with the book because I'd never really dreamed of using grains in a landscape as as a ornamental, but also as something that you could harvest and use.

Brie Arthur

Grains have completely changed my approach as a gardener. I was someone challenged me. They gave me a pound of wheat seed to grow something of meaning. I was deep into my heirloom tomato phase. At that point, I was growing like 150 different varieties of heirloom tomatoes. You know, in January, when the Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Catalog arrives.

Brie Arthur

I can't stop ordering the seeds. In my defense, yeah, they have really good photography, but I thought, gosh, you know, you're right. My diet does not revolve around tomatoes or, eggplants or, you know, cucumbers. I should be growing something that, like, sustains me. Yeah. And never in my life ever had I thought about this. This was 2014.

Brie Arthur

So 11 years ago, and it was so incredible experience where I ripped out 800ft² of centipede turf in my front yard, full sun, all sand. You know, I live in a former tobacco field. Nothing fancy at all about where I live or garden and, sow those those wheat seeds watched them grow all, all winter long and I when they started blooming, I had never seen anything more beautiful in my whole life.

Brie Arthur

I would just drop to my knees and I think I probably took 25,000 photos the first spring, because that's totally what a well-adjusted person does. And then I harvested 20 pounds of ground flour from my front yard wheat.

Brian Brown

Wow.

Brie Arthur

And I really started thinking about what we could do. Like just even in my neighborhood, if everybody did what I did, how much flour could we provide for a local bakery who's currently not getting any of their flour from North Carolina? Let alone from our own community?

Brian Brown

Yeah.

Brie Arthur

And then that got me thinking about other grains and like, our society's obsession with microbreweries and, well, you can't have beer without barley. Why are we going barley? And so I started growing barley, and I started talking to my local breweries about having barley in pots on their, on their patio so that they would have something that was demonstrative and educational.

Brie Arthur

And it just kept growing and growing and till I just didn't think about anything else. I've already told you several times I'm not well adjusted grains made me hyper, not well-adjusted. And beyond the fact that they're beautiful, they provide important habitat because many of these are cool, seasoned grains that are active in the winter when normal ornamental grasses are dormant.

Brie Arthur

Yeah, they also have this super important soil improvement quality, which is so vital for gardeners in the South. Right. Because we have very poor soils, all of our organic matter washes away, and these grains have these deep roots that actually scavenge nutrients and draw them back up to the surface for the next round of plants to have available.

Brie Arthur

If you pair them with a nitrogen fixing legume, you know, like, like, peas and oats, which are frequently sold together as a complete cover crop, you're then providing nitrogen for the plant material. If you harvest the seed and then mow the stalks down in place, allowing all that organic matter to decompose where you grew it, you're then adding that much more material for the microbial activity to be able to feed on, making it so that your soil is constantly having new stuff to be able to decompose into place, making your life easier as a gardener.

Brian Brown

Yeah, and.

Brian Brown

Absolutely.

Brie Arthur

Three things together. Make it. Why are we doing this a standard practice?

Brian Brown

Yeah, absolutely. And that is something that, we as Extension agents always recommend is like if you have typical Alabama heavy clay soils, you don't add sand, sand and clay make concrete. So, so add your organic matter it is we can't emphasize that enough is to add organic matter. And there's that is a great way to do that. Let it decompose.

Brian Brown

Let it break down. You'll you'll see the benefits in in a season.

Brie Arthur

Well, and it's also important in this day and age where we have a lot of herbicide present in our environment from not just farming, but, you know, the DOTs spraying roadsides and, you know, under power lines. And so we have a lot of aminopyralid that's present now in compost that you purchase.

Brian Brown

Yes. I have that every year.

Brie Arthur

a persistent issue where your plants look like they've been sprayed with Roundup, but in fact, it isn't they it's just that the compost that you purchased has a residue that is continuing to break down. Right. So when you grow your own organic matter, you can be assured that you won't have persistent herbicide on your property. And then you can safely grow those summer vegetables that tend to be very sensitive to the aminopyralid classification of herbicides.

Brian Brown

Yeah, we I get that question every spring they see people, oh I just use cow manure. Well where did you get that cow manure? That is such an important question because it will pass through the body of the cow and that manure may contain those in there. And so we see a lot of herbicide damage, especially on tomatoes.

Brian Brown

Yeah. Very, very bad on tomatoes. And that's...

Brie Arthur

As if we needed another thing to make tomatoes hard. Yeah.

Brian Brown

Exactly, exactly.

Brie Arthur

But it's a discussion that we need to just start normalizing. Yeah. And it's not to demonize the herbicide itself. It's to educate consumers to make better decisions about what they're purchasing and have a better understanding of the system behind the compost industry. I, I represent a compost company, who actually does now facilitate portions of Alabama. Yeah. And we ran into this issue and I've become very, very educated on it.

Brie Arthur

And it's a discussion that I think more people need to have. You just need to be aware of it because there are workarounds. And actually our solution for Soil Cube was just implementing and integrating activated charcoal which neutralizes the aminopyralid. So it's not that it's something that's impossible to overcome. But if you're not aware of the problem then you don't know what to do.

Brie Arthur

I mean, I can't tell you how many people blame their neighbors, you know, Tru-Green subscription. I'm like, I'm actually I'm not so sure that Tru-Green is so reckless in their spraying that you're having that much drift. Yeah, but it might actually be in that bagged soil that you put out on to your vegetable garden.

Brian Brown

Yeah. And again, integrating those grains into, into your, into your landscape. I mean, and, vegetables too, you know, there's so many things that you can do and you've got a lot of great pictures on your, on your social media and on your website and things, and just go, go there. And how can people get in more information about you, how to get in touch with you if they're interested in getting you to speak?

Brie Arthur

Well, you can find me, at BrieGrows.com. That's Brie. Like the cheese BRIEGROWS.com. I'm a one person business, so, I manage my website. Hey, if you have technical advice, I'm always willing to hear it. I'm also @Brietheplantlady on YouTube and Instagram, which is where I really try to put a lot of just as much practical, user friendly information as possible.

Brie Arthur

I'm one that tends to learn from watching other people, and so I've really tried to make my YouTube videos, maybe to a fault. Super authentic. I'm not a tech savvy person, so I walk around with a cell phone. But what you're seeing is real. None of it's staged. And, you know, I just try to show what I'm doing in real time so that other people can then take my example and then apply it to your own gardens.

Brie Arthur

And, I certainly enjoy being able to share my gardening experiences with others. And I'm always here to be your cheerleader for everybody who's who's interested in being a plant nerd.

Brian Brown

Well, we certainly appreciate you joining us today. And again, if you want to reach out to her, visit her website and her social media. And I'm sure she would love to hear from you. So go ahead and follow her on there. And if you ever need any more information about anything gardening, anything landscape, you can always reach out to your local Extension agent.

Brian Brown

And we appreciate you listening Thank you.

Brie Arthur

Thanks so much for having me, Brian. This has meant so much to fun to catch up with you.

Brian Brown

Thanks. From the Ground Up is a production of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.