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Naomi M. Jacobs

University of Maine - Main, naomi\_jacobs@umit.maine.edu

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## CONSUMING BEAUTY: THE URBAN GARDEN AS AMBIGUOUS UTOPIA

Naomi Jacobs

What wondrous life is this I lead!  
Ripe apples drop about my head; □  
... Stumbling on melons as I pass,  
Insnared with flowers, I fall on grass.  
Marvell, "To the Garden"

Every garden is a utopian text, expressing the desire for a more perfect world as well as an implicit critique of the less-lovely world in which it is located. A sustainable garden is something more specific: an ecotopian text that attempts to model an ideal realm in which nature and humankind coexist in harmony. To engage in the creation of such a garden is to experience both a utopian way of knowing and a utopian way of doing, for the longer one gardens, the better one understands that a gardener's work is not limited to care of the plants themselves. When well and thoughtfully done, the gardener's practice of care extends to the soil, the insects, the birds, the mice and the groundhogs, and beyond that to the self, the family, the neighborhood, the community, and the planet.

All of this can feel rather a crushing responsibility for a beleaguered urban gardener trying to coax a tomato or two out of less-than-heavenly soil in something less than full sun. Like every utopianist, a gardener must come to terms with the gap between the ideal and the possible—between the perfect garden one can imagine and the local conditions in which one must work. And furthermore, the gardener's many layers of desire and levels of responsibility can never be entirely aligned. One gardener might specialize in the beloved ornamentals: the roses, lilies, rhododendrons, irises and such that were brought from far-away places by European adventurers who risked their lives to collect gorgeous specimens from around the world. Another

might prioritize environmental responsibilities and design the garden with an emphasis on native plants, pleasing to the eye, yet alluring to native pollinators and providing food for native birds and beasts. Yet another might create a flourishing vegetable garden, producing tasty meals for the family from spring through fall. A rural gardener with ample land could do all of these things, if so inclined, while still preserving unaltered woods and meadows.

But for an urban gardener with an over-active conscience, the choices are more stark, for every square foot devoted to ornamental plants (whether native or exotic) is a square foot that might have been devoted to growing vegetables for one's family or for the local homeless shelter. And even in a climate with a long growing season and a range of native food plants, every square foot devoted to food for people represents a square foot taken away from the garden that Mother Nature would plant if we gave back her ground. The very element of design in our gardens can be seen as an imposition of abstraction or control that does violence to nature. Symbolically, the garden represents a state of innocence. But in reality, every garden testifies to our fallen state, our separation from and opposition to non-human nature, not only as individuals, but as members and heirs of the human communities that have shaped the nature(s) in which we live and garden.

Taking this dilemma as my central problem, I will explore the challenges of sustainable urban gardening as an ethical activity. I will proceed in the personal mode, addressing the interpenetrations of 'utopian' nature and 'dystopian' culture at three loci that frame my own quotidian experiences of nature, utopia and the garden: first, my bioregion, known as '*l'Acadie*' by the French explorers of the seventeenth century, and still sought out as an Edenic paradise of unspoiled natural beauty; second, my green and quiet city, rich in parks and streams, and bordering the vast North Woods; and third, the small garden I have created on the tainted ground

of an old neighborhood in this city. This tightening spiral will bring me to an impasse: a sense that this place I inhabit—like every place of human habitation—is grievously damaged, that many of the choices I have made as a gardener in pursuit of beauty make me complicit in that damage, and that any action I might take in future will fall far short of what is needed to repair it.

I will be aided out of the ensuing paralysis by the work of contemporary thinkers who ask us to regard with skepticism the notion of ‘pure’ nature, and to seek instead an understanding of ‘natures’ in any given place as multiple, as dynamic, and as always in the process of being re-created. Once we relinquish the binary opposition of nature and culture—with its associated opposition of utopia and dystopia—we can begin to conceptualize a garden that functions like what Tom Moylan has theorized as the ‘critical utopia’: a text that acknowledges the dialectic between utopian and dystopian elements in every human endeavor, confronts questions of definitions, and emphasizes process rather than product.<sup>1</sup> With this in mind, I will re-imagine the ideal urban garden as a new kind of *potager* combining food for nature, food for people, and food for the soul. Finally, because one urban plot can accomplish so little on its own, I will envision the city itself as an unplanned collaborative garden, the combined product of all gardeners who create spaces for nature and for beauty in the city. This shared effort honors our competing responsibilities to nurture the natural world, to feed ourselves, and to satisfy the human hungers for beauty, creativity and community.

“THE WAY LIFE SHOULD BE”

I am fortunate to make my home and my garden in Bangor, Maine, a small New England city of 35,000 people. The state of Maine capitalizes on its reputation for clean air, clean water, abundant wildlife, outdoor sports and gorgeous scenery—a garden of unspoiled natural beauty—to market itself in utopian terms as “The Way Life Should Be”. Millions of tourists travel to Maine every year in search of a refuge from urban life, a return to a wild Eden, and many are not disappointed.

