



Of Flowery Meads And Changing Aesthetics

Last week our garden club went to the Ivoryton Playhouse to see its latest production, Native Gardens. The plot involved two sets of neighbors: one dedicated to its perfect “traditional” garden of stiff flowerbeds, imported plants, and manicured lawns, the other with gardens planted loosely and naturalistically, with an emphasis on native species. It was very funny, and if you have a chance to see it before the end of its run, I recommend it. But even though the play is a comedy, it highlights a real dilemma in how we approach our home landscapes: how do we reconcile our idea of what is “beautiful” with what we know our ecosystem so desperately needs?

The American garden ideal derives heavily from European, and especially English, garden styles. But a bit of research reveals a very different concept of what a garden was. In early horticulture books, manuscript illustrations, and even tapestries, fair ladies sat in a ‘garden’ that was nothing more than a grassy area studded with a limited variety of small flowering plants—a ‘flowery mead.’ It was only later, starting in the sixteenth century and throughout its colonialist heyday, that England became a nation of international plant collectors. The plants settlers brought to the Americas were gathered from all over the world. In our country’s sparsely settled early days, the interlopers weren’t much of a problem. Many still aren’t, staying well-behaved within their beds. But however apparently harmless, the non-natives simply aren’t the preferred (sometimes essential) food for our insects and bees. And our approach to the ideal, with an emphasis on relentless weed control and ruthlessly clipped acres of lawn, make it even harder for our tiniest cohabitants, whether winged or crawling, to survive.

My own yard demonstrates the dichotomy of traditional and eco-conscious. My courtyard couldn’t be more traditional in its layout, and includes many cottage-garden classics: roses, lilies, foxgloves, iris. I’ve planted many natives too: dogwoods, American wisteria, penstemon, but still, the old world predominates. Going forward, I’m trying to choose mostly natives, but can’t bring myself to abandon the traditional favorites.

But the lawn is a different story. Across the country and elsewhere in the world, homeowners are being encouraged to adopt “No Mow May.” The strategy recognizes that many insect species are out and about, and trying to produce the next generation, in early spring, at precisely the same time we fire up the machinery and mow down all the natives (“weeds”) before they can flower. I was all in for No Mow May, and have been rewarded almost daily with a surprising variety of flowering plants that have been lurking, unsuspected, in the grass. Among those that were just waiting for a chance to bloom are small pink

daisies, sturdy white yarrow, dainty blue-eyed grass, several sizes of buttercups, and violets. There are also plants I added deliberately, like echinacea and butterfly weed, and those bequeathed to me by previous owners, like ajuga. I bemoaned its aggressiveness even as I delighted in the violet-blue haze it created a few weeks ago. And, of course, dandelions, which, as one of the earliest bloomers, are the answer to a bee's prayers. There are more than 250 varieties of dandelions, none of which are native to North America: they arrived—intentionally, valued for food wine, and medicinal uses—on the Mayflower. I don't know their names, but I can distinguish at least four or five different varieties in my yard.

I thought "letting the lawn go" would be painful. That it would look unkempt. That I was sacrificing beauty for science. But all these flowers, together with the graceful plumes grasses produce if they're not cut off at the knees, create waves of ever-changing colors and textures that rival anything Gertrude Jekyll ever designed. I wouldn't trade my meadow for the most golf-course-worthy lawn ever. Given half a chance, nature will retrain our eyes and change our idea of beauty. And that, of course, is what needs to happen.

I won't keep all of it unmown (which I'm sure will come as a relief to my neighbors). I want a small area for entertaining, and another to set off the more heavily-planted areas. All of it needs to be cut at least once a year, preferably in early spring, just before new growth begins; otherwise it will gradually revert to woods. (My lawnmower can't cut the tall grass, so if anyone reading this has a mower or tractor that can handle the first cut, please contact me.)

I hope you'll consider trying No Mow May yourself next spring, and try to leave at least part of your yard wild all year long. You, too, can live amid a flowery mead.