PLANT PEOPLE Season Two Episode Three 'Sowing Change' Transcript

CAMILLE DUNGY NARRATION: ***(Excerpt from Soil)***
"Our garden regularly ruptures my sense of progress and process and time. There is the forward trajectory of days into months, seasons into years. June's tight rosebuds will lead to July's full-crowned blooms. Evident and irreversible change, straight forward as an arrow toward its mark. But there is revolution in the garden as well. And reversals. Months and seasons and days turning so far forward they bend backward. I stand in the past and in the future when I stand in the present of our garden. Just as with grief, neatly outlined stages double back and return well after or long before I expect them to appear or be over."

JENNIFER BERNSTEIN NARRATION: This is Plant People from NYBG. I'm your host Jennifer Bernstein, CEO & The William C. Steere, Sr. President at the New York Botanical Garden.

The passage you just heard is by Camille Dungy, from her book Soil: The Story of a Black Mother's Garden. Today I have the honor of speaking with Camille about how the natural world can inspire personal and societal transformation.

CAMILLE DUNGY: Hi, my name's Camille Dungy. I'm the author of a book called Soil, the Story of a Black Mother's Garden. And it's a bookling narrative that follows seven years in my family's journey to create a sustainable, diverse ecosystem starting right in our own yard.

JENNIFER BERNSTEIN: Well, it's really terrific to be with you today and have a conversation about your journey as a gardener and maybe we can start a little bit at the beginning. You have established a garden in Colorado and that was the subject of your book, Soil. And I'm wondering if you could talk about what was the inspiration for that?

CAMILLE: The initial inspiration was quite simply I wanted to see some color when it got to be spring, and I wanted to see color a lot sooner than I could with the lawn and hardscaping that dominated the landscaping in the house where we

lived. And so I just planted bulbs and some plants that would come up earlier in the season and give me something interesting to look at.

JENNIFER: And, you know, gardening in Colorado is also an exercise and patience because it's a short window and you've really got to make it happen during that time.

CAMILLE: Right. The official growing window is really June to early September, but if you choose well, which I learned very quickly meant native plants, then I can have things that can come up as early as March and can withstand those unpredictable snows and freezes and that may last as late as October, sometimes even November.

And so I very quickly got into native gardening because I learned that doing that allowed me to have that color and excitement and visual interests for significantly longer than I otherwise could.

JENNIFER: I was struck in the book by the ways in which your values, your identity, your concern for the world and the values you wanted to impart to the community and to your daughter were shaping your approach to the garden. So I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that.

CAMILLE: And I think those values were shaping my approach to the garden, and the garden was shaping my certainty in those values, my trust in these convictions. So, if I'm saying that planting a garden that pays attention to the needs of the landscape and planting a garden that is diverse and has a variety within it allowed the garden to flourish longer and better and stronger and invited more pollinators and birds and beautiful butterflies, and by fostering this sense of strength through diversity and longevity and sustainability through diversity, that then was directly connected with my personal and political convictions as well.

So it was very obvious as I grew into building this garden that this, much more expansive and open sense of community that I created in this track of land allowed for more thriving, more growth, more positive opportunity.

JENNIFER: You talk in the book about gardening as a political act, gardening as a form of activism. I'm interested to hear about maybe some of the key influences either before or during or after this journey, that shaped your view that gardening could be a form of activism.

CAMILLE: Gardening can be a form of activism and it can also be a respite for people who are politically active and exhausted from that work. And in Soil, I speak about a woman, mother, gardener, and civil rights activist named Anne Spencer, who lived in central Virginia in the first three quarters of the 20th century. In her professional life, she created a library for Black members of the community. When the library was so heavily segregated that Black people were not allowed in the building at all, Spencer created, using her own books, a library for the Black community of Lynchburg.