Though Maine’s wild land was for a time substantially cleared for lumber and agriculture, today 90 percent of the state is again covered in forest, as it was in 1846 when Henry David Thoreau made his first visit. The 12 million acres of the Maine North Woods are said to constitute the largest unbroken tract of forest east of the Mississippi.<sup>2</sup> More than half of the state is so sparsely populated as to have no local municipal government and no paved roads. Only 9000 people live in this ‘Unorganized Territory’, at a density of approximately two people per square mile; it would be difficult to find anything more like wilderness in the northeastern United States. At the heart of the woods is the 200, 000 acre Baxter State Park [Figure 1.] Bequeathed to the people of the state by a former governor, with the stipulation that it must remain ‘forever wild’, the park is a mecca for wilderness hikers, climbers, campers, kayakers, canoeists, and back-country skiers. Moose, deer, black bears and eagles are commonly seen.

Another popular tourist destination is Acadia National Park, which attracted 2.5 million visitors to the Maine coast in a recent year. ‘*L’Acadie*’ was the name given to this stunningly beautiful maritime region by the French explorers of the early seventeenth century. Fifty years earlier, Verrazzano had named the mid-Atlantic coast “Arcadia” because of its lush woodlands. In each case, the reference was to the Arcadia of Greek mythology, a place of beauty and abundance ruled by the great god Pan, where human beings lived a peaceful life in harmony with

nature. When Samuel de Champlain came to Acadia in 1604, part of an expedition sent by Louis XIII to establish a fur trade with the indigenous people of the North Atlantic Coast and the St. Lawrence Valley, he found a place far from paradise. The local Mi'kmaq people were thriving in this locale, but the French were ill adapted to its ways; cold and scurvy took almost half of Champlain's 79 men in the first winter, and the expeditions were called back after only a few years as unprofitable. Nevertheless, the region has retained the name "[Acadia](#)" and the aura of an idyllic place set apart from ordinary life [Figure 2].

A solitary hiker communing with nature near a pond at Baxter Park or Acadia, breathing the scent of fir and pine, listening to the rustlings of chipmunks and songs of birds, or watching an eagle soar above a remote stream, might feel that she has found a wild utopia. The truth, of course, is more complicated. In Maine as everywhere, human beings and natural forces have together produced the 'nature' that we find, whether we are in a lonely forest, on a rocky shoreline, or sharing a city park with fellow citizens on their way to the methadone clinic nearby. The state's immense wooded tracts contain only a few stands of old growth timber, and large clear-cuts are often concealed behind the so-called "[beauty strip](#)" that borders the interstate highway. About a third of the Maine forest is owned by the wood products industry and crisscrossed by a network of logging roads; the smokestacks of the Millinocket paper mill are visible from the summit of Mount Katahdin. Trailer trucks loaded with pulp logs rumble through remote villages, and sulfurous fumes foul the air of towns where certain kinds of paper are made. Pregnant women are warned not to eat fish from Maine's inland waters, which were long ago contaminated with PCBs, dioxin and mercury from mills, tanneries, and a chemical plant that manufactured chlorine for the paper industry. Despite the state's strong environmental laws, hot summer days often bring warnings of poor air quality, due to elevated levels of ozone and

harmful particulates. Maine's location is commonly described as "at the end of the nation's tailpipe," because weather patterns deliver to the Northeast the pollutants generated by coal-fired power plants in the Midwest. These toxic substances not only endanger human health but contribute to acid rain and acid fog, bringing acidification of lakes, resultant damage to fish and amphibian populations, and forest decline. Furthermore, the very hunger for a 'good place' close to nature that draws tourists to the state leads to increased carbon emissions, eroded trails, polluted waterways, and degraded habitats for native species—matching the dystopian visions of the most pessimistic of environmentalists [Figure 3].

The same interplay of utopian and dystopian realities is found on a smaller scale in my city and my back yard. Today a center of commercial and financial services for the rural northern half of the state, in the nineteenth century Bangor was the lumber capital of the world and one of the busiest ports on the Atlantic Coast of North America, with as many as 200 sailing ships tied up to its wharves on a typical day. The city's early wealth was drawn from the region's vast tracts of forest. Thoreau described Bangor as "a star on the edge of the night," surrounded by the "howling wilderness that feeds it".<sup>3</sup> Even now, passengers on a night flight into Bangor will see the lights of the city surrounded by an immense darkness.

To a casual summer visitor, this provincial community with its quiet streets, rambling nineteenth-century houses, and walkable downtown may recall idyllic visions of a simpler time, a world apart from the Boston-Washington metropolitan corridor that begins 150 miles to the south. Indeed, to a typical New Yorker, the town would not even qualify as urban. We live close enough to the edge of the wilderness that fox kits have been filmed playing at the edge of woods near a busy intersection, and black bears are frequently spotted in the 700-acre Rolland F. Perry City Forest. The opportunity to be alone in what we call "wild" nature is never far away. The

forest's nine miles of walking and skiing trails include a boardwalk through a forest wetland, peat bog, and a five-acre 'moss lawn' liberally sprinkled with pitcher plants and other rare species [Figure 4]. The city proper features many small parks; one trail follows the banks of the Kenduskeag Stream for almost three miles past sheer granite cliffs, as well as rapids and waterfalls. As if in continuation with the surrounding forest, lines of mature trees run down the middle of each long block in the older neighborhoods, their green alternating with the grey stripes of asphalt streets. It is not unusual to see a groundhog or a raccoon in residential areas, and a moose occasionally wanders onto the city's streets during blackfly season.

