



© Alex Pankhurst

As Charles Kingsley said, 'Never lose an opportunity of seeing anything beautiful.'

Idle thoughts in autumn rain

Martin Spray

It has been raining, and blowing, and I have been confined to the house. Gardening has been off the agenda for a few days. *Real* gardening, that is; gardening in imagination continues, of course; and it has been helped by my digging into the fertile soil of notebooks of assorted quotations (of which I'm over-fond), some of which I would like to share.

I forget where the first is from, but I shall pass on quickly anyway, though this Chinese proverb sets the scene nicely. 'If you would be happy for a week take a wife; if you would be happy for a month kill a pig; but if you would be happy all your life plant a garden.'¹ Actually,

I'm not entirely convinced – perhaps I'm just lucky.

So, he – or it is at least as likely to be she – makes a garden. And perhaps it gets someone's attention, and they say 'Show me your garden and I shall tell you what you are.'² That seems a good way to sort the gardeners; now what about the gardens? One aspect is plain: 'It would never occur to most gardeners to write a poem or paint a picture. Most gardens are the only artistic effort their owners ever make.'³

Not that 'art' is the only reason, or necessarily the main one, for making a garden. (Veg plots are part of a different story.)

There are several reasons, and for several reasons they change. In particular, 'having once been a place for man to escape from the threats of nature', a garden has become 'a refuge from man.'⁴ Not everyone, of course, sees it this way. Gardens, 'while welcome if they provide 'cheerful surroundings', are worth nothing in themselves'. They represent 'an uneasy mixture of – indeed, a 'discord' between – nature and art... For philosopher Hegel, the garden has too much of nature in it.'⁵

What you are determines the sort of garden you make. There are ways and ways of making a garden.

Not the least influence is culture; for instance, 'while the English speak of 'planting' a garden, the Chinese 'build' one.'¹⁶ Part of this dichotomy depends on your attitude to the garden's plants (assuming it's a planty garden, which it might not be, and not a veg plot), which – as this journal shows well – can vary considerably. Typically, 'a European will say "That is where I wish to plant that tree", but a Japanese may say "That is where this tree wishes to be."¹⁷

But cultures can develop rather fixed ideas. 'It will probably be agreed that the most desirable gardens are those which contain the largest possible number of charming pictures.'¹⁸ Ji Cheng, in *The craft of gardens* (1630s), suggests that 'the view [out] should include a watery expanse of many acres and contain the changing brilliance of the four seasons.' But few of us have that luxury.

Let's explore trees a bit further. Like gardens and gardeners, they come in a wide range of guises. 'The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way.'¹⁹

Space for big trees is in short supply these days, but in the early 19th century one gentleman clearly had sufficient room: 'His greatest pleasure was to sit out of doors of an evening in sight of the grand old trees in

his park, and before going in he would walk round to visit them, one by one, and whisper a good night.'¹⁰ He was undoubtedly not the only person to regard trees as special.

We are lucky: we have the choice of thousands of species and varieties – though, alas, they don't include those Sir John Mandeville said he came across on his way to Cathay: "Every day at sun rising, the small trees begin to grow, and they grow till mid-day, and bear fruit. And after mid-day they decrease and enter again into the earth."¹¹ That was some plant!

Even so, we are spoiled for choice, or confounded by mistaken choices, and not just of trees: when one looks at some herbaceous plant groups, despair is the best reaction. For example, *The Plant Finder* has 18 pages of *Narcissus*; of the mints, 'there are only ten species recognised from Europe, but in the *Index Kewensis* the names of over 900 species and hybrids are listed. The majority ... are worthless.'¹² Or think of the tens of thousands of *Hemerocallis* 'recognised' in the USA.

Any of these plants might be important, if only to a gardener: "To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that lie too deep for tears."¹³ Some people are less than enthusiastic: 'Who will not be made sick by the mere name of these rank and leafy weeds?'¹⁴

(And that's *Physalis* sorted!) What ought one to make of a group of shrubs met with in so many of our gardens? 'The cotoneasters are useful in the garden to give the blackbirds somewhere to nest, and I flatly refuse to waste any more of my life attempting to write interesting descriptions of them.'¹⁵ It's true, 'There is I know not what great difference / Between the vulgar and the noble seed.'¹⁶

For good or ill, I have a few *Cotoneaster* species, and I admit that on warm mornings in early summer, *C. horizontalis* is one of my favourite plants when I have a garden breakfast with a riotous orchestra of humble bees, hive bees, flies in variety, wasps, and an occasional butterfly sipping nectar from the bush. (Sweet scent – but aesthetically challenged.)