She was friendly with nationally recognized civil rights activists, and in fact hosted many of them in her own home. And she was also an exceptional gardener. She had a stunning, miraculously robust garden, and this was a space of respite for her and all of these people who would stop and stay at her house and be fed quite literally at the Spencers' table and also spiritually and emotionally in the Spencers' backyard.

And so seeing that example of this incredibly hard and persistent, consistent work that Anne Spencer did throughout her lifetime, balanced with this self-care that she created in this spectacular garden, that felt like a wonderful model.

JENNIFER: And I'm interested because, in Spencer's example, you can see this desire and example of building a community around the garden and around the library. Can you share examples where maybe your garden sparked conversations within your community?

CAMILLE: It happens all the time and it is a real delight. It's an opportunity to talk about decisions. Why have I chosen to leave these sunflower stalks up through the winter instead of taking them all down after they've gone brown? And so we can have a conversation about how they save me money in bird seed because the birds can eat the remaining sunflower seeds instead of my buying a bag of

sunflower seeds to put in the bird feeder. We can have conversations as people are walking their dogs about what different plants are.

There's this whole community of seed exchange and exchange of little starts of plants. When people divide their plants, they are looking for people who are interested in taking those plants into their own space. And so there's this opportunity in the community of gardeners for real interchange, interconnection, idea exchange, and what I like to think of as exchange of love and care as well.

JENNIFER: Yeah, absolutely. So, sometimes if you're bucking garden trends of a kind of monoculture approach to garden or, like a heavy lawn approach to garden, that can evoke a response. And I think that experience could have been amplified by the fact that you're in a predominantly white community.
What was the experience of creating a very diverse native-forward garden like for you?

CAMILLE: It seems I should be honest to say that I didn't start with a massive turnover where the whole yard all of a sudden became a native plant garden. I started with a four by four foot section in the center of the front yard that there were just some old railroad ties in the backyard from some other landscaping work that a former owner had done and I just took four of those and made a planter box in the center of the front yard.

And that I planted with natives and, then each year I would grow that 4x4 to an 8x8 and then a 16x16 and kind of kept going slowly, partially because I knew that this was a different aesthetic.

And I didn't have the energy for a fight over these decisions, but I also knew I was right. And that I knew that if I worked slowly, eventually by the time the whole yard did look like I envisioned, the community would get on board and see what was going on, was a good thing.

And I do believe that it was partially about understanding that I had my family moving into this neighborhood was already quite a change for this neighborhood.

And I believed that we could make this a strong communal place, if I built connections along the way.

JENNIFER: Well, you talked about that invitation for conversation and the exchange of love and knowledge that comes about when a garden becomes the sort of mechanism for that dialogue and doing it slowly and then seeing it grow over time gives it that space to develop in a sort of organic way. I was really struck with the book because of course, I also garden.

My garden does not look like the New York Botanical Garden. It looks like my garden. But a big part of my gardening experience has been time with my kids. And it has shaped what I plant and how I approach it. And I know that that was also a factor for you. So how did your daughter influence the approach that you took to your garden?

CAMILLE: My daughter is another one of the reasons why things went more slowly, she actually wanted some lawn to play on. And that, that made a lot of sense. So I didn't immediately take over the entire lawn, because she wanted some places to run around and throw a ball and slip and slide with her friends and things like that.

I think when people think of xeriscaping a lot, they think of particularly out West where I live, they think of just like a cactus garden, right? It was like no hospitable space, but I wanted to make sure that there was softness and beauty and flowers we could pick and things that we could eat, in the space, et cetera.

So that this space felt welcoming for her as well as having all the benefits of being a low-water garden and a pollinator space.

JENNIFER: Yeah, that goes to just the need for accommodating the different ways that people experience a space. People are looking for different things out of a garden and having a diversity of kind of offerings or experiences within the garden can make that more possible. You write beautifully about the connections between the power of diversity in the natural world and the power of diversity in our human ecosystems and drawing that connection I think is so important. Were

there things that were revealed to you about that through the experience of gardening?