Yet even from the center of the City Forest, one hears the ceaseless traffic on the interstate highway or the activity at the shopping malls just a mile away. Toxic runoff has harmed the amphibians in the stream that runs through the mall's paved area, and local environmentalists fought a mostly-losing battle to prevent a 'Big Box' merchant from building a new superstore that would impinge upon the 300-acre Penjajawoc Marsh, one of the premier bird habitats in the state and nesting ground for several endangered species. There can be no clear boundary between city and nature. Even a protected area like the Bog Boardwalk is created and defined by human activity and marked by such activity, whether the scientific stations set up in the bog, the rumbling of the jets ferrying tourists to the Bangor International Airport and military personnel to Afghanistan, or the fact that nearly every year, some section of the boardwalk is vandalized and must be replaced [Figure 5].

At every level, then, the natural and the urban infiltrate each other. On scales large and small, the best human efforts to protect and to appreciate nature are vulnerable—not only to human depredation, but to natural processes of wind, water, and growing things. Asphalt streets and sidewalks may restrict moisture to the city's trees; but tree roots also heave asphalt and crack



sewer lines. Trees are felled by developers, but also by wind and ice. This is the nature we have. It is one we have made, but one also always making itself. In our own gardens, we seek to balance these simultaneous processes of making and unmaking, to bring into reality our own visions of a good place in which we can work together with those natural processes. But our attempts are always constrained by the history of any given piece of ground.

## ON TAINTED GROUND

My own small home garden allows me a regular taste of what Gerard Manley Hopkins called “the dearest freshness deep down things” in the rich flora and fauna just outside the back door [Figure 6].<sup>4</sup> When purchased, the property was nearly bare of plantings. There were a few white lilacs, which someone had cut to the ground in a renewal pruning; a patch of common orange daylilies; and one ancient peony bush, its blossoms white with a creamy center. There was an unkempt barberry on one side of the front steps, a scraggly privet on the other, and a gigantic Norway maple by the gate. The rest was grass, and a smattering of trees that had planted themselves along the property lines. Since then, the lawn has steadily shrunk to make room for flowerbeds and a kitchen garden occupies the sunny space on the back lot. The original lilacs, now fifteen feet tall, fill the spring air with exquisite fragrance. The plantings include over 300 different shrubs and perennials, including multiple varieties of peonies, roses, lilies and daylilies, as well as sizable stands of native ferns and wildflowers—some gathered from friends’ woodlots, some arising on their own initiative. Tending to this flourishing garden gives me great pleasure and solace. It can seem a magical place on a pleasant spring day, with birds twittering, squirrels

chattering, lilacs and tulips blooming, pollinators at work, a dragonfly cruising for a mosquito snack, and a fresh breeze rustling the trees. There is no question that the garden provides me with a refuge from the pressures of work and the realities of life outside the fence, or that it creates a nurturing space for nature. More than one visitor, seeing it for the first time, has termed it 'heaven.' It is what gardening magazines like to call an "oasis" or a "sanctuary". But this backyard Eden is also a toxic site, burdened by the effects of human activity since the land was cleared and houses were built.

First and foremost, my plants do not grow in good earth. Thanks to the inexpensive lumber milled in Bangor in its early history, this city's houses were built from wood. Two thirds of them date from before 1939, a period when most paint contained lead. These large clapboard structures sit close together, typically on one-eighth acre (50 ft x 100 ft) lots. Due to the harsh climate, houses must be repainted frequently. Although lead-based paint was banned in the United States in 1978, lead paint chips have fallen to the soil with every round of scraping over the past century and a half.

The oldest part of our house was built in 1885. Lead concentrations in the flower beds that border the long south wall measure over 800 parts per million—nearly three times the levels considered safe for food crops or children. Levels are lower, but still too high for comfort, on the back lot, where we once blithely cultivated a large vegetable garden that we thought was organic. A soil test told us that our urban 'oasis' was inextricably entangled with the natural and human history of our community. To remove the contaminated soil would have exceeded our means. We still grow vegetables in a 20 x 30 raised bed filled with clean soil, but the rest of that area has been relegated to flowers.

In addition to the lead contamination, certain areas of our property are actually built upon waste. The L-shaped lot sits at the highest point on the block and slopes down to the streets on either side. The builders created two flat areas: one, on the back lot, for a barn that no longer exists; the other, on the front lot, for the house itself, whose shallow fieldstone foundation sits on rock ledge. These terraces were built up with random debris and covered with a thin layer of soil and grass. To force a shovel into some parts of this ground is nearly impossible. A grub hoe will turn up lumps of coal, veins of ash, broken window glass, fragments of old china, rusty nails, harness bits, and lost marbles [Figure 7]. In fact, my attempt to remove unsightly chunks of asphalt from one bank ended when I realized the garden shed was likely to slide down the slope if I continued to dig. The asphalt *was* the bank.

