

A plea for real gardens and real gardening

By Henry A. Ross

The following article is based on a talk Henry A. Ross gave in April at the annual convention of the Garden Club of Ohio in Strongsville.

DURING MY LIFETIME, it has become clear to me that Americans have not yet even begun to scratch the surface of ornamental gardening. I have been increasingly aware of this during recent years. Many Americans do not even understand what the terms "gardening" and "gardener" mean.

Compared with England and other European countries, this country is centuries behind. In England, ornamental gardening has always been a way of life that provides immense pleasure and personal satisfaction to those who engage in it. The people are born with a love of gardening, and they garden because they love to do it and they love the results. They spend countless hours working in their gardens, visiting other gardens and searching out choice selections to add to their gardens.

European flower and garden exhibits and shows are the most magnificent in the world.

In England, many boys are eager to become gardeners because they have gotten the love of gardening from their fathers, who got it from their fathers and on down the line. In this country, people can hardly expect youngsters to have any such interest, since parents have no interest in gardening.

In America, people look at gardening as sissy. And I am sure parents would react to a teenage boy's statement that he would like to become a gardener with the same horror that they would to a teenage girl telling them she was pregnant.

In this country — for the most part, at least — there has hardly been any understanding of, or interest in, creating beautiful gardens. People have little desire to spend any time working in a garden.

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Mention the word "garden," and most Americans immediately think of a vegetable patch or a landscaped area, which are not gardens at all. Mention the word "gardener," and most people immediately think of a person who comes in once a week to mow the grass or to rake the leaves. That is not a gardener; that is a handyman.

These terms have been so corrupted and distorted in this country that they no longer mean what they say. If America is ever to become a nation of beautiful gardens and knowledgeable gardeners, people must begin to use these terms properly. If they do not understand the problem, or are unwilling to accept the fact that something is wrong, it will never be corrected.

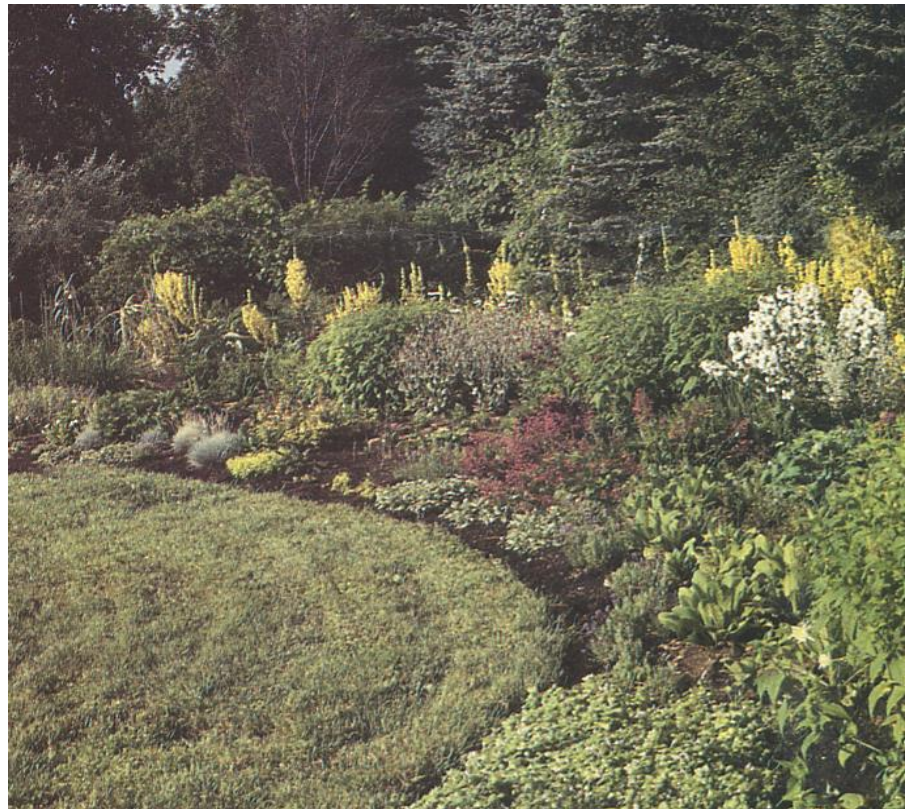
It is time people recognize that gardening is a very special art form and

that those who have the knowledge, talent and skill to practice it are truly artists and professionals. They are not menial laborers, as many people perceive them to be.

Gardening Vs. Landscaping

In most instances, what are referred to as gardens in this country are not gardens. They are, in fact, landscaped areas made up of green lumps of specific shapes and sizes that are intended to fill space, to look the same year-round and, above all, to require a minimum of, or preferably no, care.

The difference between a landscaped area and a garden is that, in a landscaped area, the entire emphasis is upon architectural features and effect — not upon plants. The plants used in a landscaped area are looked upon only



Gardenview plantings are based on the English cottage garden concept, which aims to incorporate a wide variety of plant types.



