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## 2023 PERSON OF THE YEAR



# Jim Vasil

Tom Castronovo/Photo

**By Tom Castronovo**  
Executive Editor/Publisher  
*Gardener News*

*Gardener News* proudly bestows our 2023 “Person of the Year” to Jim Vasil, for his gracious dedication to covering the agricultural, farming, gardening, landscaping, nursery, and outdoor living communities in the

Garden State on his PIX11 News segments.

Every single human being on this planet is dependent on agriculture. Basically, the above industries touch the lives of all Americans – from the farm field to the kitchen table, from the plants we grow to the clothes we wear, and from the air we breathe to the energy that powers our country. Agriculture also makes our houses

and properties a little greener, too.

Vasil is a two-time Emmy Award winner and six-time nominee who joined PIX11 in October 2022 as a reporter/multi-media journalist.

PIX11 provides national and local news, with a focus on New York City, northern New Jersey, Long Island, Westchester County, and northern New York suburbs. Vasil’s news segments can be seen most weekday

afternoons and early evenings.

Vasil comes from a family filled with first responders, veterans, nurses, and educators, and enjoys having the chance to tell the stories of everyday heroes, such as the ones below.

Following are some of the news segments that Vasil has covered in New Jersey during his first year with PIX11. There are also a few accolades from some of the (Cont. on Page 15)



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With global climate change creating extreme weather events, such as extreme summer temperatures, periods of drought, warmer than normal winters, periods of significant precipitation inundation, etc., we need to consider plants and plantings that will be more tolerable of these extremes.

Certain types of plants, or even specific species, are already showing the effects of the changing climate. For example, the true cedars, *Cedrus*, which are native to higher elevation mountainous regions of the world seem to be suffering from hotter and longer summers. The cedar-of-Lebanon, *Cedrus libani*, is native to the mountains around Lebanon and the Atlas cedar, *Cedrus atlantica*, occurs in the Atlas mountains in northern Africa. Both of these regions of the world are dry with low humidity climates. *Cedrus atlantica* and *Cedrus libanii* for decades where stately conifers that thrived in this region with beautiful specimens at both the Tyler Arboretum and Scott Arboretum, however, with changing climates both species are suffering.

Scientists have predicted that certain species like the native white oak, *Quercus alba*, will succumb to the changing weather over time and this species will retreat to the north where the summers are cooler.

The Pennsylvania



## Pennsylvania Horticultural Society

By Andrew Bunting  
Vice President of Horticulture

### Plantings to Mitigate Global Climate Change

Department of Conservation and Natural Resources has published a resource, *Selecting Trees for Pennsylvania's Climate Change*. This document focuses on native trees that will be tolerant of hotter and more humid summers, drought conditions, and wet soils due to episodes of large rainfall events.

The Kendall Crosslands Arboretum at Kendall Crossland Communities in Kennett Square, PA has developed impressive curatorial tools for the campus arboretum to start to proactively plant to mitigate climate change. They have developed a list of trees exhibiting low to medium vulnerability to climate change in the Philadelphia area, including those existing plants in their collection. To guide future plantings, they have created a long list of "target species" for climate change. The document states "climate change resilient trees for PA should be southern tree species that tolerate/prefer wetter soils and warmer temperatures."

This list includes many "southern" species, including native species that currently exist in North Carolina, South Carolina, northern Florida, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. These plants, in theory, will have genetics that make them better adapted to hotter, dryer and longer summers. They have included Southern natives, such as mountain pepperbush, *Clethra acuminata*; *Cornus florida* subsp. *urbiana* which is a selection of the flowering dogwood from Texas; and feverfew, *Pinckneya bracteata*, which is native to Georgia.

Other plants from more southern latitudes than Philadelphia should prove to have heat and humidity tolerance. This might include plants from central or southern China, southern Japan, Taiwan, and possibly even northern Vietnam. On their list is *Emmenopterys henryi* which has large tropical looking leaves and an amazing profusion of white bracts in the summer. *Cornus wilsoniana* is a Chinese dogwood which

currently thrives in Raleigh, North Carolina. This dogwood species develops alabaster white bark over time. *Pinus ayacahuite* is a relative of white pine, *Pinus strobus* which is native to Mexico. It exhibits many of the attributes of the ubiquitous white pine, but over time should be more tolerant of hot summers and relatively warmer winters. *Quercus myrsinifolia* is the Chinese evergreen oak. 20 years ago, this evergreen tree was considered marginally hardy in the Delaware Valley and New Jersey. Today, it is a small tree that reaches 30 feet tall at maturity and provides considerable winter interest with its evergreen leaves.

Cultivar selection can also play a role in mitigating against climate change. For years, *Betula nigra* Heritage® was the most popular cultivar of river birch. Heritage® was made from a population of river birches with climatic conditions similar to Philadelphia. In more recent years, Dura Heat® has been promoted because it was selected from a more southern

native population which has heat tolerance embedded in its genetic make-up.

This approach to managing climate change in the garden and landscape will undoubtedly evolve over time as new information and research results are made available. The home gardener can play a role by observing which plants seem to be struggling and those that are thriving under these changing conditions.