In this, my garden continues a long tradition, for it is believed that domestic gardens originated in dump heaps outside dwellings, as “unanticipated consequences” of human habitations.<sup>5</sup> Because of this substrate, some plants I might like to grow simply will not survive, especially when the clay soil and the density of tree roots are factored in. I have tried and repeatedly failed to establish native groundcovers such as the charming bunchberry or wintergreen, both of which would have offered food for birds. Instead, I have resorted to *vinca minor*, the pretty but much-maligned periwinkle. As I have learned about the importance of native plants to the ecosystem and the dangers of exotic invasives, I have come to see such plantings with more critical eyes. When periwinkle escapes from cultivation into woodlands, this non-native invasive can choke out native growth.

My garden is also contaminated by certain plants that were here well before I took possession. A human being probably planted the large Japanese barberry, a notorious invasive, by the front step. A bird planted another, almost as big, that has sprouted under a maple in the

side yard. We cut that one to the ground and dug out what we could of the bright yellow roots, but some were so entangled with tree roots as to be inaccessible. Despite our labor, the plant is even larger than before and has begun to start ‘babies’ nearby. It seems that nothing short of heavy chemicals will defeat this aggressor. I would gladly rid my garden of barberry and fellow invasives like ground elder and the creeping bellflower that is infiltrating ever-larger sections of my flowerbeds despite many efforts to dig out its fleshy rhizomes. On the other hand, I would be sorry to lose certain other invasives that are problematic on ecological grounds. When periwinkle cloaks a city bank filled with trash and bounded by a sidewalk, colonizes dry shade in collaboration with a native invasive such as the woodland anemone, or emerges from snow as the spring’s first green, it is a very welcome presence [Figure 8].

Similar dilemmas are found in our sidewalk forest. Very few of the city’s trees are native maple, beech, birch or conifer. American elms that once lined the streets succumbed to disease decades ago, and the dominant variety is now the Norway maple (*acer platanoides*), introduced to North America by a Philadelphia nurseryman in 1756. This maple was considered so desirable that George Washington planted a pair at his Mount Vernon estate.<sup>6</sup> Today the Norway maple is on many ‘most hated plants’ lists and banned for sale in some states. In the wild, it can quickly crowd out the native trees that provide essential food to hundreds of species of caterpillars. It secretes a growth inhibitor to discourage competitors, and few plants other than invasives will thrive under it. Our yard is shaded by a dozen of these trees, which self-seed copiously [Figure 9]. Every year I spend a good deal of time pulling up maple seedlings and cursing the trees as I do. I know all the reasons why I should despise them, yet I also know that their tolerance for poor soil and urban pollution means that they bring cool shade and greenery where other trees might fail. Those we have taken down have provided fuel for our woodstove, giving us the

DELETED:

pleasure of warming our house with the product of our own little woodlot. All over the city, these trees provide homes to squirrels and birds; they also feed several varieties of *Lepidoptera*, including the caterpillars of the Io and Polyphemus moths, if not the hundreds of varieties that would be fed by an oak.

The gigantic Norway maple next to our front driveway is one of the few large trees remaining on the street. It is not a tree I would plant, but it is the tree I have, and I love it. This majestic specimen has a spread of 70 feet and a height of 50; its trunk is four feet in diameter. It withstood the Great Ice Storm of 1998, when ice-laden limbs crashed on power lines all across town and the night sky was filled with blue flashes as electrical transformers exploded. Its vivid chartreuse flowering is one of the loveliest events of spring; and the shower of gold on the pavements when its blossoms drop presages the brilliance of its autumn foliage [Figure 10]. I've never hugged this tree (or any other), and I don't talk to it, but I do give it the occasional appreciative pat as I pass by. Its days are numbered. Several large limbs have already been taken down for safety, and every year it drops smaller branches.

If I were a native plant purist, I might feel obliged to have it removed immediately, along with the other Norway maples in the yard, and to replace them with native oaks and maples that I would not live long enough to see mature. But when this tree is gone, our house will be exposed to the full force of the summer sun, shade gardens will shrivel, and I will grieve the loss of a beloved presence in our neighborhood ecosystem. I am not prepared to sacrifice this tree, with which I have an intimate relationship extending over thirty years, to a principle, however persuasive. Nor am I prepared to sacrifice other beautiful plants I have fostered over nearly thirty years, even if they are taking up space that might be devoted to more practical or more ecologically sensitive choices.

Due to this complex of imperfect decisions and contradictory intentions—my own, my predecessors', my community's, even those of the plant-loving daredevils who brought back lilies, rhododendrons and peonies from China, poppies from the middle East, irises from Siberia and lilacs from the Balkans—there is clearly no chance of a perfected realm. Looked at in a certain way, my garden is a tainted site. Even in my efforts to make it more beautiful, I have sacrificed nature to culture, devoting far too much of my precious space to non-native plants that play little part in the local web of life [Figure 11]. I am persuaded by Doug Tallamy's indictment of the harm that our lawns do to the ecosystem, even when grown without chemicals.<sup>7</sup> I take Kerry Dawson's point that "[h]uman aesthetics rarely correspond to ecological principles."<sup>8</sup> I can even entertain Mark Treib's claim that the making of a domestic garden is an act of domination, that "we value the garden because it allows us to maintain control over a piece of land, to shape it, foster it, nurture it, and even punish it, according to our feelings, ideas, and whims. Control also implies power".<sup>9</sup> Such domestic dilemmas play out on a small scale the larger dilemma of the entire human presence in the natural world. We are a part of nature, and yet, our activities change nature and often damage it, whether in our backyards, our towns, our bioregions, or the planet itself.

