

Books that keep on giving

This surely is the season to read about other people's gardens as our own gardens are not demanding to be taken seriously. Most relaxing of all is a book, especially a picture book that allows you to take in the beauty without any attendant facts.

Dover publications has issued "Japanese Woodblock Flower Prints", a selection chosen from an extremely rare picture album of western plants and flowers by Tanigami Konan (1879-1928). Each page is a picture of one or two flowers with only the name, Rose, Tulip, etc. under it. The color gradation is astonishing as is the botanical details. The reproduction of the exquisite coloring that made the original volumes classic has been dramatically successful. The book is a treasure.

It would be an even greater treasure if just a page or two had been added to explain to those of us totally ignorant of the process of crafting woodblocks what differentiates that artistic endeavor from etching and painting for example. Even though modern photography of plants and flowers has become a fine art, we still are curious about other specialized techniques that brought them so vividly to life.

Another picture book, with text, is "Private Paradise – contemporary American gardens" by Charlotte M. Frieze published by The Monacelli Press. The fine photography features the work of outstanding landscape architects and garden designers currently working in the United States.

The pictures and text combine to give you an armchair course in design and planning. The garden locales may not often reflect the topography familiar to us in Southeastern Virginia, but the principles they expound are applicable here. Whether you are interested in features such as water, garden 'rooms', hardscape, or meadows, there are plentiful examples of the use of space and materials to achieve serenity.

The gardens pictured demonstrate the growing importance in implementing design for the health of environmental and ecological systems. For example, the plant materials used are native or appropriate to the climate and the landscapes are designed to use primarily rainwater with recycled water a second option. Drinking water from municipal water systems is most often a last resort.

Throughout the book it is apparent that the barrier that divides inside and outside is breeched! Some climates lend themselves to this openness with expansive glass that offers a view rather than walls to protect against the realities of weather either too hot or too cold. In studying the pictures and text I would hazard a guess that only a few of the gardens selected were redesigned long after the original house and grounds were established. Most seem to have benefited from concurrent planning.

To use the idea of the gardens flowing from the house, the design of house and garden needs to be a united project. Because life is what happens when you are making other plans,

most of us land in a house that is primarily shelter and a mortgage. We do the best we can to bridge the gap between inside and out but often our widest opening to outdoors is the view from the kitchen sink.

I remember an argument decades ago about windows: smaller windows cost less but if you are in your living room you should not have to stand up to catch the sight of a rabbit eating your tulips. End of discussion. Even without long windows you can add to the enjoyment of your garden from inside by clearing out the typical foundation planting, putting small plants at a distance from the windows and using the space between that back ground and the house's foundation for an attractive and private small garden. Gives you a personal 'resort' to enjoy at your leisure from a chair by the window.

The beautiful photography gives us a lot to admire and even though the sweeping views are not 'down home', they illustrate ideas we can use, such as planting trees to ward off winter's cold winds that raise our fuel bills and planting still more trees to cast shade on the sun heated patios and driveways that add to the drain on our hard-working air-conditioners. This is the time of year to plan, to do it slowly and enjoy the doing.