True gardens invite repose.

as architectural components — green lumps of specific sizes and shapes that remain the same all season and require little, if any, care. In a garden, the primary emphasis is upon each plant as such — upon what a plant does and how it changes from season to season, day to day and hour to hour.

In a garden, change is desirable and is considered an asset rather than a liability. Gardeners take for granted the fact that a garden requires a substantial amount of effort and care to maintain. They see their efforts as part of the cost of having a beautiful garden and do not consider the necessary care to be undesirable or an unacceptable liability.

For that reason, a garden is dynamic, ever-changing and extremely beautiful, while a landscaped area might just as well be made up of plastic plants that remain the same all year, require no care and fulfill the designer's goal perfectly.

Unfortunately, what is taught in American schools is almost entirely landscaping, not gardening. I vividly recall that while I was a student at The Ohio State University, Columbus, in the late 1940s, the landscaping curriculum was moved from the horticulture department into the school of engineering. I believe this is how the curriculum is viewed by most colleges and universities in this country.

Horticultural practices promoted in newspapers, magazines and books are landscaping, not gardening. And most people in America landscape, not garden.

Instead of staying at home and creating, maintaining and enjoying

beautiful gardens, Americans prefer to spend their time on the golf course, at a football or baseball game, or jogging around the block to work off their potbellies and dissipate pent-up energy.

Materials

Choice and desirable plants are available in this country, for those who search them out and are willing to pay the price. But for the most part, sources only offer the same rubbish that they have always grown because it propagates easily, grows rapidly, looks the same from spring to fall and, above all, requires minimal care.

Books and articles written in this country invariably stress only common and ordinary schemes and the desirability of low-maintenance or, preferably, no-maintenance areas.

The author of an article in a national garden magazine repeatedly suggested that plants requiring staking, dividing, spraying, pruning or any care at all, be left out of American gardens. By the time she was finished, the only materials left to use were plastic plants, since they are the only ones that do not require any care.

There is a world of plant treasures for gardeners to use. With them, Americans could create such gardens as the world has never seen. If the English have been able to create magnificent gardens using primarily old and obsolete plant varieties, just think of the kind of gardens Americans could create with the vastly superior hybrids available in this country.

If American gardens are ever to not only begin to catch up with English gardens but to surpass them in magnif-

icence, it is essential that plant professionals begin to educate Americans about how much pleasure they can gain from creating beautiful ornamental gardens and in getting out and working in them. Plantsmen should encourage them to garden, not only to gain pleasure but to compete with one another — to create a garden more beautiful than the one next door.

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Plant professionals must search out and use choice and uncommon plants and discourage the use of weedy and invasive ones, like vinca, pachysandra and common ivy. With the proper approach and some effort on the part of professionals, America can become a country of beautiful gardens and avid gardeners.

I have spent my entire life creating 16 acres of the kind of gorgeous gardens that anyone in the world would be proud of — hoping that they might start the ball rolling and that others would follow. But, although beautiful gardens and knowledgeable gardeners can be found on the West Coast and

the East Coast, things are different in the Midwest.

For some mysterious reason, most people in the Midwest would love to have a gorgeous garden only if it costs them nothing to install or to maintain and does not require any physical exertion on their part.

Schools should initiate real honest-to-God, gardening courses designed to train people interested in real, practical gardening instead of those only interested in sitting behind desks, designing plastic landscapes.

Inspiring Change

Plant professionals represent the horticultural power structure and together can make a change. I urge you to increase your emphasis on practical, down-to-earth gardening — to encourage people to take an increased interest in creating real gardens so that entire states can become massive and gorgeous gardens.

Perhaps the single most potent way of doing this is to sponsor local and statewide ornamental garden contests — highly publicized and thereby both prestigious and fashionable. I am sure that you are aware of the enormous popularity of the vegetable garden contest, which is conducted each year on television's "The Victory Garden." You could do the same thing with an "ornamental garden contest."

I also urge you to demand that newspapers and magazines broaden their scope to emphasize advanced gardening, rather than continue to publish only articles for beginners. Demand that they publish articles written by real gardeners instead of journalists.

Perhaps the most important thing you can do is to insist that schools initiate real honest-to-God, practical gardening courses designed to train individuals who are interested in real, practical gardening instead of individuals who are only interested in sitting behind desks, designing plastic landscaped areas. People falling into the latter group know nothing about real gardening and could not do it if their lives depended on it.

By myself, I have not been able to get the ball rolling — in spite of 40 years of effort. But with your help, I sure can.

The results will be breathtaking.



Creating gardens that reflect the true meaning of the word garden has been a goal of Henry A. Ross. On 16 acres of his land, he has pieced together 30 gardens that form a composition he calls Gardenview Horticultural Park.



Colchicum and *Ceratostigma plumbaginoides* lend a delicate touch