## FROM 'NATURE' TO NATURES

However, at some level I know I am mistaken to set up beauty and pleasure against ethics and utility. Such an opposition replays an equally problematic one between human and non-human nature—between civilization (which involves both human use and human pleasure) and the wild.

What do I see if I imagine my garden not as a ruined version of ‘pure’ nature, but as what Doolittle calls a “hybridized matrix” in which multiple natures coexist?<sup>10</sup> In pursuing this line of thought, I follow geographers and ecologists who have argued for new understandings of nature(s) and of the human relationship to place. Doreen Massey, for instance, asks us to understand places as dynamic entities, with multiple identities and no clear boundaries that could distinguish ‘inside’ from ‘outside’. In her view, a place is a processual entity, “constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus”.<sup>11</sup> This is an insight that holds true whether the place in question is urban, rural or wild.

If I adopt this view of the garden and of nature itself as places of multiplicity and process, places whose relations include those between people, plants, insects, voles, birds, and bats, I can see and appreciate the simultaneous natures inhabiting my small plot. The layer I have consciously designed contains ornamental plants both native and non-native: exotic clematis, hybrid shrub roses, hostas, hydrangeas, epimediums and such, but also native ostrich ferns, Solomon’s seal, trillium and bloodroot. As I have become aware of the value of native plants, I have added shrubs and small trees providing food for birds, such as pagoda dogwood and winterberry, whose bright red berries persist into winter; such plants happily coexist with species from distant locations.

The garden also contains an ornamental layer that was designed by natural forces: the birds, the bees, and the wind. A native aster of unassuming aspect seeds itself in a dry corner, and Virginia creeper is blanketing that asphalt-ridden bank. The native buckeye that has sprouted in one garden bed must have been planted by a squirrel. Trout lilies and a Jack-in-the-Pulpit hitched a ride with the duff beneath the fern a friend dug for me. The chokecherry that volunteered by the porch is a scruffy little tree, but robins relish its berries, which glow garnet-

red in the late afternoon sun. Spores of moss and hay-scented fern germinated in the woody loam where a rotted stump had been; the ferns are now a charming feature there in dappled shade. My responsibility in this aspect of the design is simply to edit the volunteers, weeding out or relocating some, and leaving others to spread at will.

Our kitchen garden is another layer without clear boundaries between the wild and the cultivated, the useful and the (merely) beautiful. A milkweed has sprouted in the broccoli row. Self-seeded purple coneflowers infiltrate the garlic, and wayward clematis vines twine up the sunflowers along the fence. Roaming strawberries carpet the ground under a lilac. On the hot side of the house, tomatoes, peppers, and basil in large pots join lilies in the lead-contaminated flowerbeds. Some of these plants feed bugs and birds. Some feed people. Some serve pollinators. Some simply feed the soul. All make up a part of utopian nature in my small urban plot [Figure 12].

As I tend to this “metropolitan nature”, I gain a sense of ‘home’ that is inextricably bound up in plants, including non-natives.<sup>12</sup> Lilacs from the Balkans are now an iconic element in the New England spring, and in mine. An old-fashioned rose in my garden (perhaps *rosa spinosissima*?) is a descendant of a plant brought from England by the first European settlers. It was a gift from Bill Chesley, a former student of mine whose family has lived in Maine since the 18th century. Bill dug it from the garden of his grandmother, who called it “Thoreau’s Quaker’s Rose” and said it came from a homestead Thoreau visited on his way to “Ktaadn”. I find no reference to true Quakers, or to a rose in bloom, in Thoreau’s account, but have no reason or wish to doubt the family lore. The plant is briefly beautiful in flower, then sets equally attractive near-black hips that don’t much interest the birds but spark up the slow time of year for humans.



Indeed, my mental map of this garden contains all the people who've given to it. Krista, who lives two doors down, gave me the fragrant lemon thyme and sturdy cotoneaster; when her daughter was married, flowers for the reception were cut from my beds. The fabulous, floriferous apricot daylily came from MaJo's house in the woods [Figure 13]. Judith helped me dig the trillium and ostrich ferns from her family's woods on a spring day when we watched harbor seals from her deck on Penobscot Bay. The "Double Delight" and "*Jardin de Bagatelles*" roses were birthday presents from my sister Ramona, and many of the perennials were grown by bagpiper-nurseryman Pete for sale at an annual peace-and-justice fundraiser. The rhubarb start came from our neighbor Bob, who lets me add my garden debris to his trailer when he's making a run to Public Works. When I mow what's left of the grass, I remember Leo, the elderly neighbor who used to do this for me because, he claimed, he needed the exercise. To give space to these plants and others with similar resonances is to honor the history of the place and the unfolding process that has produced this garden; it is to honor the relationships between gardeners as well as the relationships between people and plants.

