


## PREFACE TO THE *EXPANDED EDITION*

 **I**N THE YEARS LEADING UP TO THE WORK ON the original edition of this book, published fifteen years ago, I was a beginning gardener. I remember being a bit awed by a neighbor who offered me some groundcover transplants while casually mentioning that it took twelve years to establish a garden. Oblivious to the long view of things, in the years that followed I went right along creating my own garden—more precisely, gardens—driven by the sheer force of will and enthusiasm for my new obsession. Forty feet of hostas and iris next to a forsythia hedge, a sprawling bank of lilies, specimen shrubs in a nearby meadow, shade gardens, cosmos gardens for cutting, a big vegetable garden, and a sixty-foot long perennial bed with stone edging, in addition to foundation plantings on all sides of the house and roses in the front yard along the fence. For years, whenever I was able to leave my home in New York City, I worked nearly the whole day in April, May, and June, even July, planting more spaces, ever envisioning new garden plans.

I learned to love working with plants, digging in soil, just being outdoors observing them, and, when indoors, looking out of the windows of my house into the yard and meadow beyond, dreaming through the old maple trees. My favorite time has always been the evening walk

around the yard when I inspect all the plantings, trying to determine how each is doing, if any seem in exceptional form, or perhaps stressed out by the weather. It's the time just before the magisterial Hudson Valley twilight. I never tire of examining the plants, moving them from one place to another, even bandaging a broken stem from time to time (I got the idea from Chekhov).

Oh, like so many travelers, I have had my moments in European gardens picturing this or that plant or fence or wall or pond back home in Catskill. How I would love to see Italy's oleanders or umbrella pines or the linden trees from the allées of palaces on the continent in my own garden; if only our roadsides had the English plantings; if only the Hudson, more beautiful than the Rhine, had lovely vineyards trailing down its riverbanks. But, then, back home, little by little I become attached to my own garden because it is mine. Alas, no sooner had I gotten my garden in full swing—it did take at least twelve years—than I realized that I had made too many gardens to care for, especially since I was traveling abroad for much of the last decade during the summer months. I didn't like coming home to find that my deer neighbors, who were sometimes lounging under my picnic table in the morning, had eaten all the lily buds.

Now I am in my second life as a gardener, having grassed over the lily bed and the hosta and iris garden and the cosmos cutting patch and considerably shortened the perennial bed and the vegetable garden. I have taken out the conventional yews and planted many more beautiful or fragrant shrubs, today with greater attention to texture and patterns of growth and color, especially variegation and blue and silver hues. I learned to consolidate my plants rather than having too many different species all in one place. I became a ruthless pruner. I also learned to accept the independence of nature, by now having lost several old pines to aphids and two poplars to the wind and numerous flowers to the winter frost and fruit trees to the passage of time. Plants, like texts, lead their own lives in the world, I have come to understand.

In thinking about the new edition of this book and reading over some of the original selections which mention the old flower favorites, it has become clear to me that in the years since I started gardening, so many of the old farmhouses in the Hudson Valley, particularly in Greene Country which I know best, no longer offer hospitality to the sweet pea and hollyhocks that used to adorn the front steps or barns. The houses

have been sold or destroyed and many of the old flowers are unfashionable today, like the flowery wallpaper that framed their parlors. The old houses with prewar furnishings and plantings that I used to show visiting friends searching for a country house are, two decades later, mostly repopulated by New York City folk who have changed the plantings to express the new species of desire.

In the years since this book was published there have been significant changes in the region—to all intents and purposes, my garden world—that serve as a microcosm of much larger national issues. Even as city people seek out rural life, the loss of so much agricultural land has forever changed the countryside. Current environmental concerns have led to local conflicts over business interests and historical restoration, zoning laws, protection of farm land, and stricter legislation for waste sites and cement plants. But, new social forces have also led to the rehabilitation of formerly polluted land and to the designation of more nature preserves and a renewed interest in the Hudson River. Environmental, agricultural, economic, and political issues are all intertwined in the ecology of the garden “plot” which is, after all, the story of a culture.

