

In Search of My Garden

by Dan Hinckley

TWG Editor: Most people admire Dan Hinckley, co-owner of Heronswood Nursery in Kingston, WA, for his horticultural prowess. I, however, admire him most for his writing skills. Dan's entire catalog is a joy to read, largely because of his sense of humor. Many of his essays can also be very lyrical and abiding. "In Search of My Garden" is such a piece, and I thought it just the ticket for us gardeners to usher in the year 2000. Thank you, Dan, for the permission to share it. It's way better than I could have written.

In early November, equipped with a high-strung cup of Seattle's Best and a queue of bird feeders outside our breakfast nook window at dawn, I ponder things. I say "things" only from the obligation of finishing a sentence in the way that Mrs. Lashua, my fifth grade teacher, would have demanded. Quite frankly, and simply and incorrectly, I ponder. From the bedroom, NPR rebroadcasts accounts of ruined lives, and when they get to the part where she says, "the worst disaster this reporter has ever seen," I say in near perfect synch, "the worst disaster this reporter has ever seen," for it is the third time this morning I have heard her say this, and it is only 6 am, and it seems like a mindless enough, though sad enough, accomplishment for anyone, so early in the morning, before the day has begun.

Like blown leaves, the small birds scatter in the

approach of a Steller's Jay, that comes again to empty the large feeder of seed as it solicits the random shells of sunflower within by a sideboard shovel of its beak. I feign indignance, yet I am mostly happy that it comes here to feed, for its exotic, turquoise plumage is sufficient compensation for its wastefulness, and besides, indignancy is entirely too loud at this hour.

With one eye on the jay, the chickadees hang upside down in the contorted filbert and tap against the catkins in a fashion that I have come to recognize as no more than kitten play. I reflect momentarily on the account that I have just read; that these tiny birds can regenerate memory cells on a yearly basis. In fact, it is one of the few creatures currently known to be endowed with such abilities. In so doing, they jettison those cells already expended; molecularly imbedded moments recalling precisely the location of each seed that had been secreted away the year before. I watch each spirited peck upon the buds of the filbert, and I silently hope that these, my tiny birds, remain unfettered by those that might study them, for the magic of their brains

seems clear enough to me, even at this hour, and even as I pour my second cup of coffee.

Then, again, I remember what I was meant to ponder here this morning, most deeply, as I am prone to forget momentarily what has weighed upon my mind, and will stalk the conundrum until it is again found and it swashes down for a long slumber, not unlike the manner that a bird might approach her nest and find each egg, and position each correctly beneath her to begin again worrying them to hatch. For it was the garden that I was to look for today that suddenly, with a dread equal to what I supposed it would be when it was remembered, returned abruptly. I will look again, with a daze that one might expect from one whose third cup of coffee has yet to ignite, for a garden that I possess.

As has been repeatedly banged about in life, in verse and prose, there comes from the business of living the torture of insufficient time for that which brought about the passions of life in the beginning. So much, in fact, that one falters and can not pursue the passion at all; an author too possessed by writing for words, or a musician too infatuated with music for notes, or a gardener too overwhelmed by growth for growing. So. So.

Yet to be sure, I have a garden, I

An advertisement as seen in *The Northwest Herald*, 8/26/99:

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Where Beautiful Gardens Begin

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TWG Editor: Wow! What's the discount on the ones that don't have needles?

think, as I stoop to pull the errant weed from the beds that extend from my office, or as I, at least, wave my hand in the correct directions when it comes time to plant or remove or prune, as I leave for the airport, or another meeting, or another hiring, or another meeting. Yet with the chickadees again upon the feeder, I realize that there must be a reckoning of circumstance and desire; a repossession of innocence and sensations that, when remembered, come like a hard hit against the window, when feathers are left pressed upon the glass, and you dread looking to the ground.

Might it be, I wonder, that tiny bit of bog, between *Gunnera magellanica* and *Gunnera prorepens*, that I have watched, wondering who will win the battle and when the battle will be won? Is it the ant hill in the midst of our rock garden, that had established and grown for eight years, with debris of past gardening years piled in a heap of memories, and the weight that I felt when inexplicably, the ants simply disappeared? Listening; a song in the morning, and wondering to whom it belongs, or noting the line of flight to determine where it nests, or what it carries to the nest, and if, as you walk by, its reaction betrays a brood of nestlings or simply a nest of eggs? Paying heed to the slide of snakes in the grass, for I can never hear them, and the silencing of frogs as it slithers by, for obviously they can.

And if these are my parameters of a garden (though to be sure, I will ponder this again tomorrow and next week, as I sit here again in the early morning, and worry to remember), it should be enough. It is, to be sure, supremely more than just perfect culture and precise color, extraordinary position and startling contrast. Much

more than passionate grooming or superlative collecting, or a perpetual line of dirt beneath the nails. The garden becomes a continual caress of what the process brings, and a perfect understanding of the fullness that it embodies.

At this hour, I remain satisfied that I again have, for the moment, found the garden. And in this still morning, as I drink yet more coffee, and watch the jay shovel my feeder to its bones, the words of Barbara Jordan, the late congresswoman from Texas, come from seemingly nowhere. Words that I had not thought of for many years, yet they purl to the window and startle me in their precision of the questions at hand. "Each day as I rise," she said, shortly before her death, "I look for that kernel of excitement that surrounds me and which I have never seen before. And then I simply do the day."

As I rise from the table, content to get on with my living, the chickadees return to the feeder.



Dan Hinckley has just published his new book, *The Explorer's Garden: Rare and Unusual Perennials* [Timber Press, 1999]. The book contains "some of the most exciting, challenging, and satisfying perennials currently available to Western gardeners", according to Roy Lancaster's foreword. In it, Hinckley describes hundreds of species, varieties, and cultivars from 75 genera of herbaceous perennials which should be better known by gardeners. He should know: he grows over 9,000 species at Heronswood Nursery. You may contact Mr. Hinckley or order the book by calling (206) 567-5458 or heronswood.com.



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