I do not, of course, mean to deny that the human history in nature has often been destructive. As William Cronon wrote in his essential article, "The Trouble with Wilderness", "Calling a place home inevitably means that we will use the nature we find in it, for there can be no escape from manipulating and working and even killing some parts of nature to make our home". But, he continues, the solution is not to seek a "flight from history" in some imagined pristine wilderness, untouched by human activity. Rather, "If living in history means that we cannot help leaving marks on a fallen world, then the dilemma we face is to decide what kinds of marks we wish to leave". Our home includes both the garden and the wilderness; we inevitably

inhabit a “middle ground” and “need to embrace the full continuum of a natural landscape that is also cultural”.<sup>13</sup>

A part of doing so involves accepting the ambiguities and compromises inherent in every choice we make. It can be sobering, but also tremendously freeing, to relinquish the dream of perfection.

## BREAD, ROSES AND BUGS: TOWARD A MORE-THAN-HUMAN POTAGER

Perhaps it is precisely through the utopian model, as understood in contemporary discourse, that we can best imagine a dynamic coexistence of beauty and use, the natural and the human. According to Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, “utopias allow the aesthetic and political attitudes, which are usually mutually exclusive universes of discourse, to play with each other, to spin around, and spin with each other”.<sup>14</sup> In such a utopian state of play, I will imagine in this final section an urban garden occupying Cronon’s middle ground of sustainable use. Its gardener would follow ecological practices, of course, in seeking to minimize harm to the web of living things. The garden would feed non-human nature as well as people. But the garden would also *of necessity* be beautiful as well as useful. That is, it would not be restricted to native plants or plants with food value for birds, insects, or people. It would assume that the human aesthetic instinct deserves to be fed as well. Thus, this garden would be a reconceptualized version of the *potager*—the ornamental kitchen garden.<sup>15</sup>

The potager is that rare endeavor in which productive, aesthetic and social labor can be integrated. The dream of such integration has long been a strain in utopian discourse: the horn of

plenty, after all, spills over with flowers as well as fruits. As women in a 1912 textile strike famously proclaimed, “Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses!” Perhaps the most eloquent advocate for beauty as an ethical and political goal was William Morris, who believed that all human beings deserve a “full life to which the perception and creation of beauty . . . shall be felt as necessary to man as his daily bread”.<sup>16</sup> A garden combining the growing of food plants and the growing of flowers is the quintessential practice in which the production of one’s daily bread can be simultaneously an act of community and an act of perceiving and creating beauty. Writes Florence Krall,

The kitchen garden is not a sculptured abstraction symbolic of logical control and domination. Its plans and plantings emerge from an integrated theme based on practical necessity, convenience, and esthetic and sensual satisfaction.... This kitchen garden is a middle ground that centers and encloses.... It cultivates in us a feeling of belonging and a connection to the land, to its creatures and its climate and to the neighbors and neighborhood.<sup>17</sup>

By no means does every potager represent an unambiguously utopian enterprise. Some of the most famous began as clear expressions of monarchic power. The nine-hectare *Potager du Roi* at Versailles was created by Quintinie from 1678-1683, by order of Louis XIV. It included 30 gardens (of which 20 remain), including some 5,000 fruit trees. The heart of the garden was the *Grand Carre*: sixteen large squares in geometric design, arranged around a central pool and surrounded by espaliered pear trees. Other garden enclosures were dedicated to asparagus, melons, and strawberries, to provide the royals with delicacies out of season. The King liked to view the gardens from a strategically located platform, an arrangement that has been described as “agricultural theatre”.<sup>18</sup> The politics of this kind of potager are not difficult to critique. Such

gardens have historically been maintained by armies of ill-paid workers, to feed the vanity and the luxurious tastes of idle courtiers or landowners. Reportedly, the Sun King even took lessons upon occasion from one of the gardeners—an activity anticipating Marie Antoinette’s fondness for dressing as a milkmaid and milking cows that had been carefully cleaned by the servants before the Queen came near. Today, in its post-monarchic manifestation, the king’s potager has a new life as a tourist destination. Containing about 50 types of vegetables and hundreds of unusual varieties, it is productive as well as beautiful. Locals shop for groceries at a weekly market on the palace grounds, and children are allotted squares for school projects.

Another famous potager that elevates the aesthetic dimension to its ultimate degree is the twentieth century creation located on the grounds of the renaissance Chateau de Villandry in the Loire Valley. Here too, intricate geometric designs with symbolic import are created using vegetables chosen for their visual qualities; the beds are edged with three miles of clipped boxwood, and the design is changed twice a year [\[Figure 14\]](#). According to garden writer Anna Pavord, “The thought of actually eating any of the vegetables in the vast potager at Villandry is quite shocking. Rich ruby chard, metallic blue leeks, shining parsley and frilly lettuce in bronze and green are used like richly textured paint. It’s a work of art”.<sup>19</sup> In a severe mood, we might feel it an obscenity to devote land, energies and resources to growing food plants as art, while people go hungry and caterpillars find no familiar plants on which to feed.

