

Garden Writers and Their ilk

The books I have about gardening measure a few feet but those I've read, if stacked, might reach the ceiling. I think of myself as a garden reader more than as a garden writer. My horticultural education is too limited for the designation 'garden writer' and my opinions are not sufficiently strong. I never met a plant I didn't like. My most frequent reply to a query is 'it depends'.

What I especially love about British garden writers is the fact that they are never tentative! Wilfred Blount, eminent writer of biography as well as a garden writer finds rhododendrons over used and pretty ugly when not in bloom. The book, from a gardening friend, is a collection of letters. One was tempted to argue in the margins. Coincidentally I had just read that strong opinion when another gardening friend sent me a clipping from the Norfolk Virginian-Pilot. Written by R.B.Jones, the article, with a great picture, is about Gloucester residents Jim Brant and George McLellan and their passion for rhododendrons in their azalea guise.

Active members of the Middle Atlantic Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society, Brant and McLellan have worked intensely to preserve the native azaleas on Hooper Bald, a North Carolina mountaintop meadow in Nantahala National Forest. Jim Brant is sharing cuttings from his 35 native azaleas with curators from the Norfolk Botanic garden: last fall, George McLellan and other volunteers gave seeds collected from that mountain's meadow to a research center concerned with the preservation of Southern Appalachian Highland plants. Mr. Blount needs to visit Hooper Bald. Mr. Blount needs to meet Jim and George.

Another British writer, gardener, and world-traveling expert on matters horticultural is Christopher Lloyd, the owner of the stately home and garden, "Great Dixter". Mr. Lloyd finds island beds, those "squirring horrors that students in horticultural colleges are taught to admire." To this statement I would add –"It depends."

Splendid horticulturist notwithstanding, Christopher Lloyd speaks of sensitive fern, *Onoclea sensibilis* "quite a weed in its native East Coast states of America." Island beds are too important in their ability to reduce the size of the environmentally taxing great American lawn to need justification. The sensitive fern has only to be seen with evening light falling on the fronds and playing on their haphazard shapes and shades of green, to love it.

British writers tend to be quirky, a quality that makes them fun to read. Once an English gardener, now a Virginia gardener, Pam Harper has written the books we treasure, read, and reread. She, too, is opinionated, but gently so and her garden is so close to us in Tidewater, we value her opinions and attempt to imitate her practices.

If you wish to meet historic gardeners, you can find books about them, beginning with Pliny the Younger (61-112) who not only gardened but also wrote copious letters to friends about his several gardens. 'Capability' Brown (1716-83) never wrote a book but began as a

kitchen gardener and eventually became the subject of much garden writing as England's leading garden designer.

Not by writing but by drawing did Humphry Repton (1752-1818) achieve prominence. He cleverly created books of 'before' and 'after' artistic renderings using overlays. They were bound in red morocco and became the famous Red Books, some 200 of which survive. Another artist, Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932), an astonishingly determined and gifted woman was at first a painter before continuing artistically as botanist and gardener. Her many books are frequently reprinted and are detailed prescriptions for the construction of what has become our vision of a English garden - the use of related colors in herbaceous borders and plant choices that flower at the same time.

Sometimes we read just for information and for that we do not necessarily need books. Catalogs are great, worth finding space for a few inches of them to be mined at leisure. Magazines are wonderful for pictures but not too practical as the information has to be general in publications that cater to all the gardening zones.

One simple newsletter that is full of information is "The Avant Gardener", published monthly without a picture in its eight pages. The current issue is Vol. 42, No. 9 so it has been around a while. Thomas Powell is editor and publisher and it can be ordered at Box 489, New York, NY 10028. It is \$24 a year.

The information covers tests being done at universities, new commercial products, and gleanings from various pubs. Fascinating tidbits abound such as the news that tender geranium plants, pelargoniums, contain a compound that paralyzes Japanese beetles when they eat the flowers. Scientists have isolated the compound and patented it for use as a beetle control, which reminds me, why are there so few Japanese beetles this year?