CAMILLE: Well, circling back to the question of children; I think as I was, writing the book, I began to really think about my understanding of environmental literature. And the canonical environmental literature that I was raised reading was so frequently white and male, and there's just no children in it.

The children are just gone. And the implication of that is to have some sort of real connection with the greater-than-human world you had to be the kind of person who could just walk out for miles and miles separately of any children, any job concerns…

JENNIFER: Safety…

CAMILLE: You know, no, no safety concerns, no elder care, no partner waiting for dinner at home, you know, like none of those things seemed to be happening. But I was really, I'm trying to rewild this lawn and I wanted to really interrogate and reimagine what my relationship with wildness could be. Could I create a connection with a wild space right in my suburban backyard that could then include my family and include my daughter?

And so that I could have that true, deep connection with the greater-than-human world. And also not. disown my child in the process of accessing that.

JENNIFER: Yeah, yeah, hello child, I'm going to take to the land for six months on a journey to discover my soul. It doesn't seem very practical, does it?

CAMILLE: I don't think most people can do that. And I think, an environmental imagination that says that in order to connect with the world, you have to do that, that cuts out 98 percent of the human population.

JENNIFER: Yeah, the environmental canon as you say, describes nature as a distant thing. A thing that you have to go and seek out. And in a way, that gets to the very root of the problem, which is this idea that humanity and nature are

separate and disconnected. Do you think that incorporating a broader array of voices into our understanding of the, as you say, greater than human world will help us to knit those things back together?

CAMILLE: I certainly hope so. I know that we need a broad variety of approaches and solutions because the problem is really huge. And one set of solutions can't be sufficient. The more voices, the more problem solvers, the more ways of thinking and being and doing that we can put towards this really crucial healing that we need to do, the better, right?

JENNIFER: Yeah, and I think it gives space for the, telling of the experience of urban nature. I was talking to someone recently that was talking about how wonderful it is to observe the plants that are sort of struggling to make their way through the cracks in the cement because they're so fierce.

They're fierce like desert plants, right? They're demonstrating that resilience and there's all kinds of beauty and lessons around us that we're not giving enough credit to, I think.

CAMILLE: Right, right. I made a point at some point in the book of saying whether a plot in the yard or a pot in the window, right, that the connection with, with green and growing things doesn't necessitate you having acreage to create a giant wild prairie. One of the parcels in my yard I call a prairie project. We're talking about maybe 700 square feet. I'm not talking about a sort of massive acreage of reclaimed prairie, but in that 700 square feet the density of the variety of living creatures that have almost, it seems like spontaneously appeared in that very, very small area.

And so, it's crucial to think about pocket gardens, about urban gardens, about rooftop gardens, about balcony gardens, about all these different ways that we can do this restorative sort of work to keep the planet and ourselves alive.

JENNIFER NARRATION: Camille makes an excellent point. Connecting with greenery and growing plants doesn’t require owning vast amounts of land. Start small, and amazing things can happen.

When we return, we'll talk with Camille about the inspiration behind her book Soil, and how it transformed her approach to gardening.

[BREAK]

JENNIFER NARRATION: This is Plant People from NYBG. I'm Jennifer Bernstein. I've been talking with author, professor, and poet Camille Dungy about her journey of creating her garden in Colorado and how it's affected her family and community.

JENNIFER: I'm curious at what point in your journey of making your garden, did you decide to write the book and, what caused that inspiration?

CAMILLE: I had written a proposal for the Guggenheim Foundation, as I did every other year for 20 years. I had written a proposal to write some poems about what grew up around me. So I must have already been thinking somewhat in this direction, but 2020 happened when I got this Guggenheim fellowship.

And so it was amazing. I was able to buy a year's worth of writing time and I didn't have to go teach. I could just write this book; and not many months into that glorious year, I was all of a sudden homeschooling a nine-year-old. And so all of a sudden I had to figure out how to write while also having my attention pulled in so many directions and intensely in a way that I really hadn't had since my daughter's infancy.

