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Author:

[Lyndon, Donlyn](#)

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Caring about Places: Gardens

Gardens hold a special place in American culture. They are more likely than baseball to be the genuine national pastime. Probably everyone's life has been touched at some point by a garden: a grandmother's garden (the first one I remember), a rose garden, a vegetable garden, a public garden, or even a prolific window box.

We are told, (and are inclined to believe), though, that garden design is at a low ebb, that it needs rejuvenation through more professional attention and public recognition. Why might this be so?

One answer may lie in the confusion between the act of gardening and the making of a garden. Gardening, however satisfying it may be, does not of itself create distinctive gardens, any more than practicing the piano leads directly to concert performances. Pride of authorship, combined with the intimacy that results from constant nurturing care, goes a long way toward ensuring that a garden will please its maker, but that is not enough to ensure excellence of design. Conversely, paper is not dirt, and the care (however much) emplaced on it cannot yield living results. Excellence in garden design, as elsewhere, involves the coincidence of broad understanding and obsessive personal attention.

There are also troubling questions of patronage. For whom are gardens made and by whom? In the early part of this century, the English magazine *Country Life* could

comfortably maintain that "no one has ever been found to doubt that [gardens] should possess a definite relation to the houses they adorn." Their illustrations tended toward sweeping terraces and rose pergolas hundreds of feet long, interspersed with topiary and statues. Cast figures entitled "kneeling slave" appeared in their publications with appalling regularity—precursors of the nasty, offensively colored figures still found on some suburban lawns. Presumably their readers would have had little trouble with the suggestion made by one of our contributors in this issue that the proposed garden would be inhabited by scientists, theologians, and convicts, with the last (convicted of we know not what) performing maintenance.

The grand gardens of the past depended, clearly, on command of great resources and on a leisure class sufficiently dedicated to their perception. They were, at first, private affairs, even when they embodied the state.

There have been, of late, few patrons for gardens of such scope. And when they have appeared (usually in corporate guise), scope has tended to take the form of sweeping naturalized scenes rather than anything that would speak in terms of confinement and intensive observation. "Of course," you will say, "who can imagine paying for the amount of attention required to maintain an intricately designed garden?" We should. The time has come, I would venture, for

communities to create places that incorporate splendid understandings of both the natural forces and the cultural patterns we live amongst. Gardens can become popular emblems of our determination to care about the world.

How will the body politic ever come to such an unexpected conclusion? Only by being shown. The exhibition reported on and debated in this issue is an attempt to focus attention on the garden as a subject for design. The National Country Garden, also reported on, is an attempt to encourage people to garden with imagination, even in the most limited of circumstances. Though both are directed more to private than public situations, they each show ways that the professions can bring possibilities to public attention. The issues they raise and the suggestions they bring forward deserve continuing vigorous attention. So, indeed, does a good rose.



Donlyn Lyndon