



Steven Foster in Petra, Jordan, in 2013.
Photo ©2022 Steven Foster

TRIBUTE TO STEVEN FOSTER

1957–2022

By Hannah Bauman

**BOTANIST, AUTHOR, PHOTOGRAPHER,
AND HERBAL COMMUNITY ICON STEVEN
FOSTER DIED AT HIS HOME IN EUREKA
SPRINGS, ARKANSAS, ON JANUARY 15, 2022,
AT AGE 64.**

Foster, who was self-taught, had more than 47 years of experience in the herbal field. He served as a consultant for numerous herbal organizations and companies, authored best-selling books with some of the most noted luminaries in the field, and captured the beauty and diversity of medicinal plants in more than 150,000 photographs. As an international expert on medicinal and aromatic plants, his work took him around the world, and he gained valuable insights into botanical value networks, conservation, and sustainability. He was involved with proj-

Ayahuasca vine *Banisteriopsis caapi*
Photo ©2022 Steven Foster



ects in Argentina, Armenia, Belize, China, Costa Rica, Egypt, England, Germany, Guatemala, Japan, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Peru, the Republic of Georgia, Switzerland, Trinidad and Tobago, Vietnam, and elsewhere.

Foster's contributions to the nonprofit American Botanical Council (ABC) were invaluable and incalculable. He served on ABC's Board of Trustees from 1999 until his death, and, for 10 years, was the president of the board. Foster's photography filled nearly every issue of *HerbalGram* since issue 24 in 1991. He also served as a contributing editor of *HerbalGram* and wrote numerous seminal articles, which will likely be cited for many years to come.

ABC Founder and Executive Director Mark Blumenthal said: "Steven was an essential part of the nonprofit research and educational mission and content of ABC. His sudden passing leaves a huge hole in our hearts and our organization."

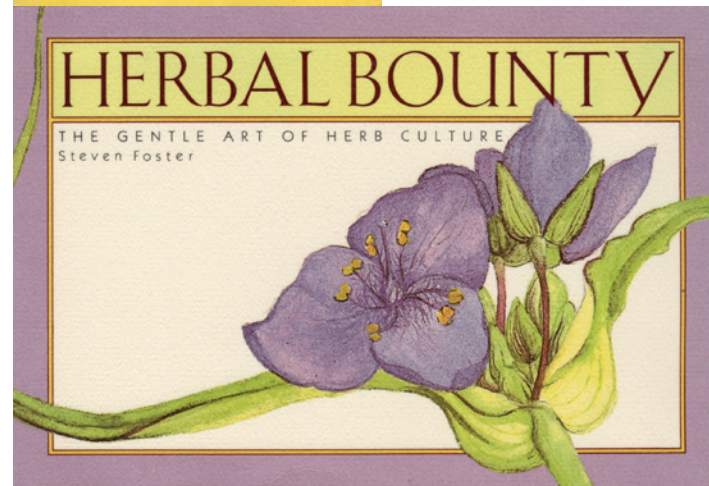
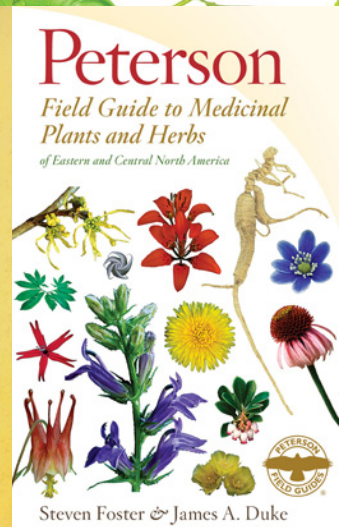
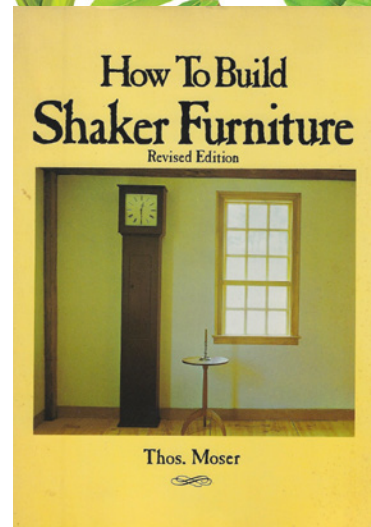
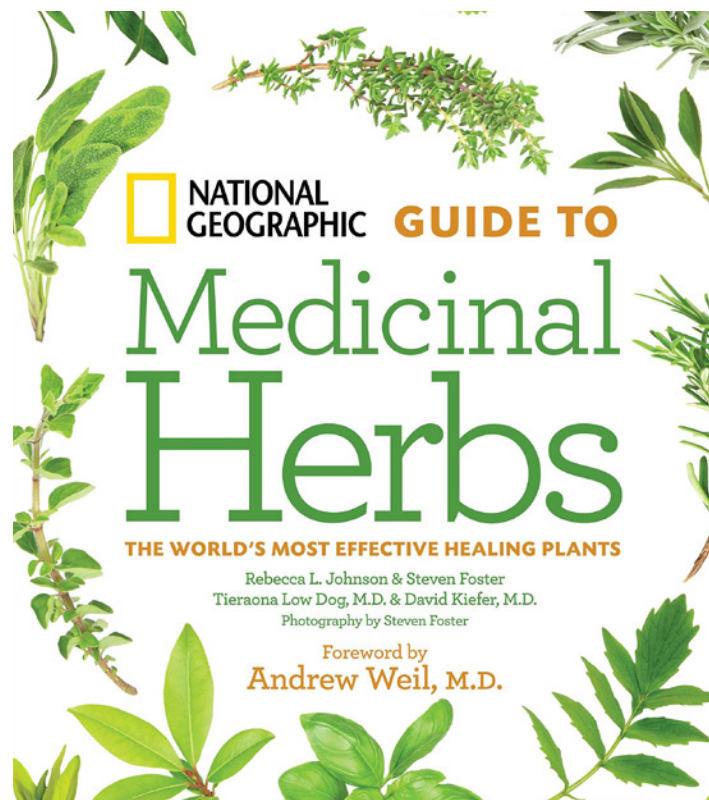
A Maine native, Foster was born on February 27, 1957. At age 17, he began working for the Sabbathday Lake Shaker Community in New Gloucester, Maine. The Shakers, which is the common name for the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, originally called the "Shaking Quakers," are a Christian sect founded in England in 1747, when they split from the mainstream Quakers. The Sabbathday Lake community was founded in 1783 and is the only active Shaker community in the world, according to its website. The community runs an herb store that was founded in 1799, the oldest in the United States. There, Foster got his first experience in the herb industry. He managed the community's three acres of herb gardens and oversaw the production of more than 50 herbal preparations.

