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Late summer betony in the rough grass area, buzzing with insects. A garden surrendering to the wild, but still a garden

## A gesture against the wild?

Martin Spray

A characteristic of gardens is that they are not 'full': in an ecological sense, that is, they are immature and incomplete. We leave unfilled a variety of opportunities that some plants, if we are not vigilant, sooner or later are likely to 'fill' by themselves. We call such plants *weeds*. Weeds do not occur in 'Nature'. [I use this word reluctantly, and emphasise it when it means 'other than human'. But from my point of view 'Nature' is 'Life, the universe and everything'.] If they are not in a 'right place', they die. This point is relevant to the ongoing debates about, for example, naturalistic planting and natives-and-aliens.

If we neglect our gardens we say that they 'revert to Nature'. Thirty-odd years ago I walked through a pasture, crossed a ha-ha, and entered an old garden that has intrigued me ever since. Its existence was not

unexpected, but its interest was. You might consider the neglect detrimental, but I found in it a certain pleasure. The garden was gradually becoming secret as it surrendered to the freedom of the Wild, no longer held back by horticulture. There was the usual scramble by weeds to exploit opportunities that were 'going spare', and the usual slower competition between plants to sort out a long-term structure.

A recognisable garden, however, remained. Among the wild brambles, nettles, docks, and the feral buddleia and montbretia, I found plenty of exotics spilling on to the paths of a Victorian flower garden. It reminded me of the derelict garden where I played as a child and was first intrigued by butterflies and beetles. Such serendipity is an important characteristic of the gardens in which I am most comfortable – the stumbling upon things that

give unanticipated pleasure or satisfaction. They can be everyday and familiar things – but you do not expect to find them. Or they are things not met before.

Beyond the flower garden, the plantations of the estate were becoming choked by cherry laurel, some of them enormous, with the help of rhododendrons. In places there was such a frozen writhing of laurel branches that I could pothole one or two metres above the ground through a 3D maze for over 100 metres. I have not met this challenge before. Just the sort of thing, I thought, that should be in a large woodland garden – but as far as I know never is. I recognise, of course, that my interests and attitudes are unlikely to meet with unbounded enthusiasm. I was delighted by the place; you might have been dismayed, or horrified.

I was in the old garden first just before the moment when it would be either prepared for restoration, or abandoned. Of the garden proper, the state of things could be read two ways. On the one hand, the dynamic was Nature being not quite held at bay by the surviving Garden; on the other, the Garden being invaded and subdued by Nature. A natural vegetation – that is, one not brought together by people, (a big caveat), was gradually establishing.

But horticulture has since been reimposed, signalling it is art rather than ‘mere’ vegetation. It is clearly a human, a cultural, thing. It is *our* doing.

## II

My title is from the first line of *The garden*, by Welsh poet R S Thomas. He has no question mark: the doubt is mine. ‘Having once been a place for men [!] to escape from the threats of nature’, wrote W H Adams in *Nature Perfected, Gardens Through History* (1991), a garden has turned into a ‘refuge from men’. There had, of course, been previous doubts, famously voiced, for example, by Andrew Marvell in his late-seventeenth-century poems. In *The mower, against gardens* he complains that the garden-maker enclosed ‘a dead and standing pool of air’,  
*... all enforced, the fountain  
 and the grot, [grotto] / While  
 the sweet fields do lie forgot,  
 / Where willing Nature does  
 to all dispense / A wild and  
 fragrant innocence.*

He compares what some regard as idealized Nature with the gardener who acts like ‘a lecherous brothel owner’. Like quite a few people, including me, Marvell seems to have yearned for the chance to escape from human-made and human-influenced things to a state of untainted naturalness. This was, of course, an ideal, approachable but not achievable by him – or by us. And maybe we understand the unachievable nature of the ideal, because we expend strenuous efforts to make gardens simulants and symbols of and substitutes for the wild.

Could this, however, be our Big Mistake?

## III

Making ‘wildernesses’, ‘wild’ gardens, woodland gardens, ‘nature’ gardens, wildlife gardens, naturalistic plantings, or ‘prairies’, is now widely discussed and promoted – and a varied array they are: try googling ‘natural garden’! They are all, surely, pretences. As George Sitwell (eccentric father of the very eccentric Edith) stresses in *On the Making of Gardens* (1909), ‘the utmost extreme to which artificiality can go is the mock-natural’. Rather than presenting Nature, they present (to borrow from Edith) a *façade*.

And yet, the ‘naturalistic ideal is clearly deeply rooted in the human psyche and expresses itself ... in the desire to create a vignette of nature’, says *The New Royal*

*Horticultural Society Dictionary of Gardening* (1992). The so-called naturalistic ideal places more emphasis on the structure, interactions, and ecology of plants growing together – vegetation – than on what I call hortodiversity, or on the art-aesthetic by which, conventionally, we judge our gardens.

Much of the charm of the garden I found has been lost. In fact, a dual loss; thinning trees allows a greater number of types of bush, groundcover, and bulb species to survive but, in all this increased hortodiversity, common-or-garden [!] natives are suppressed. Moreover, the plants are grown garden-wise: they are kept separate, the weaker are protected from the stronger, and they are expected to be viewed with art-aesthetics – that is, as a conventional picture. They make a picturesque picture but not a community. And there is little serendipity.

