

All Things Bright and Beautiful

Especially bright! Decades ago our area was lovely and colorful in spring but the long hot summer languished with only the green of boxwood given a little zing by the white, pink, and red plumes of Crepe Myrtle. We are dull no longer as color is everywhere. When I visited Brent and Beck's Bulbs recently I was dazzled by the bright colors. There were lots of bulbs of course, lilies, cannas, beauties too numerous to list. And calla lilies, that are not lilies but Zantedeschia, belonging to the Araceae family (like Jack in the Pulpit). They are elegantly sculptural with rich and smoky colors.

They have a catalog garden that marshals the bulbs from their catalog so you can pick and choose to your heart's content. More exciting is the emergent display garden. This unique place requires seasonal visits so you can watch the expansion of the 'hardscape' – the handsome block paving, gravel paths and spots that invite you to sit and admire. You will want to study the shrubs and perennials in all seasons as there will be changes – bud to flower to foliage and then the leafless pattern of branch and stem painting its own portrait.

As are all things that grow organically, this is not an instant nor an artificial construct, but the realization of a dream. It is akin to the weaving of a Persian carpet whose design develops carefully over time. There is beauty to be seen today, with the promise of more for years of tomorrows.

One plant I noticed stirred the one of the seven deadly sins to which gardeners are most prone. I envied, coveted, desired, the hydrangea 'Limelight'. It actually captures light! I spent a lot of time mulling over which piece of my over-crowded borders could be cleared to accommodate it? And who would tackle that chore? You must visit this garden on a summer afternoon, and again in fall, and winter.

Some sunny evening arrange your schedule to include a walk on Gloucester's Main Street. Examine the hanging baskets, each a different collection of a few plants chosen to contrast and enhance the variety of flower, shape, foliage, and color, but all lovely. Be thankful for all the gardens and baskets that lighten your end-of-day walk.

CABBAGES & KINGS OR THE GOOD AND THE BAD

First the good: redemption is possible for even the most derelict of sites- those contaminated by toxic trash and compounded by neglect. Twenty years ago a town in New Jersey had a former landfill that was bereft of life; no birds sang and only two plant species survived, both alien. A team of graduate students and their professor decided a miracle was in order. After a thorough study of native species of flora and fauna as well as a diagnosis of what had created this disaster, they set to work.

What followed was a successful viable ecosystem of native plants, flowering trees, singing birds. This success has led to a really challenging project on Staten Island at the famous, (or is that infamous,) Fresh Kills landfill. This project, too, will eventually

succeed and has led to the creation of a young academic discipline, “urban restoration ecology”.

The necessity of restoration does not stem merely from the desire for beauty and disdain for ugly. Those insects, plants, and wildlife provide essential services in cleaning our air and water, preventing erosion, pollinating crops – you know, all those factors that do not show up in the math that determines our GNP but does, indeed make life worth living. The professor, Steven Handel, is the director of CURE, Center for Urban Restoration Ecology, a joint venture between Rutgers University and the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

On to the negative news! Does it actually take more than a few minutes to wash a head of lettuce and tear it up for salad? Is a cellophane bag of ready-to-eat greens so important to us that we can ignore the down side of this convenient product? And there is a down side. When consumers pushed the panic button after E-coli got into bagged spinach, the California growers of greens directed that fields be entirely devoid of wildlife. Ninety percent of farmers did as directed and cleared trees, plants, and brush, poisoned birds, squirrels, and mice, drained waterways or doused them with frog-killing chemicals and erected 8 ft. deer fences.

This exercise in overkill may not solve the problem since only 1 % of wildlife carries E-coli but 50% of cows do and all that barren soil invites wind-blown dust from cow manure, dust that could be contained by small grass buffers. Anyone for Virginia grown greens?