

THE GARDENS AND PEOPLE ESSAY

This month we start an occasional series of essays on gardens. The essay is a rather neglected form, but we think it important as it allows people to muse, to connect and express their thoughts on an idea that interests them. We welcome ideas for essays - please go to the [How to Submit](#) page.

Why Do We Make Gardens?

A Contemplation by Twigs Way

Ask anyone why they garden and you will usually be met with a ready response. In my experience typical replies include the joy of retreating to somewhere secluded and private, a love of nature and wildlife, a commitment to grow your own, and the desire to see things grow and seasons change. However, ask the same people why we *make* gardens (rather than why they physically garden) and answers come less readily. Yet for thousands of years the making of gardens has proved to be one of the most fundamental human attributes. From the buried gardens of Pompeii, to the Victorian suburban villa garden and the twenty-first century patio, gardens are present in almost all cultures, so why do we make them?

In his 1782 essay on *The History of the Modern Taste in Gardening*, Horace Walpole very properly suggests that the first gardens were practical. The need to have fruit and herbs within constant reach, rather than dispersed in the woods and meadows, led to the creation of enclosures close to the house, eventually developing into the walled kitchen garden and orchard. These early garden makers were too busy growing for necessity to spend time considering the design of their gardens, although Walpole assures us that 'the prototype of all these sorts [of gardens] was the garden of Eden. Over the millennia since those first small enclosures filled with their precious herbs and pot vegetables, creation of the perfect productive garden has occupied many a garden designer. Whether desirous of combining beauty with utility in the style of the 'potager', or obtaining maximum yields, literally hundreds (if not thousands) of books have been written on the making of the productive garden.

But what of beauty without utility? Why do we strive to make gardens whose contents are largely inedible, or at least primarily decorative? Here too Walpole has a contribution to make, albeit obliquely. 'After the fall no man living was suffered to enter into the Garden [of Eden], and the poverty and necessities of our ancestors hardly allowed them time to make improvements of their estates in imitation of it'. The inference being that when 'improvements' finally did come to be made the inspiration behind them was to re-capture that lost Eden. Alas for Walpole, and for us, no one knows the design style of the Garden of Eden, although Milton's imagined description might work as the blueprint of which many a walled garden was built.

Religion, or rather Christian thought, appears surprisingly frequently in the discussion of garden making. In his essay '*Of Gardens*' (c1625), Francis Bacon famously claimed that

'God Almighty first planted a garden; and indeed it is the purest of human pleasures'. Although a casual reader may conclude that it is the act of gardening which Bacon is commending, a closer attention to the detail of his essay makes plain that it is the art of garden creation and garden design to which he refers. The relation between pure thought and garden

making is highlighted again almost three hundred years later by the Hon. Frances Wolseley, founder of the Glynde School for Lady Gardeners in Sussex. 'The profession of gardening' she declared in her 1916 work *Gardening for Women*, 'offers a considerable amount of freedom, the refining influence of poetry and beauty . . . and health and happiness to body and mind' although she was referring as much to gardening as to garden making, or in her words 'landscape gardening'.

The first years of the 19th century saw this divide between gardening and garden making most hotly debated. William Robinson leading the horticulturalists, whilst Reginald Blomfield (architect designer) led those who claimed that design and layout were the remit of the architect, belonging as they did to the realm of the house. Whilst 'laying out' of smaller suburban plots at this period generally fell to the gardener, the country house found themselves the subject of heated exchanges. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the argument, it sparked a rather more reflective response from those who found themselves in the middle. Gertrude Jekyll (plantswoman and garden designer) was one and John Dando Sedding (architect and member of the Arts and Crafts movement) another.

In his *Garden Craft Old and New* (1891) John Sedding devoted his first chapter to 'On the Theory of A Garden'. For Sedding the ideal garden was neither untrammelled nature nor pre-meditated art, neither wild nor tamed, but a place where the two met. In the rather flowery language of the the Arts and Crafts he describes the garden as a place where Nature and Man 'have struck a truce and are leagued together in a kind of idyllic intimacy, as is witnessed in their exchanges of grace for grace, and the crowning touch that each puts upon the other's efforts.' 'Neither' he continues, 'can strictly say "I made the garden" to disregard the other's share in it. True that behind all the contents of the place sits primal Nature, but Nature to advantage dressed, nature in a rich disguise, nature delicately humoured, stamped with new qualities, furnished with a new momentum, led to new conclusions, by man's skill in selection and artistic concentration.'

The early eighteenth century was a period of supreme confidence amongst garden makers, men who expressed themselves in terms of improving' upon Nature, Tidying her tresses and re-sculpting her curves so that 'Hills and Dales, of easy ascent be made by Art , where Nature has not performed that Work' (Batty Langley 1712). Garden making for the eighteenth century designer consisted In theory) of assisting Nature to look her best as expressed by Sir John Clerk of Penicuik in *The Country Seat* (1731).

' . . . Through the bushy Trees and lonesome Shades,
Nature in all her windings trace;
Search out the Beautys which unfinished lie
And let assisting art complete the scene'.

Or with a rather more sensual overtone, the poet Thomson encouraged William Shenstone in his garden making at the Leasowes that 'You have nothing to do but to dress Nature. Her robe is ready made; you have only to caress her, love her, kiss her, and then -

descend into the valley' .

Having completed his 'garden making' at Nuneham Courtenay, Lancelot 'Capability' Brown was rewarded with a poem by Whitehead, the Poet Laureate, claiming that Dame Nature herself could not distinguish between her own work and that of Brown. Although with a happy reflection she realises that 'Whate'er he has done, and whate'er he has said, The world's little malice will balk his design: Each fault they call his, and each excellence mine'. Brown has been double-bluffed into assisting Nature to excel in such a way that none can see his art.

The transformation and humanisation of Nature is what John Sedding believed created the ideal garden, and the perfect balance between Nature and Art what the garden maker is striving for. A garden must be both man's response to Nature and Nature's subsequent response to man's handiwork and so it continues with each beautifying the other handiwork. Having identified the 'perfect garden' Sedding answers the question why we make gardens. It is, he believes, inherent in man's nature to strive for the ideal rather than the commonplace, to crave the fulfilment of unrealised dreams, and a garden gratifies those instincts. However being a gratification of those ideals the garden is also by necessity a paradise in man's own image and in particular the image of its particular maker. An artistic creation it bears the imprint of the artist as surely as a self-portrait, albeit one framed with Nature.

To make a garden therefore is to create something new and of ourselves. Whether a professional designer with a specific style sought by out by a client, or someone expressing themselves through the making of their own garden, we bring to Nature not only 'enhancement' but identity. An 'Open Garden' is an Open Soul, although there might be fewer entries in the 'Yellow Books' if this were more widely realised. We may be 'Nearer God's heart in a Garden than anywhere else on earth' but in the making of gardens we approach the ultimate power of creation and with it the ultimate self exposure. Our creation will in many cases live on beyond us and reach out to generations yet to come, revealing both our conceit in attempting to improve upon Nature and our own personal vision of paradise to those who come after. In the words of the seventeenth century pastoral poet Robert Herrick, 'Behold this living stone, I rear for me . . . Here is my hope and my Pyramidees'.

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