## IV

The notion that Nature is a garden has perhaps led to the idea of a ‘natural garden’, and that this is the work of a ‘natural gardener’. Our bookshelves and the web abound with such titles. But this is confusing, at least when we use ‘Nature’ (or ‘nature’) to signify an absence of human agency. To garden is to intervene: Nature in which we have not intervened is wilderness. A ‘natural garden’ is an oxymoron.

A garden made with (as it were) guidance only from Nature, using only 'natural' materials, is an impossibility (I would say), because a garden is necessarily a cultural thing. Its making and its management are directed by the culture of place, time and garden-maker. Hence the English garden, or the Chinese; the Rococo garden, or the *avant-garde*. A bog garden, or a woodland one – yes: but not a natural one.

A neglected, derelict, or abandoned garden is still a garden. A wilderness is not. How could it be, when it is something not made by us? What it looks like (or smells, tastes, or feels like) is not our doing. The 'wildernesses' that proliferated in the eighteenth century were human contrivances – just as, for example, the 'naturalistic' or 'nature-like' Dutch gardens much enthused about in the 1970s.

This is only one of several understandings of wilderness. In some understandings, and in many parts of the world, that is not how things are seen, and they are expressed in a way very different from Sitwell's. I am reminded, for example, of a Chinese visitor to Europe in the 1920s. He was amazed by our fondness for the mown and bordered lawn, which, he thought, 'while no doubt of interest to a cow, offers nothing to the intellect of a human being.'

In a Chinese garden, at least in the Taoist tradition, human culture and Nature (as we might put it) cooperate



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I visit the components of an old collection of *Sempervivum* that enlivens a stone wall, and on the way enjoy a colony of pixie cup lichens, and I smile (or frown) at the sculptural quality of a piece of planting – or an assemblage of stones.

to produce something which symbolises the total interdependence of things in the world. This version of the garden, unlike, say, that of a typical hardy-planter, is made and managed with an ethical intent, to make its users better persons. I don't think ours usually are. Moreover, there seems to have been no 'wilderness ideal' in ancient China.

There is a growing sense in the West that we don't have a monopoly on interpretations of the world and that, in contrast with our own tradition, much of humankind regards humans as a part of Nature. For example, for some of us it seems that 'wilderness' can only mean 'in the absence of mankind', while a garden is just an eccentric piece of what is called 'Nature': it is, if you like, a work of cooperation between beings including us.

I am not trying to set up the oriental garden as 'better' than ours (for one thing I don't have enough knowledge); but I suggest that thinking about the differences from our own approach, and the language in which it is expressed, can lead to interesting conclusions.

## V

I am usually pleased to see a rich hortodiversity, as a collection, or as what we might call the 'nursery experience', or simply as 'one more plant squeezed in somehow'; but it's not what I want to live with. I do focus on individual plants each day as I walk around my own garden, with the anticipation of a new flower, or something for gustatory delight.

It is not the collection of plants, but the *collective*, with the animals, fungi, and the Dark Nature – the large



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A severe intervention with delightful consequences – but is it a garden?

majority of life, which we depend on but do not see – and the associated rotting logs, tree roots, or stones, that gives me greatest pleasure, and for both ethical and aesthetic reasons, as well as my interest in natural history from childhood. For the moths and butterflies and dragonflies, the frogs and toads and newts, slow-worms and grass snakes, titmice, regular pheasant and occasional heron, voles, bats, even cute-and-they-know-it grey squirrels, the stink-horn fungi, the stone-hiding lichen crusts, and the self-grown lawn mosses, and *even* the pests and diseases, are parts of the communities – are parts of the garden, too. All are interesting in different ways, and *most* are delights.

I am aware of landscape

architect Christopher Tunnard's comment (*in Gardens in the Modern Landscape*, 1938) that the wild garden offers 'all the charms of escape for [the person who] prefers animal to human society.' In many cases it is true. And I know that there are serious pests and diseases affecting gardens, fields and forests, just as there are human diseases and parasites, that we must strive to keep at bay. But don't we want a balance, a harmony – not a constant, tiring, battle? Our gardens can be sanctuaries for other things besides ourselves, can't they?

'I have given you every herb bearing seed... and every tree...' The generosity of the Gardener of Eden

reads like a Gardener's Charter (and also a hortodiversity challenge – to squeeze in one more and one more!). This is part of the cultural tradition I guess most of us live in. In this tradition (I am English) it is not easy to speak or write, or even think, as (just) one member of the biological community like the rest, even if we believe we are just one member of what is usually called nature. To reject the charter is difficult, not least because it seems to mean rejecting much of the language we use and the concepts which that language speaks of. Even if we do not wish to keep a distinction between ourselves (a Special Creation, some say) and Nature, the words we use imply that that is just what we do!

Of course one must compromise; and it is, after all, the gardens we make that count, not the words we use to describe them. Like other forms of art, the work may be understood more easily than its rationale. Often, though, it is misunderstood.

We weren't at home when some of our friends called. They left a note. I think I know what they meant; and if it wasn't a joke I'd say they were mistaken: 'Sorry you were out. We looked around, but we couldn't find your garden.' 🌸

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