

Assisi Nature Council

The Garden. Articles.

Article 1.

Botanic Gardens: A Tribute to the Role of Beauty in Conservation of our Plant Heritage

by Maria Luisa Cohen, for BGCI

A theory of gardening was expressed by Joseph Addison in 1712 'I look upon the Pleasure which we take in a Garden, as one of the most innocent Delights in humane Life' (cited in Dixon Hunt and Willis 1997).

The instinct to cultivate is strong and independent of simple material necessity. Gardens and gardening are activities that, although associated with necessity, have given humanity centuries of pleasure. Botanic gardens, although mainly devoted to the acquisition and diffusion of knowledge, have a strong aesthetic element without which they wouldn't attract the wider public.

Utility and Beauty

Interaction between humans and plants cannot be reduced to mere economic expediency. Yet a more recent tendency to look for quantifiable use has reversed the ancient numinous look at life. An inhibition is caused by the sentiment of guilt, that if there's no use for something there cannot be any justification for wanting it. We have not taken into account an important human element; the human perception of, and response to, the natural environment.

We are rightly reminded that plant preservation is necessary for the survival of our species. Still, the debate on sustainability risks degenerating into a new form of instrumentalism, whereby the value of nature is assessed on the basis of producing something else; a material commodity. If it doesn't deliver the goods, its survival is doubtful. The issue of gene manipulation in agriculture brought about by the ever expanding need for food, already points to a substantial change in our perception of the function of nature and questions the importance of biodiversity.

While I leave the scientific side of it to the many experts, I am deeply troubled by the implications. If we could invent a means to be independent from nature, if we could really master it to the point of creating another nature more convenient and more pliable, what will then happen to what is called biodiversity, the richness of the plant

kingdom and the stability of the biosphere?

By chance, the name Flora was the name of the ancient Greek Goddess of fertility and the functions of giving birth and growing suggested the process of life, wealth and abundance. The principle of variety has been a recognised feature of the mind's delight in change, mirrored in the bounty of nature.

Here order in variety we see,

Where all things differ, yet where all agree

William Gilpin an eighteenth century English writer (cited in Prest 1981).

It is also the recognition that this diversity of life has an aesthetic appeal.

Two new documents give me some reason to hope for recognition of such a truth. One explains that there's a '...progressive diminishing of global and local biological diversity and of economic, scientific, educational, cultural, recreational and aesthetic values due to unsustainable human activities' (Convention on Biological Diversity 1992), which states the importance of beauty as an element of biological diversity.

A second document recognises the necessity of a shared vision of basic values, '...which are the preservation of the Earth's vitality, diversity and beauty' (Earth Council and Green Cross International 1999).

One thing should worry us; the loss of this beauty which is an assessment of environmental quality and health, and the perception of the balance, harmony and diversity, which are also indicators of good human development. The loss of beauty accompanies the loss of biodiversity, replaced by a few useful man-manipulated plants.

The image of environmentalism is too often linked to news-making issues, which are usually bad news and give a sense of powerlessness in the face of global disasters. The message is often pessimistic and moralistic, neglecting the fact that nature is there to be enjoyed and that its defense should be a pleasurable task, not a sacrifice. The emotional effects are somehow counterproductive, because these big issues detract from the tasks that each of us, with personal action, can undertake within our own place in the world.

Biological diversity is one of these tasks. It can be protected through the interest and love for the humble and ignored flora of our regions. These plants which have for so long nourished and cured us, are our sisters in the ecosystem and will continue to accompany us along the

path of our existence, if we allow them to prosper. This idea of preservation conjugates pleasure with an ecological life-style. After all, any small garden can give us an endless source of stimulation, delight and gratification, which is the form of aesthetic experience, not merely practical.

The Importance of Aesthetic Perception

I remember walking on a little tropical island of the Micronesian Archipelago and seeing to my surprise a clearing in the woods, where, by a tin-roofed shack, stood a glorious cultivated garden full of flowers, as if to prove that the longing for beauty is an irresistible force which fulfils some ancestral emotional need. In fact, the aesthetic perception of nature is not a frivolous subject; it is imprinted in our biological nature.

The force of appearance has naturally attracted all ancient cultures because it has a survival value. The senses are our most democratic attributes, equally shared by rich and poor, black and white, male and female, and they represent the organism's emotional response to the environment, and the basis for our thought process. The world enters our mind through chemical, mechanical and luminous sensorial receptors. According to Dewey, the aesthetic experience is grounded in the most primitive relationship between organism and its environment.

(Bourassa 1991)

This cultural arsenal can vary individually or according to groups, but there's a basic common heritage of direct, pre-rational, non-mediated apprehension.

Apart from food and shelter, the next preoccupation of humans is the finding of a mate, but this instinct is so bound with the notion of beauty, as to become a powerful means of selection. Beauty becomes an important factor of recognition. Its erotic function is of absolute importance for the species, it is genetically inscribed. From it derives the urge to decorate and beautify the body, home, surroundings, and tools. The practical scope sublimates itself in ennobling gestures. Religions adorn temples and offer gifts to the gods. The monuments erected by different civilisations testify to the need for the artistic expression that conveys ideas of serenity and transcendence.