In Catskill and elsewhere in Greene County, many of the farms now produce the organic fruits and vegetables that are sold in the farmer’s market in New York City’s Union Square and are bought by the upscale restaurants who tout their “local” offerings. The farms are worked by a growing number of Mexican laborers, some of whom now populate the upstate towns. These same farms also produce the food in co-op organizations subscribed to by Manhattanites. Yet, many of the farmer’s market shoppers and restaurant customers don’t know where their food supply comes from and have never visited the Hudson Valley (perhaps haven’t even heard of it).

Paradoxically, this same produce is not available in the supermarkets in Catskill whose fruits and vegetables are shipped across country before arriving here, often discolored and tasteless. When I asked one of the workers at Price Chopper why the local apples were not available—in one of the major apple growing regions of the world—he didn’t seem to understand my question. This general lack of connection between gardening, place, and labor is fostered by the images in garden books and magazines which tend to emphasize the garden alone, without human presence. The denial of its relation to culture is further exemplified by the scant number of 20th-century American paintings

featuring gardens or gardeners, compared to, for example, French art. And yet, the other side of that absence is the impossible beauty of the glossy garden photograph, like the unreal bodies of models whose photos appear in fashion magazines. Most gardeners do their own work and what matters to them is observing over time the fruits of their labor.

The world of gardening has seen many transformations over the last decade, not the least of which is its growth as a major American pastime and industry, complete with designer tools and clothing and the continuing quest for bigger and brighter and hardier plants from more and more exotic places. Surely sight now takes precedence over smell in the garden experience. What has gradually taken place is the increased blurring of boundaries in garden writing, food writing and the writing of history. Likewise, attention to environmental and health issues and the controversies of biogenetic engineering, framed by new attitudes toward the natural world in both its urban and rural manifestations, has pushed the subject of gardening, like food, toward investigative journalism. The rise of the personal essay has also contributed to opening up many more aspects of human experience. The new edition of *American Garden Writing* acknowledges these changes, which is why I added the selections in the final section of the volume, titled "Education of the Gardener."

Poetic reveries of the garden have drifted naturally toward politics and culture, without denying the sheer pleasure of gardening as an activity with often deeply spiritual attachments. Garden writers have simply become more aware of the global implications of local life and increasingly activist in their concerns. But that just means that they are reconnecting to the ancient tradition which joins culture and horticulture in a more worldly historical perspective. Any way you approach life, it all began in the garden.

Bonnie Marranta  
Catskill, New York  
May 2003

PREFACE TO THE  
ORIGINAL EDITION



WHEN THE EIGHTY-YEAR-OLD MARCUS TERENTIUS Varro sat down in 37 B.C. to write *De re rustica* as a guide to husbandry for his wife, he pointed out that fifty Greek sources on the subject already existed, if she needed further assistance. That husbandly gesture seems hardly likely to occur again, so vast has the literature in the field grown in the intervening two thousand years. Besides, too few people, much less a statesman/landowner, have time to write the six hundred or so books Varro produced in his lifetime.

But, more to the point, what the Greeks and Romans left as a foundation of thought demonstrates how expansive a range of topics such treatises encompassed then: the care of fruits, crops, vines, animals; religion, history, myth; ecology, philosophy, aesthetics. The concept of cultivation described a way of being in the world, with the result that the same word made civilization a synonym for husbandry. To cultivate both the land and the mind were regarded as activities of a responsible life, and so for centuries the idea has come down to us that the measure of civilization is the attitude of a people to their land. Regrettably, in our time a misguided sense of progress has separated one kind of knowledge from another: the mind from the body, humanities from science, agriculture from ecology, philosophy from action, the in-

dividual from a common good.

Likewise, natural history is often isolated from our understanding of the history of the world. History books are filled with exclusions, among them the place of nature in human consciousness. They tell instead of wars, the lives of kings and queens and statesmen, of exploration and invention, the creation and destruction of cities and cultures. Few tales are told of any other species than the human one. How simple it would be to include with our other histories those of plants and animals in the world, their habits and habitats. How many know the names of the plants in their neighborhood, or the birds and butterflies that frequent them? If naming is the greater part of possession, we live as strangers in paradise.

Research on this book led me to the conclusion that there is a theme larger than the one I initially envisioned, in the way Americans thought and wrote about plants, and worked in their gardens. The evolution of gardens and gardeners is inseparable from patterns in American society. That the lives of plants follow the same developments as the lives of people is not surprising because they share the same cultural and economic circumstances. Horticulture, like art, commerce, or technology, is one more historical portrait of a nation, in any given time and place.