"Everything I do now — writing, lectures, consulting and photography — began during that time from age 17–21," Foster wrote on his website.¹ In addition to herb farming and production, he also learned the art of photography by shadowing photographers who visited the community. His first published photos appeared in Thomas Moser's *How to Build Shaker Furniture* (Crescent Publishing, 1977). The knowledge he gained at Sabbathday Lake was the foundation of his professional career as a photographer and botanist.

Rosemary Gladstar, the "godmother of American herbalism," worked extensively with Foster through her herbal studies school and on several organizations' boards. "I first met Steven when he was in his early 20s and already somewhat of a legend," she wrote (email, January 24, 2022). "Steven was among the first teachers I invited to the very first session of the California School of Herbal Studies around 1976. Even then, he was quite obviously the smartest person in the room, a brilliant plant person with a remarkable, almost photographic memory."

Foster moved to Arkansas in 1979. He helped shape the growing but nascent bioregionalism movement in the Ozarks, which promoted a future based on local goods that were produced in a sustainable manner. This community that he joined would later become the Ozark Area Community Congress, a forum for the discussion, promotion, and celebration of the region's distinct environment. From there, Foster embarked on deeper research into herbalism, especially echinacea (*Echinacea* spp., Asteraceae). This research brought national attention to him and the potential benefits of this native American botanical, which has been one of the best-selling herbal supplement ingredients in the United

A selection of books written or featuring photographs by Foster.



States market for years. Early on, Foster earned the nickname “Mr. Echinacea” because of his enthusiasm for and promotion of echinacea.

Echinacea Exalted!: The Botany, Culture, History, and Medicinal Uses of the Purple Coneflowers (Ozark Beneficial Plant Project), the first of 21 books that he authored or co-authored, was illustrated by Judith Ann Griffith and published in 1984, with a second edition in 1985. Also in 1984, his book *Herbal Bounty: The Gentle Art of Herb Culture* (Gibbs Smith) was published, which featured botanical illustrations by D.D. Dowden, a preface by plant taxonomist and Harvard University professor Shiu-Ying Hu, PhD, and foreword by preeminent ethnobotanist and Harvard professor Richard Evans Schultes, PhD. *Echinacea Exalted!* was republished as *Echinacea: Nature’s Immune Enhancer* (Healing Arts Press) in 1991.

