

Can We Learn to Live with a Mess?

In the bitter heat I haven't been watering, doing penance for having turned the faucet all the way 'on' rather than all the way 'off' (don't ask) and receiving a staggering bill for water, none of which went to flower beds. To my astonishment, the color is wonderful! Lots of phlox, rudbeckia, gaura, even roses survive. No, none of them would merit a picture in a catalog, but they are cheering when we need cheering.

Now I wonder, can we venture on a path that redefines a proper garden from one requiring high maintenance and formal orderliness to one that is nature-inspired and replete with wildflowers? Honestly, I don't know. It seems to me that it is instinctive to want to create order by straightening, organizing, clearing, cleaning, fixing, reusing, and weeding until we happily drop from exhaustion. Years ago I decided I didn't enjoy mowing grass, pulled it out, resulting in what a neighbor termed a jungle. The planting that remains is supposed to have a rhythm created by contrasting foliage color, texture, size, and density. It is only partially successful, restful if messy.

Given that history you can understand that I ordered a book listed in a discount catalog, "On the Wild Side: experiments in new naturalism" by Keith Wiley. Written by an English gardener with 25 years of experience in the southwest of England, the book can't be translated into a design handbook for southeastern Virginia. However, the focus on studying plants in their native habitats can be used to advantage everywhere there are gardeners trying to create gardens that fit the local setting without needing a staff to keep beautiful.

One lesson Mr. Wiley learned was that perfect loam was not the only soil that would produce flowers. Seeing spreads of glorious blooms in inhospitable soils he realized it was possible to have a garden under less than ideal conditions by using the plants that were happy there. The lesson of using what you have in your home landscape can be seen in our local wealth of azaleas. Their colors can be garish when magenta accosts red brick but there are wonderful whites and soft pastels that create a four-season landscape of harmonious beauty. In wanting vivid color all the time, we forget that green is a color, not just a background color.

Virginia is so deeply green it takes an effort to see beauty in other background colors. In a large part of the world green is rare, even missing. We hear of the golden hills of California, grays of stone and sagebrush, yellow of sand, tans of marsh grass, and of course, amber waves of grain.

Decades ago beds of bulbs were dug up, replaced by masses of geraniums, in their turn dug up. Who has time for all that? In our zone 7 we can leave the bulbs, particularly our best-beloved daffodils, to rest amid a spread of low-growing grasses, sedums, thymes, even daylilies. They offer soft shades of gold and green and a dilatory progression of brighter colors. It may not be traditional perfection but it is natural, lovely and easy!

Once introduced to a garden where they fit; many plants self-sow, creating touches of color here and there but not tidy blocks. Black-eyed Susans will do that and I think their strong gold is more welcome when not confined to a solid mass. Phlox makes itself at home. Tall heads of deep rose appear against a hedge where they were never planted and the white one, 'David'

has descendents where the relief of white is needed. The bright red of 'Starlite' against mauve might clash but actually when there is not a lot of one color it tends to melt into the scene. Any plant that can keep on blooming for weeks of sizzling weather can come up any color it chooses.

Every garden is a different ecoculture so by trying many and tossing some you will find those plants most likely to live happily in yours. A good place to start is with plants having the genes of those native to the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Even without an exhaustive list, you will recognize them as those that stick around. The list includes aquilegia (wild columbine), aruncus (goat's beard), asclepias (butterfly weed), baptisia (blue indigo), coreopsis (tickseed), liatris (gayfeather), monarda (beebalm), physostegia (obedience plant), and asters.