

Cool Plant, Hot Topics 2026 Speaker List

Cassie Knavel

Cassie's early career, coupled with a degree in restoration, supported Natural Resource Districts, then she jaunted to instruct with Teach For America in a Sovereign Nation. Currently, Cassie supports national priorities surrounding invasive species advocating for Washington's landscapes. Cassie's been honored as Washingtonian of the Day twice and in her free time recreates outdoors and serves in her community.

Talk Title: *Discover the threats invasive species bring to your yard and community.*

Description: Discover the threats invasive species bring to your yard and community. Explore pests' biology to understand response efforts for Japanese beetle, spotted lanternfly, spongy moth, and invasive hornets. Should these pests become established in Washington, they could threaten many communities' landscapes, commodities, and result in costly quarantines and increased pesticide use to manage these pests. Learn how you lead efforts to help detect, prevent the spread, and protect Washington's resources from invasive pests.

Alma Cardenas

Alma is a Master Gardener with a passion for learning how to turn everyday yards into thriving, sustainable landscapes. With a background in corporate sustainability and biodiversity conservation technologies at Microsoft, she brings big-picture knowledge to small-scale spaces. Alma believes our gardens can not only look pretty and grow food— they can capture carbon, support pollinators and wildlife, conserve water, and restore native plant communities right outside our doors. She's on a mission to help fellow gardeners turn their green spaces into tools for climate action and biodiversity preservation, one backyard at a time.

Talk Title: *The Invisible Ecosystem at Home: Gardening for Biodiversity in a Changing World*

Description: Washington's biodiversity is extraordinary but increasingly at risk. This talk explores the current state of biodiversity, the ecological processes that sustain life, and the disturbance regimes reshaping ecosystems. Discover how your backyard can provide food, water, shelter, and space for wildlife, and learn simple, powerful ways to garden for change and ecological resilience.

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Molly van der Burch

Molly van der Burch has been a King County WSU Extension Master Gardener since 2009 and is a member of the Washington State Master Gardener Climate Action Team. A native Seattleite, Molly retired after a 30-year teaching career and has since dedicated her time to helping gardeners create beautiful, sustainable, and climate-resilient landscapes. She volunteers at the Mercer Island and Crossroads Farmers Markets Master Gardener clinics, where she provides research-based gardening advice to home gardeners. Molly also teaches classes for PNW Garden Savvy, the Bellevue Botanical Garden, and the Master Gardener Speaker's Bureau on topics including climate-ready plants, keystone plants, container gardening, and creating a hummingbird-friendly garden. Molly has served on the boards of the Northwest Perennial Alliance and the Bellevue Botanical Garden Society. She has also operated a small garden consulting business, designing residential gardens and coaching clients on pruning, container design, and selecting the right plants for their landscapes.

Talk Title: *Keystone Plants: Nature's VIPs in Your Garden*

Description: Discover how a small group of native plants can power your entire garden ecosystem. Learn which Pacific Northwest keystone trees, shrubs, and perennials support pollinators, birds, and beneficial insects—and how choosing the right plants can transform your garden into a thriving habitat.