And one of the ways that I managed to do that is to write prose instead of poems. That there's something about just write 500 words a day and like doing that kind of steady work about what I was observing, and coming back later and figuring out what I was seeing, I can be writing in and take care of that need.

And so a book that I thought was going to be entirely a book of poems turned into primarily this narrative – with some poems scattered throughout – and a very different set of concerns than I thought I would have going into the project. So, 2020.

JENNIFER: Yeah, yeah, it changed a lot. You know, it's interesting that whole period of time which was filled with so much suffering for so many people, also I think caused people to observe their immediate surrounds in a whole different way because you were just immersed in this like small, kind of world for that period of time.

How do you think that the book challenges readers to think differently about land ownership and cultivation?

CAMILLE: Hmm. I live in the American West and so I have maybe a different awareness, or attention to, maybe even knowledge of, the complexities of land in North America, right? The ways that in the American West we do still have access to a great deal of wide open space.

And at the same time, I think we're really aware of the illusions of that kind of American myth of wide open, uncharted territory because the indigenous population is still very much here, and very present. And so there can't be the fantasy that no one was here. There also can't be the fantasy of all that unopened land being untampered with.

Because, I see the oil derricks. I see the ways that so much of the drive to populate the American West had to do with resource extraction, silver, gold, molybdenum.

And so being from this region, I've never had a simple view of what it means to steward and tend and build a relationship with whatever land or space I happen to be living in and on. And I wanted to write that set of excitement and glory and wonder into the book, but also the reality of the complication of the history of North American habitation, particularly since European settlement.

JENNIFER: In the East Coast, particularly in like places like New York City, I think people think of nature as something from the past. And so we have a lot of conversation about how to sort of dismantle that idea. Because, of course, the nature still exists.

Why does it flood in certain places? Because there are rivers underneath our streets. In the American West, the nature is still very present and you still have that experience of being sort of awed by its presence very frequently. But you do have to confront the fact that even at that scale our impact is so evident.

CAMILLE: For me, it circles right back to why native plant gardening is so useful and rewarding, because I then am able to return plants, and also once I've returned the flora, some portion of the fauna returns as well. This was a kind of prairie, and so how can I have that – a version of that restoration – on a much smaller scale?

But I think, starting small is how anything starts and, when we first started this reclamation work in our yard with my little four by four plot, I was the only one in the neighborhood who was doing it. And now there are maybe three houses that aren't, right? So it's this kind of gradual shift that can become a kind of much, much larger sort of cultural change.

JENNIFER: Did your experience of gardening change over the course of writing Soil? Did you develop a different relationship to it? Did you grow to like it more, less?

CAMILLE: My appreciation did not change, my knowledge grew. And as knowledge grows, some things get a lot easier. But then other things get harder because then you actually know what you're supposed to do.

Once you learn, then there's new tasks. So I think I learned, in terms of things being easier, for instance, in those early years, I had no trouble buying those little native wild seed packets and just spreading those and hoping for the best, but I learned eventually that those aren't always made for your exact region and so then, I became more selective about what I was planting and, where I was sourcing the seeds.

And so, a little harder work, differently rewarding, right?

JENNIFER: Yeah. What have you heard from readers about maybe advice that they've given you about gardening or responses that they've had to the book?

CAMILLE: I have been so touched by the scope of people, the kinds of people, who have had connections with this book. At one point I gave a reading at a 55-plus community where there were a number of 70-plus-year-old white men who would have struck me as relatively conservative kinds of people, who listening to my story on the intersection of African American history and also my gardening story, had tears in their eyes.

Some actually rolling down their cheeks, and I wasn't entirely sure whether this response was in relationship to the difficulty of some of this American history or the fact that they miss their own gardens from having moved into this, or maybe both, right? And that really moved me that there was something that I had done to write about my own experience, which from the surface would seem very, very different from their experience.

There were ways of such deep connection that more than one man was visibly crying.