So close to recent times American gardeners have struggled to name, to plant, to study the species of a New World. Out of this effort has emerged a rich heritage of horticultural documentation that extends from the seventeenth century to the present. If the notion of a garden belongs to the history of ideas, then garden writing, like other literary genres, offers its own perspective of the American imagination.

We search for answers to the great questions in books and ancient wisdom, even in statistical data, the new oracle, when quite simply, there are times in history when knowledge grows on trees. Since the beginning of time philosophers and writers and craftsmen have made the symbol of the tree part of the poetic life of civilizations. My own favorite arboreal fantasy is depicted in Italo Calvino's joyful novel *The Baron in the Trees*, in which a young aristocrat in protest against society goes up into the tall trees of Northern Italy one day and never comes down again. From his leafy home the baron as an old man writes a "Project for the Constitution of an Ideal State in the Trees." Alas, we

are not so fortunate in our time, having neither leaders who can imagine such a life, nor the network of trees to support us.

Those who like myself woke up early the morning of October 4 last fall to the white sound of cracking branches witnessed a stormier scene in the relations of people and trees. The unseasonal wind and snow blasts that sent trees toppling throughout the Hudson Valley, then moved on to stun English parks and gardens from the deep green sleep of time, showed that nature has no thought of us. We are the spectators, the setting. I wonder if the orioles, perennial boarders in an old silver maple, will come back to a Catskill tree whose unwitting new airiness has transformed its shape. As somebody once said, we don't live in the first chapter of Genesis. If I will never see Capability Brown's now damaged landscapes, I can console myself with poppies left in Etruscan tombs.

Now as I sit and write these words from the center of a city, snow is falling outside and I wait anxiously for spring to come again. Fantasies are easily packed in snowflakes. Yet, bare trees bring their own semaphoric calm to the glow of urban skies. I know that flowers need their privacy to go underground for a time of sexual frenzy unknown to us mortals who envy their abandon. When I look out the window the ground acts as a blank mask—a sheet of ice melting into a sheet of paper—on which I project my thoughts of how to write about ephemerality.

I judge a garden by the gardener who cares for it, the one who invests space with daydreams. What is a garden but a species of desire? How well I know the downward gaze into the face of the earth, the feeling of a luxurious body in good, dark soil that slips through the fingers in the rush to return to its dirty delirium. Each gardener creates an ideal world of miniature thoughts that drift languidly into each other like flowers on a dry afternoon. Here silence has the rhythm of wishes.

Gardens have that special resistance beautiful things offer to our understanding. Some days I think it is enough to watch a hummingbird wander into the sweet tunnel of a trumpet vine climbing up a summer sky. Maybe gardening is a form of worship.

Strangely enough, I feel at home in this ephemerality of time because I have spent many years experiencing it in the theatre as a theatre critic. I still feel the same sense of melancholy in a winter garden or an empty theatre. Even more of a coincidence, thirty years ago another

theatre critic, Joseph Wood Krutch, edited a collection of garden writing, his *Gardener's World* featuring selections from around the world and through the ages. Really it is not so difficult to move from a theatre to a garden. Each creates a world in a space that celebrates pure presence, and the fabulous confusion of nature and artifice, which is to say, reality and illusion. At least one half of gardening is dreaming yourself into a new setting.

For me it started with a house in the country and a new landscape, then learning the names of plants, buying them, too many, dividing them for friends, getting their surplus, looking at catalogues and going to nurseries, buying more plants, now old garden books, eventually finding myself in a garden too big to care for unless I quit my job. This, I think, is the general pattern of a gardener's life in its beginning stages.

It is very rare for anyone except professionals in the field or retired people to have the luxury of doing nothing but gardening. This book is filled with contributions by gardeners who were also historians, explorers, statesmen, editors, architects, scientists, novelists, preachers, entrepreneurs. Little by little they discovered the world as a garden. At that point everything changes, and suddenly one's whole life becomes the life of a person who gardens.

The next step if one is a writer is to find a way to turn gardening into a book project, so you can explore gardening as writing, at last unable in any season to give up the pleasures of manual labor.

Catskill—New York City  
January 1988

Bonnie Marranca