THE PHILOSOPHY OF GARDENS: BY WALTER A. DYER

HERE come times when one grows extremely weary of all this talk of economics, and sociology, and political corruption, and industrial crises, and national dangers, and all the big problems of nations and men in masses which perplex our great thinkers, create broad movements and inspire oratory. It is at such times that one wishes to steal away and walk in a quiet garden, between rows of sweet-scented box, and to sit in peace beneath the blossoming pear tree where none of the woes of men may enter. Someone must think of these things; they have to be worked out sometime. We must all think of them more or less, whether we will or no. But they can never possess the same power to soften the spirit and feed the soul that a quiet little garden has. There have always been big problems, since the world began; and always, since Eden, there have been gardens. The garden is the antithesis of war; it is the oasis in a desert of tribulation. Apparently God gave man gardens that his soul might not be consumed.

And yet there are plenty of people in this day and generation who see no sense in gardens—except, perhaps, for display. And many there are who make gardens with so little understanding that they might as well have none. There is a wealthy brewer who has his trade-mark done in foliage plants on the side of a smooth-clipped terrace, and who fatuously imagines that he has a garden. Doubtless he also fancies that his electric signs help to light the dark places of the earth.

What is a garden, anyway? It may be well to find out what we are talking about. A garden is an odd thing, when you think about it—simply growing things transplanted and arranged in a limited area. Why should it signify anything?

Many things seem odd when you come to analyze them. Have you ever tried reducing words to absurdities by repeating the syllables? Try it with home, or mother, or Galilee, or Hesperides. You can say the words over and over until they become mere sounds, and mean nothing; and yet you know that the words have always expressed something beautiful. It is so with music—merely sounds strung together in a way that somehow gives pleasure.
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It is so with flowers; you can pick a rose to pieces in a botanical laboratory until there is nothing left. It is so with poetry; study the component parts and you spoil it. It is so with gardens; if you would enjoy them, do not analyze too minutely. A garden is a thing in itself, like the firmament, and we can best understand it by learning to love it.

I offer this somewhat unsatisfactory explanation in apology for my ignorance of garden details, and also as a protest against a magnification of those details. In these days we are given, in magazines and books, a superabundance of information about horticulture, and I fear we are inclined—we Americans—to substitute horticulture for gardens. Of course, we must know how to plant sweet peas so that they will bloom; we must get our cosmos and chrysanthemums to maturity before frost. But why spoil the garden by making an exact science of it?

One attitude that I cannot sympathize with is that of the authority who writes of the right and wrong way to plant a garden. There is no right and wrong way, for no two gardens should be alike, and it is all a matter of experience. If the colors of phlox and petunias fail to harmonize, good taste and not rule-of-thumb will rectify the mistake.

An acquaintance of mine, whose mind has for years been wrapped up in business, took a place in a small town and proposed to plant flowers in front of his house. He had a vague notion of having a round bed of tulips in the exact center of each half of his lawn, and a row of cannas and scarlet sage along the veranda front. He was told that this was the wrong way. “Leave your lawn free from flower beds, and use a border of quieter plants,” was the dictum. My acquaintance did not know why, and he never will know why until a feeling for beauty and harmony comes to direct his efforts. And no rules and regulations will ever teach him that.

NOT so did our forebears, in their old New England and Virginia gardens, learn to make things beautiful. There was something in the atmosphere in those stern old days that taught the trick. The old-fashioned garden was a sort of an antidote for blue-laws and Puritanism. Amid the sweet william and foxgloves and larkspur and bleeding heart and baby’s breath and all the other lovely old flowers, men and women found relief from the harshness of life. The old garden restored the soul’s equilibrium.

And for that reason I wish that we had more gardens today—not more knowledge of horticulture or landscape architecture, but
more gardens—more little gardens, one for every home all over the land, in city and country alike.

There is much to be said for the Old World type of garden—Italian, French, or English—with its formal topiary work, its marble Psyche, its fountain, and its sun-dial. Such gardens breathe a spirit of romance. Ghosts of bygone lovers haunt arbor and gazebo—brave youths in doublet and hose, fair damsels in brocade and furbelow. But to create such a garden in a single generation is not possible. When we attempt it we usually fail; we build pergolas of bare poles, leading nowhere, but we do not make a garden. On the whole it is simpler and more effective to plant a garden of the English cottage type, or an old-fashioned garden after New England models. Only amid the live-oaks of South Carolina do we get an atmosphere like that of Italian yews and English beeches.