But once again, we need not see aesthetics and ethics as opposed, nor must we ask every garden to honor every good. The quality of attention that goes along with aesthetic appreciation and creation is distinct from but also compatible with the quality of attention required for good husbandry. As environmental ethicist Roger King notes, “the domesticated is our space. It is from this world that we move out into the wild landscape, either in fact or in imagination. Our

ability to do this with respect and attention to details presupposes an education of our moral perception to overcome the habitual and acculturated anthropocentric neglect of nature”.<sup>20</sup> The artistic dimension in gardening intensifies such “respect and attention to details” in the relationship between people and plants. A person who loves beauty will be more sharply attuned to color, form, and texture than a person concerned only with function. Thus, a visitor to Villandry may take home a more vivid appreciation of the beauty of her own cabbages.

David Cooper has argued that a garden is not precisely a work of art, but also not precisely a natural phenomenon.<sup>21</sup> Our aesthetic appreciation of a garden falls somewhere between appreciation of a painting and that of a landscape. As an art, the garden is akin to the ephemeral works of British artist Andy Goldsworthy, whose on-site arrangements of found materials such as leaves, twigs, mud, icicles, and flowers are intended to weather and disappear. In many ways, gardens also resemble Tibetan sand mandalas, those intricate patterns painstakingly created grain by grain over a period of days and then ritually destroyed—usually swept up and carried to a stream to be poured out [\[Figure 15\]](#). The Sand Mandalas are believed to have powers to heal and purify and to “transmit positive energies to the environment and to the people who view them.... A mandala's healing power extends to the whole world even before it is swept up and dispersed into flowing water—a further expression of sharing the mandala's blessings with all”.<sup>22</sup> Such beauty is created with the full intention that it be impermanent: it is created *in order to be destroyed*. Just as the mandala's grains of sand are returned to the sea or river, Goldsworthy's natural materials rot down to humus or erode away to sand. And just so, the elements of the domestic garden are shaped with full understanding that the plants' beauty will be swept away by the seasons.

The kitchen garden differs from these other arts in that it is created to be un-done in a

specific way: is it created *in order to be consumed*. In this, it perhaps most resembles the art of baking. Why should anyone bother to make a pie beautiful, or to ornament a loaf of bread with elaborate designs? There's really no answer but pleasure in the making, and love for those who will consume the results. The gardener cultivates these plants so that their roots, seeds and fruits can be taken into human bodies. To the extent that the kitchen garden is an ornamental one, the gardener's hungers for beauty and for the expression of creative energies are also fed. When building a 'more-than-human' potager, the eco-gardener will expand this circle of care by consciously cultivating plants that provide food for other creatures, and will learn to regard a tree tattered by caterpillars not as a problem to be solved, but as evidence of abundant life. Such a gardener might give space to a plant for which he has no particular liking, as an act of affection for and collaboration with the butterfly whose caterpillars will devour its leaves and the birds who will eat the caterpillars. With time, the gardener may even gain a liking for the plant and come to regard it as beautiful, for the very reason that it nourishes life.

Unlike Goldsworthy's or the Tibetan monks' materials, the materials of the garden are living, growing things. Thus in a very real sense, the plants are co-creators of this beauty. Charles Lewis conceives of this partnership as grounded in the fact that "Green nature and human nature are both expressions of the pervasive life force that permeates the planet".<sup>23</sup> We can see this relationship at work in the way that many gardeners speak of their plants as having preferences, as 'liking' or 'not liking' a given location or soil; we may even experience gardening as an act in service to the plants, tending to their needs as one might tend a child. Some indigenous peoples sing songs to certain plants, attributing to them personalities of a dangerous lover or intractable child.<sup>23</sup> A gardener with an ecological consciousness will extend this sense of fond relationship to all forms of life that are fed by the plants we encourage to grow

in our gardens.

Paying attention to what vegetables like and don't like gives us another reason to bring the beauty of flowers into the vegetable garden. According to folk wisdom, at least some of which has been experimentally confirmed, marigolds discourage nematodes, bee balm improves growth and flavor in tomatoes, geraniums repel cabbage worms and Japanese beetles, nasturtiums serve as traps for some pests and deter others, and petunias discourage the asparagus beetle. Evidence is inconclusive on how well such measures really work, but at the least, the practice of companion planting provides flower-loving gardeners with an ecological justification for devoting precious space to dahlias and chrysanthemums as well as strawberries and squash. William Morris considered art to be "the expression of man's pleasure in labour"; there is no question that the art of a potager with its trellises, fanciful designs, color-coordinated lettuce beds and patches of herbs that are never harvested, is a natural expression of the gardener's pleasure in laboring with plants.<sup>24</sup>

## THE GARDEN AS CRITICAL UTOPIA

I began this essay with the claim that a garden is a utopian text, expressing a vision of an ideal relation between human beings and nature, and even embodying aspects of such a relation. After considering dystopian aspects of our relation to nature, both in and out of the garden, I have come to a different formulation. Perhaps our ecological situation demands that we think of the garden not as a utopia in the sense of a vision of perfection, but as what Tom Moylan named the "critical utopia" which "reject[s] utopia as a blueprint while preserving it as a dream". The

critical utopia incorporates into its very form the “conflict between the ordinary world and the utopian society opposed to it ... [and focuses] on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within the utopian society itself” in order to develop “more recognizable and dynamic alternatives”.<sup>25</sup> The critical utopias of the 1970s, such as Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Callenbach’s *Ecotopia*, and Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*, are open-ended, raising more questions than they answer.<sup>26</sup> They present visions of more perfect worlds and set their readers on a productive journey toward that utopian horizon, but also maintain a certain ironic awareness that the horizon is ever-receding.