An exquisite example is the Taj Mahal, suspended in a seemingly immaterial space, which gives it the impression of permanence. Significantly, one of the masterpieces of gardens in the world is its Mogul Garden, which elevated a complex system of engineering to the task of enhancing its sacred geometry. Artisans have produced early masterpieces everywhere such as Celtic mirrors, Maori paddles, and

American Indian pottery. Visual satisfaction is a powerful element that connects north and south, east and west.

Aesthetic perception has contributed to the expansion of the human mental and physical world. Many of the scientific writings of naturalists, in their apparent objective presentation, have the quality of lyrical descriptions and obvious delight. Scientists, far from being neutral or aloof in this department of the mind, have succumbed to the fascination of nature. To study nature and plants one had to love them. Listen:

Words cannot express the joy that the sun brings to all living things... Yes, love comes even to the plants. The actual petals of a flower contributes nothing to generation, serving only as the bridal bed which the great Creator has so gloriously prepared, adorned with such precious bed-curtains and perfumed with so many sweet scents in order that the bridegroom and bride may therein celebrate their nuptials with the greater solemnity...

These are not the words of a poet, but of the great botanist Linnaeus who devised the current system of nomenclature based on the sexual apparatus of the plants (cited in Mawbey 1997).

And another scientist wrote:

Nothing within the compass of the whole wide world yields a richer pleasure not only to the mind but also to the body, than the rich store of plants life and the copious and various produce of things growing in the earth...I know of no occupation which is more worthy or more delightful...than to contemplate the beauteous works of nature... (Laurembergius cited in Mawbey 1997)

Environmentalism and the Role of Aesthetics

The issue of plant conservation is an environmental issue. It is not the first time that environmental concern has been identified with aesthetic concern. Certain historic indicators show that the birth of Western environmentalism coincided with aesthetic interest, in the form of the discovery, appreciation of the beauty of nature, in the face of the growing alienation due to industrialisation.

A Sand Country Almanac (Aldo Leopold) was first of all a celebration of wilderness aesthetics, the real humus on which to grow a land ethic. The Forestry Commission (1919), the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (1926), First Town and Country Planning Act (1932), the Ramblers Association (1935), the creation of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England, and of National Scenic Areas in Scotland were institutions first and foremost aesthetically motivated. Surveys of people's opinions and feelings towards nature suggest strong aesthetic considerations, including outdoor pleasures and

health concern, together with moral, social and economic reasons. They have also proven that aesthetic appreciation is at the top of the list of advantages provided by national parks. As the art critic Kenneth Clark (1976) observed, nothing, except the pleasure of love, can accommodate every kind of person as does the sensation of a beautiful landscape.

Nature is not only a source of immediate physical beauty, but also a treasure trove of symbols and values on which we all rely...its manifestation stands for life itself, as well as growth, change, continuity, purity, freedom, mystery and the transcendent.
(Winifred Gallagher 1994)

We can conclude that without these aesthetic impulses, the environmental movement would not have been so successful, and bereft of much of its creative impulse.

The motivation of a lay public which visit botanic gardens is a promise of a sensuous experience, more than the opportunity for scientific enlightenment. So why not, after environmental ethics, shouldn't we recognise the existence of an environmental or eco-aesthetic? We could admit that one of the educative values of botanic gardens consists, among other things, in the celebration of their seductive appeal.

The Microcosm of Gardens

The aesthetic subject is so fascinating because it collates the physical and psychological sources of our knowledge with religious overtones, it is similar to the mystical experience, with which it can be assimilated. In *The City of God*, St Augustin describes lyrically the beauty of the world, a living demonstration of the magnificence and power of God, and asks what is the main point of the creation: usefulness or beauty?

There's no doubt that the origins of gardens have been religious, as most human activities had originally some religious meaning and associations. In the past, even the activity of cultivation was sanctified by paying attention to the divinities that controlled the seasons. In Mediterranean religions that share the same cosmological story, a garden had been the prime setting of human history, and Adam, the first man was a gardener. The Garden of Eden, which serves as the model for the good life, gave priority to the beautiful over the merely useful. In Genesis, God says that trees should be '...pleasant to the sight and good for food'.

In the study of gardens we are offered a panorama of human cultures encompassing virtually the entire history of the species. We can divine

their philosophies, their political, social, economic and artistic universe by looking at their gardens; and changes in the design, conception and cultivation of gardens reflect the changes of the dominant ideology.

They are an admirable collaboration between art and nature, offering a complete experience that engages all our senses.

Gardens are a celebration of nature in the vegetable kingdom and their beauty uplifts the spirit of humanity. From immemorial times, the power of plants and flowers to inspire the imagination of artisans, artists and poets, has been a sort of leit-motif which criss-crossed humanity's diverse cultures. An invariant innate instinct explains the development of common features in places and cultures that had no known connection. Floral decorations have been frequently used all over the world. The appeal of the flower is in its perpetual fragile beauty that speaks of the recurrent drama of death and rebirth in nature. With the rapid disappearance of the diversity of the world of plants, the inspiration not only for high art and poetry, but also of the more anonymous expression of popular art, departs.