JENNIFER: That's a beautiful story and it's a vivid example of why having a more diverse array of voices in the environmental conversation is so important because it's a way of making it clear that these values and connection and, dependence on a thriving world affects all of us.

So, what advice do you have for people who are looking to start their own gardens with diversity, maybe native plant gardening in mind?

CAMILLE: Well, unless you have a whole team of very knowledgeable people with a significant amount of time, start small. Don't try and remake your entire yard all at once. Start with smaller units and tie those together. One advantage of this is that gardens take a while to grow into their maturity. Gardens really require a great deal of patience.

So one of the key advantages to starting small is that you can cycle that growth and you can have this sort of excitement and thrill of the new plot and also the

appreciation of the more mature sections and experience that in a kind of rotation of things in their fullness.

Another piece of advice that I would give is to talk to people. Unlike that sort of version of just walking up the mountain by yourself, I feel like gardening can very much be a collective kind of process.

Even if you're gardening in your own garden by yourself, it can be a process where you're talking to other people about what does well in your kind of soil, with your particular light, in your climate. And learning from others, I think, can make an individual experience more successful.

JENNIFER: Absolutely. How do you think individuals can advocate for more inclusive green spaces in their neighborhoods?

CAMILLE: I think part of it is just beginning to demand it, beginning to shift expectations, changing neighborhood codes about how high can the grass grow, how quickly do you have to remove quote-unquote, dead vegetation, right? I say quote-unquote, because even if those sunflowers that I'm describing are brown and gone, they're supporting so much other life in that little ecosystem that keeping them there until the soil warms up again in the spring is vastly more beneficial than having just that blank space with a bunch of mulch on top of it.

What looks aesthetically unpleasing until the eye shifts and begins to be able to see that. So I think just asking for patience, asking for a broader aesthetic vision, for people around you can help to promote that shift.

JENNIFER: Yeah, talking to people, sharing your story, which is so much of what you've done so beautifully. What lessons from your experience do you hope to pass on to future generations? It's a big question.

CAMILLE: That is a huge question. I think that a lot of people assume that children don't like to garden. And I wonder about that. I wonder, what are we asking them to do in the garden? If all we're asking them to do is pull weeds, and really the drudgery parts of it, then, most people aren't gonna enjoy that.

But if we can find activities and ways of engaging with these spaces that do bring varying kinds of pleasure to different people, that feels like the kind of lesson and way of living that would benefit many people well into the future.

JENNIFER: That's beautiful. So this podcast is called Plant People, so I often ask this question, what makes you a plant person?

CAMILLE: I really thrive when there are green growing things around me. I've always had houseplants. Now I have the blessing of space where I can have a yard that I can turn into a garden. And so I think what makes me a plant person is that when asked what to do with 20 minutes of quote-unquote free time, I am as likely to say, I'll just go dig around that pot, and play with that plant as I am to turn on the television or just sit on the couch or something. So it's just, where my attention and priorities have really always gone.

JENNIFER: Wonderful. Well, thank you so much for taking the time and talking today. I hope everyone reads your beautiful book.

CAMILLE: Thank you so much for chatting with me.

JENNIFER NARRATION: Imagine looking at that small corner of your backyard or the empty windowsill in your living room and adding something green... nothing fancy, nothing expensive, just a small touch of nature. Each day, you nurture it with gentle, consistent care and before you know it, you're ready to add even more greenery. After all, the biggest journeys in life always begin with a single step and if those steps lead to more nature in your life, then why not?

Our next episode features Todd Forrest, the Arthur Ross Vice President for Horticulture and Living Collections at NYBG. Todd will be discussing the history of the Bronx River, the plants that rely on it and their role within the broader Bronx ecosystem.

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From PRX, Plant People is produced by Jessica Miller, Courtney Fleurantin, Genevieve Sponsler, Adriana Rosas Rivera, and Pedro Rafael Rosado. The executive producer of PRX Productions is Jocelyn Gonzales.

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