Foster also authored more than 800 articles for trade, popular, and scientific periodicals. He first began writing for *HerbalGram* when Blumenthal published it as a newsletter under the auspices of the American Herbal Products Association (AHPA) and the Herb Research Foundation from 1983 to 1988. When ABC was founded in 1988, Foster remained heavily involved with *HerbalGram*. His first major article after ABC was established was a literature review on hawthorn (*Crataegus* spp., Rosaceae), co-authored with herb expert Christopher Hobbs, PhD, in issue 22. After more than 100 articles, including book reviews and memorial tributes, his final article was published in issue 132. It was a 32-page cover article on the history, trade, and biology of saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*, Arecaceae): “The Historical Interplay of Plant Biology, Trade, and Human Interactions with Saw Palmetto,” which was illustrated with his own photographs.²

Foster’s other notable works include *Culpeper’s Complete Herbal: Illustrated and Annotated Edition* (Sterling Publishing, 2019), which includes his commentary on 17th-century English botanist, herbalist, and physician Nicholas Culpeper’s guide to herbal remedies; three editions of *Peterson Field Guide to Medicinal Plants and Herbs of Eastern and Central North America*, which he co-authored with James A. Duke, PhD, and the most recent of which was published in 2014; *National Geographic Guide to Medicinal Herbs: The World’s Most Effective Healing Plants* (National Geographic, 2012), co-authored with Rebecca L. Johnson, Tieraona Low Dog, MD, and David Kiefer, MD; *Tyler’s Honest Herbal: A Sensible Guide to the Use of Herbs and Related Remedies*, 4th edition (Routledge, 1999), co-authored with Varro E. Tyler, PhD; and *Herbal Emissaries: Bringing Chinese Herbs to the West* (Healing Arts Press, 1992), co-authored with Yue Chongxi, PhD.



Foster photographing plants at Jim and Peggy Duke’s garden in Fulton, Maryland. Photo ©2022 ABC

Foster also edited the first edition of AHPA’s *Herbs of Commerce* (1992), which the US Food and Drug Administration subsequently adopted as an official reference for nomenclature of herbs in the US herbal supplement industry. His title *Desk Reference to Nature’s Medicine* (National Geographic, 2006), co-authored with Rebecca L. Johnson, was awarded the New York Public Library’s “Best of Reference” award in 2007.

Foster’s world travels with his camera gave him an extensive library of photographs, which, at the time of this memorial, can be found on his website (www.stevenfoster.com). His vast collection includes images of hundreds of different plant species and also harvesting, processing, and the people who work with the plants. He described his artistic vision thus: “In my botanical photography, color, form and design offer themselves to the observant eye at the right time of day, in shade, in rain, or with clouds hiding harsh sunlight. These are the situations I strive to work in, which give me the best color saturation, the richest light, and the greatest challenge in exposure length, depth-of-field, and waiting for

Foster’s photography filled nearly every issue of *HerbalGram* since issue 24 in 1991.

Right: *HerbalGram* covers featuring Foster’s photography. Photos ©2022 Steven Foster

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Foster's photograph of Rainer Bussmann and a praying mantis at Finca Luna Nueva in Costa Rica. According to Foster, this is his favorite photo. Photo ©2022 Steven Foster