**Editor's Note:** Andrew Bunting is Vice President of Horticulture for the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. He is one of the most recognized horticulturists in the Philadelphia, Pa., region and a highly regarded colleague in the world of professional horticulture. Bunting has amassed a plethora of awards, including the American Public Gardens Association Professional Citation, Chanticleer Scholarship in Professional Development, Delaware Center for Horticulture's Marion Marsh Award, and the Certificate of Merit from the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. In addition, Bunting has lectured extensively throughout North America and Europe, and participated in plant expeditions throughout Asia and Africa. Learn more at <https://phsonline.org/team/andrew-bunting>

# 2023 Person of the Year

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farmers, greenhouse growers and landscape professionals that he interviewed.

#### One million sunflowers used in New Jersey farm maze

<https://pix11.com/news/local-news/new-jersey/millions-of-sunflowers-used-in-new-jersey-farm-maze/amp/>

"I would like to congratulate Jim Vasil on being selected the 2023 Gardener News Person of the Year. As the 2021 recipient, I am honored to be in such good company," said Raj Sinha, owner of the Sussex County Sunflower Maze at Liberty Farm. "I first met Jim when he traveled out to Sandyston, to cover our Sunflower Maze this past summer. We spent the morning touring the farm and I was immediately impressed by his depth of knowledge and appreciation for New Jersey Agriculture. Jim is a true asset to our tri-state area, the local farmers whose stories he covers, and his dedicated following of viewers. Congratulations, Jim!"

#### Farming through poor NJ air quality

<https://pix11.com/news/local-news/new-jersey/farming-through-poor-nj-air-quality/amp/>

**New Jersey town's ban on gas-powered leaf blowers prompts lawsuit from landscaping companies**

<https://pix11.com/news/local-news/new-jersey/new-jersey-towns-ban-on-gas-powered-leaf-blowers-prompts-lawsuit-from-landscaping-companies/amp/>

#### Landscaping trade show takes over Meadowlands Expo Center

<https://pix11.com/news/local-news/new-jersey/landscaping-trade-show-takes-over-meadowlands-expo-center/amp/>

"It was truly fantastic having Jim Vasil join us at the Landscape New Jersey Trade Show," said Richard Goldstein, president of the New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association. "His presence brought to light the professionalism of the landscape and outdoor living industry. Bringing valuable insights, Jim was exceptionally professional and a pleasure to collaborate with throughout."

#### How to spot spotted lanternflies before they hatch

<https://pix11.com/news/local-news/new-jersey/how-to-spot-spotted-lanternflies-before-they-hatch/amp/>

**Rent The Chicken service brings hens, fresh eggs to your own backyard**

<https://pix11.com/news/local-news/new-jersey/rent-the-chicken-service-brings-hens-fresh-eggs-to-your-own-backyard/amp/>

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Over the years there have been discussions suggesting that you should reduce your lawn size in favor of native grasses, stones, pollinator gardens, etc. The American lawn is still very popular and enjoyed for its visual beauty, picnics, dog ball toss, and the occasional football or soccer match with the neighborhood kids.

There have been numerous strides made by the “Lawn Industry” in the past 50 years. Grass seed breeding for improved performance was first pioneered by Dr. C. Reed Funk from Rutgers University in the 1960’s. Dr. Funk created new varieties of Kentucky Bluegrass, Perennial Ryegrass and Tall Fescue. Dr. Funk introduced hundreds of varieties in his career, making him a world leader in turf grass science. The turf grasses offered today show improved disease resistance, color, drought tolerance, growth habit and reduced requirements for water and fertilizer. I favor a lawn with a large percentage of Tall Fescue for the best lawn in town. Tall Fescues are more drought tolerant and need less fertilizer than some other lawn grasses to still look good.

The fertilizer industry has also introduced improved products for



## Turf’s Up

By Todd Pretz  
Professional Turf Consultant

# I love my lawn!

lawn use. There are many versions now available of “slow-release” Nitrogen that grass plants use more efficiently. This allows for better absorption of Nitrogen, reducing leaching and run-off. In the last 15 years, many states have enacted stricter lawn fertilizer laws in order to address water quality issues. These include lower Nitrogen rates, increased slow-release nitrogen percentages, removing all Phosphorous from lawn fertilizers unless you are seeding or sodding, or if you can show a soil test indicating low Phosphorus levels. This was also done to reduce water quality issues. For many years, universities promoted 4 lbs. of Nitrogen per 1,000 square feet per year for healthy lawn growth. Nitrogen application rates are now down to 3.2 lbs. maximum per

year in many states. These new lawn fertilizer laws also created “black-out” dates when you cannot apply lawn fertilizer. In general, black-out dates are from December 1 to March 1 in many states. This reduces the potential of fertilizer running off the lawn into sewers, again to reduce water quality issues.

