

When Less Is More

In an attempt to clean up and clear out, I have been flipping through old gardening books and magazines and reacquainting myself with what is called 'garden design'. At the risk of sounding curmudgeonly, may I suggest 'clutter' is a closer description of so many of the plans that require a plethora of temperamental plants.

From the time when eager British plant collectors sent ships and botanists all over the world to bring back slips and seeds, people have been passionate about having the new and unknown in their gardens. Times are changing. The essential problem in the application of 'design' to the spaces around our homes is to balance our desire for a beautiful garden with the real shortage of both time and money.

If we have had the good fortune to visit large public gardens in Virginia, such as those in Norfolk and Richmond, we have brought away concepts and images that can be applied to our own small spaces. We also may have come to the point of knowing that can't successfully grow one of everything we see!

Gardeners who have visited gardens in other countries have the even more difficult problem of adapting what they have learned to our specific Tidewater climate. Somehow, adapting the lessons learned at Hampton Court or Great Dixter does not result in an English garden in Virginia. For centuries the English themselves have adapted ideas and designs from French and Italian gardens and those over time became part of the English tradition, elevating those gardens to a form of art. Victorian gardens reached the apex of color and herbaceous plant variety, a prominence continued through the Arts and Crafts era.

Gardens as living things have a precarious status as art. Drought, flood, wars, hurricanes and just plain death may affect any garden to its detriment. Basically a garden is an existential thing: it is the process itself that delights, not merely the product. We think of the ancient plantings that surround centuries old English homes as something quite permanent. However, long gone are the days of Rudyard Kipling's "The Glory of the Garden" when "better men than we go out and start their working lives/ At grubbing weeds from gravel paths with broken dinner knives."

Those magnificent gardens never just happened: they required an army of workers. Equally relevant, those fine homes had to become self-supporting with all sorts of enterprises inviting the public to come see and support. .

In the late twentieth century, just as they had once looked to France and Italy for inspiration, English gardeners began to notice the new simplicity of gardens in Germany and Holland. These trends were seen to involve greater numbers of fewer species, resulting in a more exciting swathe of motion and a more subtle play of color. However, these differences did not eliminate the hard work!

The way we plan our spaces depends on the amount of time we have to devote to its care. What complicates the issue further for gardeners living in the Chesapeake Bay watershed is our effort to avoid use and overuse of chemicals and the nitrogen overload that damages the bay. Creating an environment favorable for birds, butterflies, and other wildlife is a factor that requires the use of native plants and a more naturalistic setting.

Bird and butterfly devotees tell us that the species important to those winged delights have to be planted in sufficient numbers to attract birds and butterflies. A plant here and there will not do the job. Here again is the usefulness of a design using a greater number of fewer

species. Not only is it important to attract the charmers but other insects need to be accommodated as well. In a naturalistic setting the activity of the beneficial insects will counteract the effects of those that are pests. Lots of times they help by eating them!

It is obvious that the use of pesticides eliminates the good along with the bad – overkill! By avoiding pesticides you will have a healthier garden even if there is a small percentage of munched foliage. The avoidance of chemicals has become more important as the use of ever-stronger ones has endangered both birds and bees. As two of every three bites of food on our dinner plate is the result of bee and insect pollination, loss of thousands of hives is an economic hardship as well as the proverbial canary in the coalmine.

It may be time to broaden our perspective of what constitutes an appropriate setting for our homes. It may be time to embrace an occasional tangled plot of wildflowers or a miniscule meadow among our manicured lawns to provide a refuge for the beautiful and beneficial winged things.

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