

Garden Art or Kitsch?

When it comes to decoration in the garden, good or bad, surely the answer to the question concerning the appropriateness of gnomes or Palladian structures is, “it depends”. Years ago, my small granddaughter, with toes sporting a color depressing beyond description, announced, “Grammy, girls love tacky!” And indeed they do, as do the rest of us upon occasion. I have a few odd-ments in my flowerbeds that make others cringe and make me smile in memory of the friends who put them there.

Unless your garden is on display for a good-cause fundraiser, you are entitled to all the pink flamingoes, purple pigs, rusted sewing machine carcasses your heart desires. Perhaps you will eventually clear a corner of your garden as a retreat where there is little to distract you from sky and shade and silence. Gardens evolve to match the needs of the gardeners, whether to include swing sets or mushroom planks, large pools or small patios is a decision based on your situation, not a design model.

There are times when we cling to familiar things that have accumulated over the years and there are times when we realize that ‘less is more’. In gardening, too, the heart has reasons of which the reason knows not.

Recently I had the opportunity to visit a garden outstanding for the artistry of the landscaping and the quality of the many species it contains. What resonates in my memory are two things—the natural framing of the view of the river and the magnificence of the large boulders that were grouped in a bed along the border. Sculptured by centuries, each of those stones had mystical presence. One alone would have been arresting: the collection was a magnet.

Most of the time we can live happily with those blank spots that occur when a tree falls or a shrub dies. Letting in air and light is a plus for a healthy landscape. But other times we look for a place for something that we have been given or that has grabbed our attention and demanded to be taken home. Such additions have meaning and are an endless pleasure.

Other additions, and we each have a secret list, are really nothing but clutter and our gardens will benefit by the discreet censoring of such stuff.

A note on birds:

In Science News magazine there is an item on bird deaths by various causes. We are familiar with the decals stuck on large windows to warn away birds so we are not surprised that the annual toll taken by window collisions is between 365 and 988 million. There have been concerns over the birds lost to collisions with wind turbines because both the sites for them and the migratory patterns of birds are in areas of consistent strong winds. That figure is in the neighborhood of half a million. All of these figures are dwarfed by the toll taken by our beloved pet cats said to be between 1.3 and 4 billion!

A note on words:

There is a new word being bandied about by environmentalists. Of course, ‘environmental’ is also nearly new having followed Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring” into our collective consciousness. The newer word is ‘agroecology’ which may be defined as a collection of procedures that produce food without damaging the ecology. The aim of agroecology is to increase productivity in poor, food-deficient areas of the world while at the same time preserving ecosystems and improving livelihoods. It is a process of investment through education.

Our 20-20 hindsight has shown us the limitations of industrial agriculture that has resulted in loss of biodiversity, unsustainable use of water, pollution of both soil and water, and pressure on limited energy sources.

Common principles of agroecology include recycling nutrients and energy on-farm, growing livestock and crops together, and developing local agriculture using farmers' knowledge and experience to adapt science to the actual circumstances of their particular lands and climate. This challenging system produces real nutrition.

By using plants, trees, and animals in combination, by mimicking nature rather than an industrial model, both people and the environment prosper.

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