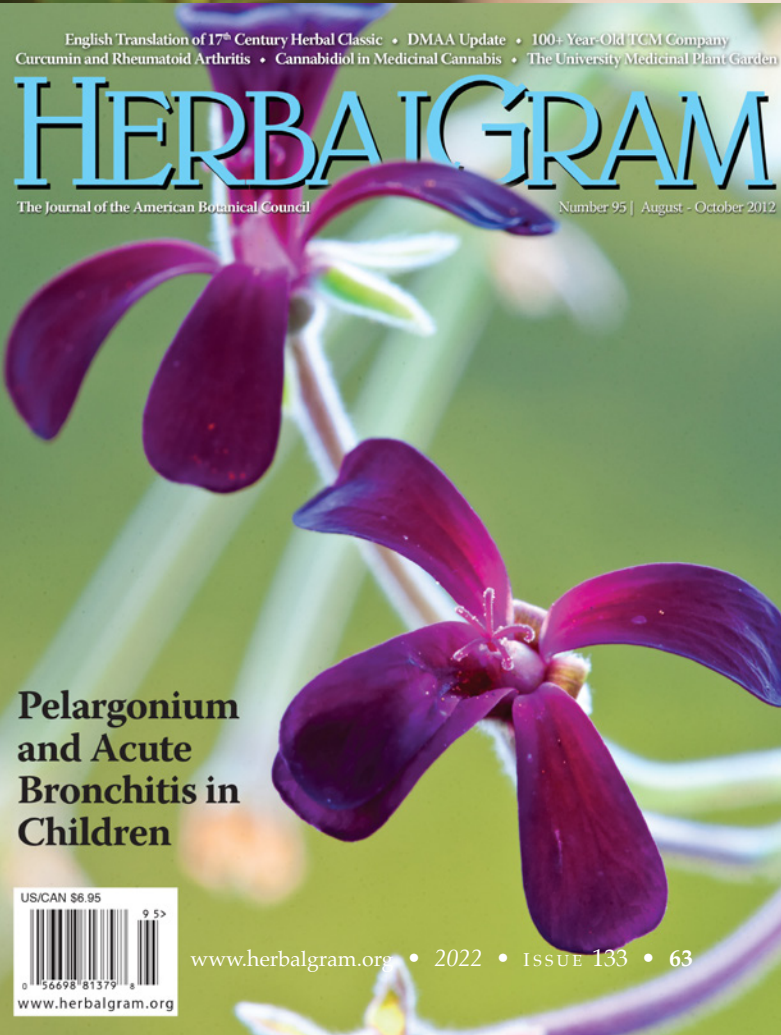
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that still moment when a breath of air does not move the subject and offers up the detail values that I seek.”³

Foster’s photography appeared on the cover of 59 issues of *HerbalGram*. His photographs also have been published in numerous other publications. These include *AHPA Report*, *Chemical & Engineering News*, *Consumer Reports*, *Dallas Medical Journal*, *Martha Stewart Living*, *Nutraceuticals World*, *The New York Times*, and *World Health: The Magazine of the World Health Organization*, among others.

His photographs also appeared in corporate projects such as catalogs, displays, product information sheets, and labels. Some of his clients included the Aveda Corporation, Bio-Botanica Inc., Gaia Herbs, Nature’s Best, and Traditional Medicinals. From 1999 to 2010, the entire Tom’s of Maine product line featured his photography. In 2008, AHPA awarded Foster its Herbal Insight award for “furthering the knowledge and understanding of medicinal and aromatic plants through his excellent work as a photographer, author and consultant. Mr. Foster’s ability to capture the elegance and intimacy of the ‘human-plant relationship’ continues to astound.”⁴

In an AHPA press release, Michael McGuffin, AHPA president, wrote: “Steven was a giant in the herbal