For most ornamental gardeners (nice term!), it is without doubt the flower that is a plant's *raison d'être*: 'Flowers have come! / to refresh / and delight you'; however, nothing lasts: 'Yesterday it flowered. / Today it withers.'¹⁷ Yet, in a garden with a good diversity of types of plant, 'it is a pleasure / when, rising in the morning, / I go outside and / find a flower that was not there yesterday.'¹⁸ Yes, flowers are an enormous, unique, pleasure – even when they have said good-bye to the plant that bore them. 'In the wind that blew last night, / Peach blossoms fell, scattered

in the garden. / A boy came out with a broom / Intending to sweep them away; no, no. / Are fallen flowers not flowers?¹⁹

My family likes to make an annual spring visit to a local woodland garden, where, if our timing is right, we stand a while in admiration, in a patch of *Rhododendron*, on a carpet of scarlet: fallen, but fresh, flowers.

Whatever, and wherever from, these are all parts of the ecology of the garden as a whole, and of the wider landscape, and indeed of the cosmos, for 'thou canst not stir a flower / Without troubling of a star.'²⁰ Hom Sap has long been indebted to the flower – so much so that 'if a man finds himself with bread in both hands, he should exchange one for some flowers, since the loaf feeds the body indeed, but the flowers feed the soul.'²¹ Gardeners, and garden visitors, should surely joyfully sing 'O! O! totus floreo!'²² – when they, too, are all aflower!

I sometimes approach that state when I find myself in a nursery with so much flowering that one should avoid buying. However, for me the feeling is stronger in an informal garden well-furnished with plants both cultivated and 'wild', allowed to mingle (fairly) freely so

that they can more nearly 'be themselves' than their relatives in a formal setting. Of course, one's choice of what to grow doesn't always work. 'Ah dreams, impracticable dreams! What dreams / Lie buried in that box all gardeners know, / Labels that once belonged to living plants.'²³

You may not have thought about it – I hadn't – but there is a paradox here. 'Gardens are hugely important, as places and as an idea ... but we know next to nothing about why and how that is so.'²⁴ I empathise with the Chinese visitor to Europe in the 1920s who commented in amazement on 'a mown and bordered lawn which, while no doubt of interest to a cow, offers nothing to the intellect of a human being.'²⁵

But gardening is moving on. The garden's importance as substitute for some of the habitats we have destroyed (not least in the making of our gardens) is known, but is commonly exaggerated. If only 'to make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee, / One clover and a bee, / And revery. / The revery alone will do / If bees be few.'²⁶ It's not so easy, yet we are beginning to think of gardens as parts of a wider landscape,

with a wider – even wilder – ecology, shared with other sorts of 'vegetation'. But beware thinking of this as a happy-clappy system. 'Everything around us looks so smiling that all nature seems to be at peace. However, it is well that plants cannot speak, or the exultations of the victors and the groans of the vanquished would be too much for humanity to bear.'²⁷

When it works, we can enjoy not only the flowers, not only the plants, but a whole community. We may have to look carefully to see much of the wonder – for instance, 'the caterpillar does all the work but the butterfly gets all the publicity'²⁸ – and it is doubtless necessary to be prepared to search books and websites for information, and not be disheartened that, for example, they 'told everything about the wasp, except why.'²⁹

Perhaps it is sometimes better, to 'go direct', as it were, and to 'speak to the earth, and it shall teach you...'³⁰

But I see that the rain has stopped, the wind has dropped, and there is a little sunshine dallying with the fothergilla. I hope these idle thoughts were of some interest, but now 'we must cultivate our garden.'³¹ 

Martin Spray gardens in the Forest of Dean, where he uses Charles Kingsley's advice to help ameliorate Parkinson's disease and keep some of the world's silliness at bay.

Sources of these quotations are to be found on the HPS website – see www.hardy-plant.org.uk