Botanic Gardens

Gardens and botanic gardens bear the same origins in an ideological framework, which includes moral, social, aesthetic and economic considerations of the time in which they were created. Lately, reflecting the current ethos, botanic gardens have undergone some changes, becoming part of a bigger design for nature conservation.

The first impulse for the creation of botanic gardens was the re-creation of the Garden of Eden, where all the abundance of the flora created by God for the enjoyment and uses of man could be found in one enclosed place, which was to be beautifully laid out to resemble the original model; symmetrical and harmonious, like the Order of the Cosmos. The idea was to bring the scattered pieces of creation together into a garden.

The medieval monastic gardens initiated the scientific interest with the cultivation of therapeutic properties of herbs (the Simples) in the humble hortus conclusus of Benedictine monks, where religion, magic and knowledge met. Beauty was all-important, because was as an emanation of God. The monastic garden was also called *dulcedo et suavitas visionis divinae*, the vision of divine goodness and loveliness.

A quote from the Life of St. Francis of Assisi of Bonaventura shows us that already in the 12th century, and in a subsistence garden, the saint offers praise of weeds and a case for biodiversity:

He orders to the gardener to leave a strip of fallow on all sides of the

garden, in order that at the right time green wild herbs and beautiful flowers could praise the beautiful Father of all things, and in the garden he wants to leave aside a little area for sweet-scented herbs and flowers, which recall to the onlooker the eternal fragrance.

Certainly more advanced than some of our modern gardeners!

To delimit space is a sacral act and there is an intimate relationship between the beauty of the garden, the opulence of nature and the enclosure that protects it. This closed universe brings to memory the archetypal Persian Paradise as a separation from the world. European cultural exchange with the East enriched this vision and emphasised the elements of inviolability, health, bird songs, water and symmetry. Moreover, the old concept of the Sacred Grove dedicated to a divinity was transformed in the Temple of Knowledge, the botanic garden, as it is the ancient idea of a place where to study and conduct philosophical discourse (the Greek Gardens of Epicure or the Chinese Gardens that provided a retreat for meditation adorned with philosophical or poetic features). It is a place of perfection where all the distasteful or dangerous elements have been neutralised and where the scope is enjoyment in enlightenment.

Education

Inspired by such past examples, the educational possibility of botanic gardens is expanding, offering an integrated and multidimensional approach. They can take the lead from the imaginative world of gardens of the past, which served many functions and were theatres of popular entertainment, an aesthetic experience, teaching devices, places for mystical meditation and contemplation, with their universe of smells, sounds, colours and forms, enhanced and tailored for multiple needs. Leonardo da Vinci, in the Italian Renaissance, introduced innovative elements: hydraulic wonders, song et lumière, and animal life. Maybe the scientific approach has been too strict and has stunted the imagination and ignored what people are really interested in, in order to attract them and subsequently to impart knowledge.

Fortunately, in many botanic gardens today, the educational staff are getting the message and have a more adventurous and experimental attitude and offer, especially to children, the opportunity to smell, touch the exhibits, handle them, and get sensually involved by role playing and through theatrical performances. The physical involvement will excite the natural curiosity, as the poet Robinson Jeffers says 'Your love will follow your eyes' (cited in Williams 1990).

In a modern world so concerned with speed aided by technological prostheses, the natural rhythm is being forgotten. It is wise to put

aside time to feel, absorb and contemplate the beauty of the world, learning from the wisdom of cultures of our past. A dismantling cultural change is again in the air and it is shaping our idea of gardens and green spaces. The environmental movement is creating a new more sympathetic aesthetic. After the aseptic formality of the English lawn (which damages biological diversity, aided by pesticides, selected grass, herbicides etc.) and the modern tendency towards maximal means of intrusive technology which dismantles the sense of place, we are entering a period which is more ready to accept nature's own rules. We cherish a return to more natural gardening, under the influence of ecological concern, which involves the owner in the double role of aesthete and scientist.

We cannot of course pretend to save rare botanical species in a limited environment, but we can symbolise the beauty of threatened nature and raise awareness of its fragility.

Conclusion

As it is true that nature has no life of its own for us, except as defined by our needs and purposes, it follows that it can be preserved by cultivating those human inclinations and purposes which are in harmony with its authenticity and integrity. After all, only humans of all mammals, dedicate their life and efforts to the search, creation and preservation of beauty.

According to this thesis, botanic gardens today should address even more the value of aesthetic appreciation and imbue it with conservation concern. The historic gardens of the past were all designed with this in mind. The very design could be an educational experience and occasion. We recommend that today areas for contemplation and silence, arbors for love, grottoes, play areas for children, sounds of birds, religious shrines, and the creation of new ecologically inspired spaces should be incorporated within the design of botanic gardens in order to attract the uninstructed into them before you can begin to raise a consciousness of plant conservation. A pluralistic model is needed; one that includes the sense of beauty as our best guide for the management of nature.

...what seems right also looks good and arouses those pleasurable feelings which comprises our sense of beauty.
(Lovelock 1987)

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