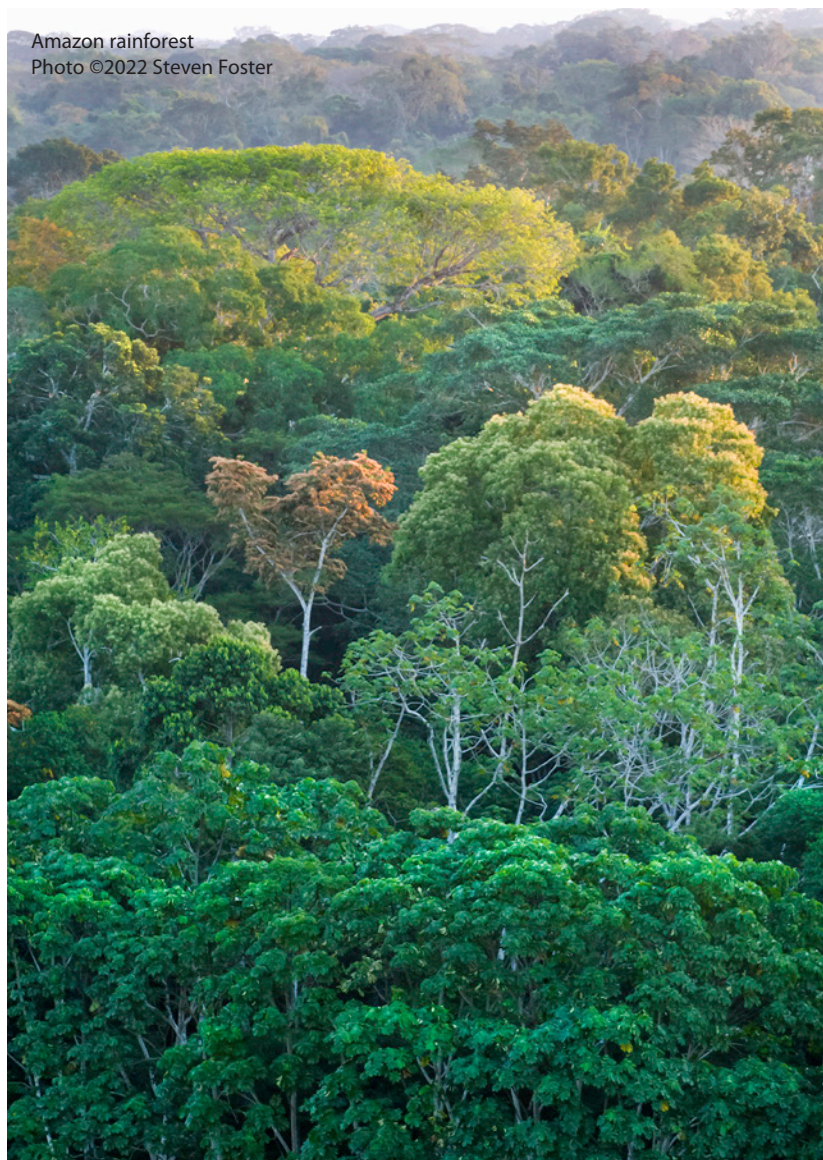
community for almost half a century. To say he will be missed is both true and a gross understatement — he is irreplaceable.”⁵

ABC Art Director Matthew Magruder worked with Foster for more than 15 years, collaborating with him on the images in *HerbalGram*. “Steven Foster has been a fundamentally important part of both the magazine and the organization,” Magruder wrote (email, January 17, 2022). “His wisdom and contributions spread throughout ABC’s breadth. His astoundingly masterful plant photography has graced at least 10 pages of every single issue I’ve put together and sometimes even more. In the more than 50 issues I’ve worked on, he’s written seminal articles on the history of botanical adulteration and saw palmetto trade, lady’s slipper orchid conservation, ginseng adulteration, and medicinal trees. Those are just the ones I can recall offhand, and there were countless others prior to my tenure at ABC and *HerbalGram*.”

“He contributed articles to the magazine, performed editorial and technical reviewing, and, most importantly, fact-checked me on the taxonomic accuracy of photos from other sources,” Magruder added. “His generosity knew no bounds, and my experience of him was just a sliver of what he contributed to this world, the herbal



Medicinal plant garden at Machu Picchu, Peru
Photo ©2022 Steven Foster



Amazon rainforest
Photo ©2022 Steven Foster



Valerian *Valeriana officinalis*
Photo ©2022 Steven Foster

“Steven just brought a sense of lightness to the [UpS] board, and, with his wonderful wit, he kept us all laughing through the work of running an organization. I’m sure he did that with all the myriad boards he sat on and organizations he was part of.” —*Rosemary Gladstar*

community, and his family. I feel honored to have known him for more than 15 years and even more so for being able to call him a friend.”

Loren Israelsen, president of the United Natural Products Alliance, a supplement industry trade association, praised Foster. “Steven was a superb photographer,” Israelsen wrote (email, January 19, 2022). “Like many, I was taken by the beauty of his botanical images, so I bought the same camera as Steven and thought I would

try to give it a go. Well, realization is the ego’s greatest disappointment. A camera does not make a photographer. It’s a lot harder than it looks.”

Steve Mister, president and CEO of the Council for Responsible Nutrition, another trade association in the dietary supplement industry, similarly praised Foster’s artistry. “A picture is worth a thousand words, and Steven Foster gave us both,” he wrote (email, January 19, 2022). “His exquisite photographs communicated the fragility and vibrancy of the botanical world, reminding us of the power and potential of plants all around us. The botanical community was blessed with his commitment and his contributions. He had a prolific life and [has] an indelible legacy.”