To understand one’s garden as a text of this sort is to devote all best efforts of mind and body to building a home place that enables and embodies a more perfect relation between the human realm and the beings (whether sentient or insentient) of the non-human realm. But it is also to remain aware that such an enterprise can never be pure and will never be completed. We so often do too much, or do the wrong thing, in our relation with nature, and yet we can never do enough to honor the wealth and beauty of its gifts. In this, our care of our gardens is much like our care of each other, and requires the same kind of humility and gratitude.

The urban gardener can find some courage in regarding her own garden as part of a much larger, decentered and dispersed utopian project—one that has no grand plan, no coherent vision, but finds its meaning in process rather than product, and recognizes the impossibility of perfection while yet “preserving it as a dream”. In my own city, the sometimes-unwitting participants in this larger project include those families who patiently petitioned City Hall for permission to build and tend raised beds on an abandoned tennis court. The project includes the inhabitants of one dilapidated house who like to sit on their porch on a Sunday morning smoking, cussing, drinking beer, and admiring the flowers and vegetables they have planted on



every square inch of their corner lot, including the 'hell strip' between the broken-up asphalt sidewalk and the street. It includes neighbors who swap seedlings and divisions, and passersby who compliment a stranger's plantings. It certainly includes the generous folk who 'Plant a Row for the Hungry' in order to help the local soup kitchen, as well as the bird-lovers who wade through knee-high snow to stock their feeders all winter long. But it does not exclude the gardeners who pursue beauty alone: the rosarians, the peony fanciers, or the elderly gentleman who patrols his tiny lawn for dandelions. All such plant enthusiasts are motivated by a deep love for growing things. And even if they don't grow milkweed for the monarch butterflies or tomatoes for the table, such gardeners are utopianists, for by entering into an intimate relation of care with the natural world —however fallen—in their own backyards, they join the community of gardeners whose zinnias and bean tepees beautify the city's sidewalks and streets, and thus cultivate a larger space of perfection.

A particular house in my neighborhood hasn't been painted in many years, and one of its porch columns is askew. I have never seen its inhabitants. What I know of them is confined to the patch of sunflowers they start from seed every May. When I walk up and down that street, I take pleasure in these bright flower faces. In the autumn, the birds feed there. This too is part of my urban garden.

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## Figures



Figure 1. View from South Ridge of Mount Katahdin, Baxter State Park. Photograph courtesy of Nico Angleys.



Figure 2. Summer Evening on Gorham Mountain, Acadia National Park. Photograph courtesy of Sam Hess.

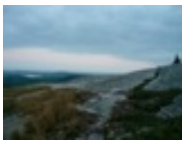


Figure 3. Worn trails atop Chick Hill, near Bangor. Photograph courtesy of Annette Giesecke.



Figure 4. Pitcher Plant (*Sarracenia purpurea*) in Orono Bog. Photograph courtesy of Sam Hess.



Figure 5. Entering the Moss Lawn, Orono Bog Boardwalk. Photograph courtesy of Annette Giesecke.



Figure 6. Lady's Mantle (*alchemilla mollis*) after a rain shower. Photograph by Naomi Jacobs.



Figure 7. Urban harvest. Photograph by Naomi Jacobs.



Figure 8. Periwinkle (*vinca minor*). Photograph by Naomi Jacobs.



Figure 9. Maple seeds on Judith's ferns . Photograph by Naomi Jacobs.



Figure 10. Big Tree in autumn. Photograph by Naomi Jacobs.



Figure 11. Pete's Poppy "Princess Victoria Louise". Photograph by Naomi Jacobs.



Figure 12. Kitchen Garden. Photograph by Naomi Jacobs.



| Figure 13. MaJo's daylily. Photograph by Naomi Jacobs.



Figure 14. Le Chateau de Villandry Gardens. Photograph courtesy of Geoff Livingston/Flickr.



Figure 15. Young monks clearing the Hevajra Sand Mandala away. Tharlam Monastery, Boudha,

Kathmandu, Nepal. Photograph courtesy of Wonderlane/flickr.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/wonderlane/3245091152/in/photostream/>

Alternate images:



Old Growth Timber in Maine Woods. Photograph courtesy of Nathan Stormer.



: Native ferns and self-seeded forgetmenots. NJ



native solomon's seal and self-seeded columbines. NJ



Shady Garden. NJ



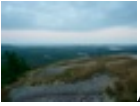
Shady garden crop. NJ



White spider on peony NJ



Zucchini flower with striped cucumber beetle NJ



Alternate version, Worn Trails (Annette)

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