When I was a boy in a New England city, every yard had its garden. In ours there was a long arbor of Concord grapes—a sore temptation in October. There were four generous pear trees and a peach tree that sprang up of its own accord. There was a strawberry patch and a little sweet corn, and a row of currant bushes. There were gladioli and sweet peas and pansies and rose-bushes—ah, such roses! We let the bushes grow too large, perhaps, but we liked them that way. And in one corner there was a little garden of a little boy, where a fuchsia and a heliotrope, and coleus and petunias and geraniums and four o’clocks and portulacas grew side by side with peas and beans and a scraggy tomato vine. A silly little garden—but a garden!

And in the yard on the east were quinces and cherry trees and flowers, and on the west, apples and corn and flowers. Almost every yard had its fruit trees and currant bushes, its weigela and syringa shrubs. Somebody planted them. At one time it must have been the thing to plant fruit trees in the yard. Who, in our neat, highly developed, modern suburban towns ever plants a fruit tree in the yard? Who cares for a lilac bush beside the door? We have parks and parklike lawn arrangements, but they are not gardens.

Well, there are some people who do have gardens, and who love them. Perhaps there are more such people than ever before. We must not be pessimistic. There never was a time when so many garden books were bought and so many garden magazines read. Only I have a feeling that many of our modern gardens are artificial, and planted according to a formula. They look so painfully correct, like those suburban towns which have been laid out in restricted plots by development companies. They are the product of an age of hurry.
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WE MUST be content to let our gardens grow. We must begin at once, and then we must be patient.

When I plant the garden of my dreams, I propose to follow no formal school. I shall plant annuals, for the sake of their bountiful if short-lived beauty. I shall plant asters because they please me, whether the pink and lavender and white and purple conform to the best canons of color harmony or not. I know of no pink so heavenly as the pink of China asters. Nasturtiums I shall have in great profusion, and corn flowers, and sweet peas for picking.

I shall plant the old-fashioned hardy perennials, because I am foolishly attached to the things of my fathers, and because there is no blue like the blue of larkspur.

I shall plant roses, because they approach as near to perfection as anything I expect to find on earth.

I shall plant trees—not short-lived poplars, not purple beeches or grotesque lawn specimens, but honest Norway maples, white pines, white oaks, and elms—because I shall then be adding a mite to the permanent glory of nature.

I shall plant box, if I live south of the latitude of Hartford, for though I shall never live to gaze upon its century-old grandeur, I shall feel that I am repaying in some slight degree the great debt bequeathed to me.

A garden, I am convinced, is eminently worth while. It pays dividends in spiritual currency. This truth is not to be proved by argument; it is to be learned by experience. A garden is not a great matter, perhaps, but it is one of the most palatable ingredients of the life-worth-living. It is one of those little touches which help to blend the more garish colors in life’s tapestry.

The Spectator wrote thus: “You must know, sir, that I look upon the pleasure which we take in a garden as one of the most innocent delights in human life. A garden was the habitation of our first parents before the fall. It is naturally apt to fill the mind with calmness and tranquillity, and to lay its turbulent passions at rest. It gives us great insight into the contrivance and wisdom of Providence, and suggests innumerable subjects for meditation. I cannot but think that the very complacency and satisfaction which a man takes in these works of nature to be a laudable, if not a virtuous, habit of mind.”

And above and beyond the good to be derived from communion with the spirit of a garden is that obtained from working in it. Getting down close to Mother Earth and helping things to grow—therein lies an education. I care not whether it be rhododendrons
TRUTH

or forget-me-nots, espalier fruits or cabbages, it is the process that counts. A moral lesson lurks in the very act of casting out the tares, in making the selection between the desirable and the undesirable, and then acting on the knowledge.

It is a pity that so many of us in these days live a migratory existence in rented houses, even in the smaller towns and villages. We do not stay anywhere long enough to strike our roots into the soil. But some of us unfortunates there be who hold fast the vision of a cozy home and a garden, where the crocuses come to hail the Spring, where hollyhocks and wistaria flaunt their gay banners in summer, where golden artemesias battle with the early frosts—a garden of our own making, where we are kings and queens in a court of regal pomp, and where the bees and humming-birds share our wealth but rob us not.

"I never had," writes Abraham Cowley, "any other desire so strong, and so like Covetousness, as that one which I have always had that I might be Master at last of a small house and a large Garden, with very moderate conveniences joined to them, and there dedicate the remainder of my life to the culture of them, and the study of Nature."

Meanwhile, let us go forth and plant a tree.

TRUTH

HE WAS seated at a big table, covered with the latest books and magazines. On one side was a huge pile of discarded literature; on the other, a small heap of tiny clippings; and he held a large pair of scissors in his hand.

"Pardon me," I said, "but what are you doing?"

"Sorting," he replied.

"But why?"

"It amuses me," he said sadly, clipping a short paragraph from a solid page of print.

"Tell me," I persisted, "what do you put in the large heap?"

"Mere cleverness," he answered.

"And the small one?"

"Truth."

ELLA M. WARE.