Throughout his career, Foster promoted conservation and sustainability in the herbal market. In 1988, shortly after ABC’s founding, he and Blumenthal advocated for market protection for lady’s slipper orchids (*Cypripedium* spp., Orchidaceae). The roots of these beautiful but delicate North American flowers were being traded as a mild nervine and sedative, but the plants’ overharvesting, slow regeneration, and resistance to cultivation meant that they were close to being wiped out in the wild. Foster introduced a resolution that AHPA later adopted. The resolution requested that AHPA’s members and other businesses and individuals in the horticultural and herb trade refrain from trade in wild-harvested lady’s slippers. As a result, trade in lady’s slipper root decreased, and wild populations started to increase. The full story was described in his cover article, “Lady’s Slipper: Once a Commercial Conundrum, Now a Conservation Success Story,” in *HerbalGram* issue 131.⁶ As with his saw palmetto article, Foster’s photography accompanied the article and served as the cover image.

Foster served on the Board of Directors of the United Plant Savers (UpS), a nonprofit plant conservation organization, from 2000 to 2003. “They were productive years, and we worked hard, but they were also some of the most fun,” wrote Gladstar, founding president of the UpS board. “Steven just brought a sense of lightness to the board, and, with his wonderful wit, he kept us all laughing through the work of running an organization. I’m sure he did that with all the myriad boards he sat on and organizations he was part of.”

He also collaborated with ABC’s Sustainable Herbs Program (SHP). “Steven was instrumental in the Sustainable Herbs Program, from long before it was part of ABC,” SHP Director Ann Armbrrecht wrote (email, January 28, 2022). “I attended a workshop on sustainable herbalism at a

Steven Foster hiking near Arenal Volcano in Costa Rica.
Photo ©2022 Matt Magruder



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Green Nations Gathering in the early 2000s. He was not just talking about the work that United Plant Savers was doing, but beyond that, he talked about the impact the botanical industry was having on medicinal plants, cultivated and wild. This workshop inspired my journey to follow herbs to their source, which eventually led to the Sustainable Herbs Program, where, 18 years later, I found myself working closely with Steven.

“Since SHP became part of ABC [in 2018], Steven was an incredible ally, providing big-picture advice and editorial input,” Armbrecht added. “He shared his photos and resources. He was an active participant in the SHP Advisory Group and attended every webinar I hosted. Steven would send me firm but kind messages when I was too impatient about missed deadlines. From the beginning, Steven told me that the Sustainable Herbs Program was important for the way it touches on the heart of working with plants, and he reminded me to keep that at the center.”

Foster received multiple awards throughout his career, including the Texas Herb Growers and Marketers Association’s Industry Achievement Award (1998), the Independent Book Awards’ National Medalist in Health and Medicine, the Independent Book Publishers Association’s Benjamin Franklin Award Silver Medal – Health in 1999 for his book *101 Medicinal Herbs* (Interweave Press, 1998), and the International Herb Association’s Otto Richter Memorial Award (2002). He also was in demand as a speaker and gave lectures in boardrooms, at conventions, and at herbal gatherings. In 2010, he was the Alan Lesniewicz Memorial Lecturer at the Dorothy Bradley Atkins Medicinal Plant Garden at the University of Illinois at Chicago.



Steven Foster and Jim Duke
Photo ©2022 Steven Foster

Blumenthal, one of Foster’s close friends and collaborators, wrote:

I have known Steven since about 1978, when he was another long-haired, fully bearded young kid studying herbs. But he was different. His knowledge and passion were remarkable, even back then.

*My favorite Steven Foster story deals with one of the Boston Tea Party ships in Boston Harbor. This is a replica of one of the famous ships from which the rebellious American colonists threw tea (*Camellia sinensis*, Theaceae) into the harbor in protest in 1773.*

*Many herb industry people, including members of the Herb Trade Association, were at the annual convention of the National Nutritional Foods Association (now known as the Natural Products Association) in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1979 or 1980. In 1976, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) tried to ban the sale of sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*, Lauraceae) root bark as a tea ingredient because oil of sassafras distilled from the root bark contained safrole, which the FDA considered a liver toxin and carcinogen. As a result, sassafras oil could no longer be used as a flavoring agent for root beer, and the soft drink industry changed to other flavorings to approximate the authentic ‘old fashioned’ root beer flavor. The herb industry would not stand for it! We used sassafras as an example of FDA mis-regulation based on faulty science.*

To make a point, we decided it would be cool to throw sassafras tea over the sides of one of the Boston Tea Party ships like the colonists did with tea more than 200 years before. But where to get a large quantity of sassafras? Steven Foster to the rescue! He drove from Boston back up to his home in Maine and returned the next day with a large burlap bag of sassafras root bark that he had previously collected. Without Steven, there would have been no “guerrilla theater” protest about sassafras in Boston.