Many soil amending products have been introduced in the last 20 years. This includes gypsum, amino acids, humates and biological soil activators. These products improve soil health, thus reducing the need for as much fertilizer for the lawn to still look good. What about checking your soil pH? We’ve talked about this many times over the years. Research shows that if your soil pH level is not between 6.2 -

7.0, you could be wasting up to 70% of the lawn fertilizer you apply. The new age golf course superintendent classes taught by leading universities like Rutgers and Penn State strongly recommend reducing inputs and following Integrated Pest Management (IPM) practices to reduce pesticide usage.

We have a “Show us our lawn” contest monthly at Jonathan Green. I am amazed at the lawn photos sent to us from many homeowners with beautiful, gorgeous lawns. These photos show that you can create a great lawn to be proud of if you follow my many lawn tips over the years. Besides increasing your property value, a well-maintained lawn provides the following benefits: a 50 foot x 50 foot lawn produces enough

oxygen for a family of four every day; lawns reduce glare and noise pollution; lawns trap dust, smoke particles and other pollutants; and, lawns purify water and moderate temperatures while improving soil conditions and controlling erosion. Mulch your grass clippings and leave them on the lawn. This helps put moisture and nutrients back into the soil and out of the landfill.

Professional sports teams prefer natural turf over synthetic playing fields. This is due to injuries which happen more frequently on synthetic grass surfaces. Other questions to consider with synthetic turf: the cost; heat build-up causing heat stress on athletes and if you have to water the surface to reduce the temperature; what to do if blood gets on the field; and, how do you dispose of the plastic material after its useful life.

Why not show your lawn a little love this year? Happy New Year!

**Editor’s Note: Todd Pretz is Vice President of Jonathan Green, a leading supplier of lawn and garden products in the northeast. For more information, please visit: [www.jonathangreen.com](http://www.jonathangreen.com)**

# 2023 Person of the Year

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## New Jersey Christmas Tree Farm offers a unique interactive holiday experience

<https://pix11.com/news/local-news/new-jersey-christmas-tree-farm-offers-a-unique-interactive-holiday-experience/>

Local farmers and agricultural businesses provide some of the most celebratory objects of the season – setting the stage for so many happy holiday and seasonal memories.

### When should you get your Christmas tree, according to experts

<https://pix11.com/news/local-news/new-jersey/when-should-you-get-your-christmas-tree-according-to-experts/amp/>

“The New Jersey Christmas tree growers genuinely thank Jim Vasil for helping make long-lasting memories at local Christmas farms,” said Christian Nicholson, association president. “Jim was a pleasure to work with and fully understood how important it was to help out farmers. His coverage also helped to promote the use of real trees, which helps to keep open land preserved, farmers in business, and promote conservation issues.”

### Christmas comes alive with poinsettias at NJ greenhouse

<https://pix11.com/news/local-news/new-jersey/christmas-comes-alive-with-poinsettias-at-nj-greenhouse/amp/>

It was a real pleasure having Jim Vasil in our family’s greenhouses at Christmas time,” said Tim Hionis, co-owner of Hionis Greenhouses. “During the holiday season, the poinsettia is a commercially important flowering plant to our growing operation. Jim was very professional in showcasing the production of and how to care for these Christmas plants. He’s welcome back anytime.”

### How an 11th-generation farm in New Jersey makes apple cider

<https://pix11.com/news/local-news/new-jersey/see-it-how-an-11th-generation-farm-in-new-jersey-makes-apple-cider/amp/>

Pete Melick, co-owner of Melick’s Town Farm, added, “Jim Vasil was very professional to work with. He did an excellent job covering not only our fruit and

vegetable farm but the New Jersey agricultural industry as a whole.”

The most recent data from the United States Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service showed that the nursery, greenhouse, floriculture, and sod industry continue to be New Jersey’s leading agricultural sector, with sales at almost \$500 million. The value of New Jersey floriculture sales was \$356 million.

Before PIX11, Jim reported for News 12 New Jersey, WFMZ-TV 69 News in Allentown, PA, and Spectrum News in Albany, NY. He holds a BA in Radio and Television from Rider University, which recently honored him with the 2023 Outstanding Young Alumnus Award.

This paper now wholeheartedly salutes Jim Vasil for the goodness and kindness that he has shown to the farmers and growers he interviewed for broadcast media, as he’s traveled around the Garden State. It also salutes him for his dedicated journalistic approaches, the way he delivers important agricultural facts, how he makes the people feel during the interview, and how he makes his interviews “news of the day.”

All facets of the Garden States agricultural, gardening, landscaping, nursery, and outdoor living sectors are lucky to have New Jersey’s own Jim Vasil on PIX11 News.

*Gardener News* began the annual “Person of the Year” cover story in 2008. *Gardener News* will annually bestow our “Person of the Year” award to a person who performs exemplary outstanding service to the agricultural, farming, gardening, landscaping, nursery, and outdoor living communities.

**Editor’s Note: Tom Castronovo is executive editor and publisher of Gardener News. Tom’s lifelong interest in gardening and passion for agriculture, environmental stewardship, gardening, and landscaping, led to the founding of the Gardener News, which germinated in April 2003 and continues to bloom today. He is also dedicated to providing inspiration and education to the agricultural, gardening, landscaping, nursery, and outdoor living communities through this newspaper and GardenerNews.com.**