



The Armchair Gardener

Snowbound! Tomorrow I'll be able to walk around and admire the shapes of bare branches against white, and in a few weeks it will be time to start next summer's seeds. But today I'll build a fire, sweep a bare spot on the deck to spread some seeds for the clamoring birds, and imagine myself in other places, other gardens. I've been researching the best gardens from six continents and dozens of countries. Each is shaped by its culture and climate, and each is perfect in its own distinctive way. Come along with me to visit a few:

Sissinghurst (England). In a country famous for its gardens, Sissinghurst is the acknowledged prize. English gardens are the closest relatives to our New England gardens, and we have adopted elements common to grand houses and cottages alike: borders crammed with flowers, planned more or less successfully to produce a succession of bloom from spring through fall; backdrops of fences, hedges, or evergreen plantings; larger spaces divided into garden "rooms." England's colonialist history is evident in its gardens, which glory in plants collected from all over the globe. If you can't get to Surrey any time soon, visit Hollister House in Washington, Connecticut. This Sissinghurst-inspired garden covers 'only' two and a half acres, and its owner had to build tall brick walls, not having any convenient castle ruins already in place, but it brilliantly captures the exuberance of the classic English garden.

Kenrokuen (Japan). At the other end of the garden design spectrum is the very controlled, meticulously edited Japanese approach. There are flowers, but they are far less important than spatial relationships. The placement of every rock is carefully considered. Trees are pruned, not just to shape and show off their most striking branches, but often to frame a view through them. An English garden's design tempts you to discover what's beyond; Japanese elements invite you to stop and meditate. A serene Japanese courtyard garden is as close as the Center for East Asian Studies at Wesleyan University. For a larger strolling garden, visit the Roger Williams Park in Providence, R.I.

Hummelo (Netherlands). The home base of Piet Oudolph, a Dutch garden designer whose gardens broke the mold. Starting in the 1980s, Oudolph turned away from traditional design in favor of gardens that featured native perennials, lots of grasses, and a strong prairie influence. The effect is difficult to describe, but once seen, not to be forgotten. To my eye, success lies in what is not included. For example, our native

ironweed or goldenrod can look ragged and rangy next to large-petaled aristocrats like roses. But plant them in a sea of feathery grasses, and they're immediately at home. Rangy and ragged are suddenly harmonious, and even ethereal. Without the distraction of showy hybrids, their modestly-sized natural forms are better appreciated. It's magic. Hummelo closed to the public a few years ago, but the High-Line, one of Oudolph's most famous gardens, is as close as lower Manhattan.

Huntington Desert Garden (California). With over 5000 varieties of cactus and succulents on ten acres, this is one of the oldest, and widely considered the finest, showcase for desert plants. Plants ranging from twenty-ton cereus to tiny lithops ("living stones" look remarkably like pebbles) show Nature's many fascinating solutions to the problem of sustaining life in very hot, dry climates. Many have large, colorful flowers, albeit only during the brief spring wet season. Most cannot survive a New England winter, though there are a few exceptions. One is our native Eastern Prickly Pear, *opuntia humifosa*, quaintly nicknamed Devil's Tongue, no doubt by some barefooted colonial who had the bad luck to step on one. Most hot-climate cacti store water in their fleshy leaves as a strategy to survive dry spells, but the Devil's Tongue reverses the process: since water expands as it freezes, causing plant cells to burst, this cactus shrivels up as winter approaches, emptying itself of water. What a clever adaptation! We can also grow *yucca filamentosa*, which maintains a subdued but stubbornly green presence even in a blizzard. In its native range, along the east coast from Virginia down to the Gulf of Mexico, it is the only food source for the yucca moth, but up here its tall white flower spikes are visited by hummingbirds. You won't find any cactus gardens close enough for a day trip; they're found in Zone 10 or higher. If you're curious, your best bet is the vast conservatory at the New York Botanical Gardens.

Whether you visit distant gardens in person or via books and internet searches, you're sure to come away with new ideas for your own outdoor spaces. If you're paying attention, you're sure to learn something about the lives of the people who built them, the climate challenges they face, and the aesthetic principles they have developed. Bon voyage!