Passionflower *Passiflora incarnata*
Photo ©2022 Steven Foster



Steven Foster

“Despite occasional recognition from various organizations, Steven was a much larger and more important figure in the American herb community than he was sometimes given credit for,” added Blumenthal. “It’s like the old song: ‘You don’t miss your water ’til your well runs dry.’ This is evidenced by comments I have received from friends and colleagues in the herb and medicinal plant community in which they lamented losing his valuable insight and perspective, or not having supported him more by licensing his beautiful photos.”

Though Foster often described himself as a “curmudgeon,” his friends remember him as kind, caring, and empathetic. The tributes collected by ABC make more than one reference to his “impish grin,” and many recall his wry sense of humor and deep love for his family.⁷ His intellect impressed people from many walks of life, and he had friends among Appalachian herbalists and industry CEOs.

Ambrecht commented on Foster’s legacy: “Steven bridged worlds that too often stay separate. He dedicated his life to plants, and he followed his curiosity where it led him. He dug deep with a rigor that I relied on. He brought the same attention to the details of history or plant knowledge as he did to his photographs. That attention helped me see each more deeply.”

Gladstar concluded: “There’s definitely an enormous gap in our circle, a place no one else can fill. Steven touched so many lives with his brilliance and kindness and left a legacy that will

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impact generations of plant lovers with his books, articles, stunning photographs (no one was a better plant photographer than Steven), workshops, and lectures. He was a stellar individual, and now is truly of the stars, and of stardust.”

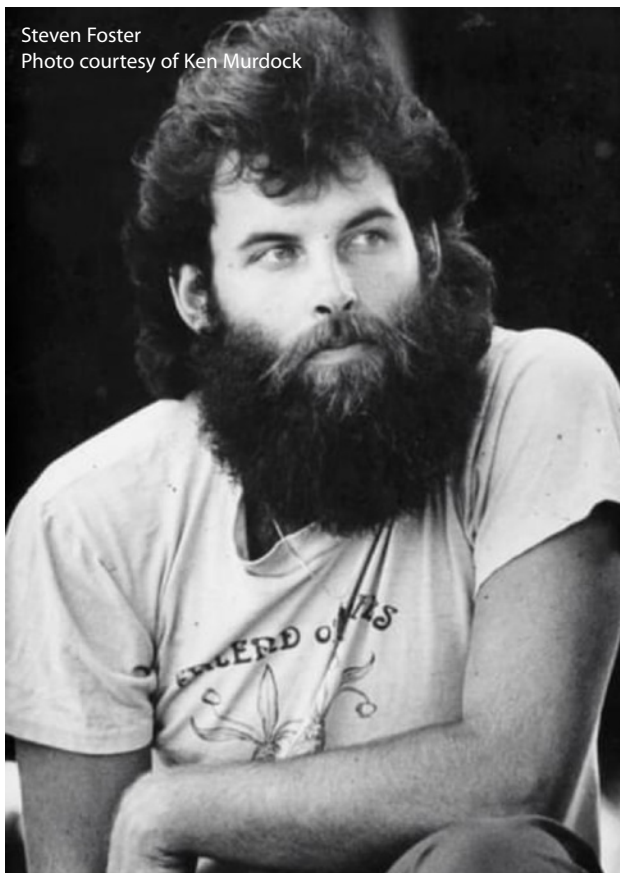
Steven Foster is survived by his wife Donna; children and stepchildren Abbey, Ashley, Allison, Colin, Farrar, and Andy; eight grandchildren; and siblings Stan, Wendy, Don, and Suzanne. HG

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Steven Foster
Photo courtesy of Ken Murdock

“There’s definitely an enormous gap in our circle, a place no one else can fill. Steven touched so many lives with his brilliance and kindness and left a legacy that will impact generations of plant lovers with his books, articles, stunning photographs, workshops, and lectures. He was a stellar individual, and now is truly of the stars, and of stardust.”

—Rosemary Gladstar

Saffron *Crocus sativus*
Photo ©2022 Steven Foster

View more tributes to Steven here:
<http://herbalgram.org/news/tributes/steven-foster/>