

CHAPTER I

THE VIRTUES OF GARDENING



The central argument of this essay is that the activity of gardening improves both people and land. The claim about improving land is modest because I recognize the critique of our attitudes of domination towards nature – of seeing nature as just a resource to be shaped and used by humans – that has been developed in the field of environmental philosophy. However, I argue that in regard to the specific context of the garden we nevertheless can and, indeed, should endorse gardening activities like increasing the fertility of the soil by good husbandry, assisting the flourishing of plant life, and designing with an awareness of wider environmental contexts. I also argue that something that is for the good of the garden (as opposed to good only for human enjoyment) is required to support the stronger claim that gardening is an activity that improves the moral character of those who engage appropriately in it. To develop this argument I look at those gardening practices that, as an incidental side effect of their purpose, increase our patience, humility, respect for reality, caring for others, and open-heartedness. Although these virtues can be learnt through practice and engagement with nature in general, I argue that they are brought together in a unique way in the relationship between garden and gardener – and that they can proceed from small things such as the micro-practice of noticing a bud open.

What Counts as a Garden

The definition of a garden I will be using is an enclosed or demarcated outside space with living plants. Definitions are hard to frame precisely and often examples better serve the purpose of getting clear what is meant. Typical examples I would include in the term “garden” are: a small urban front or back garden, larger suburban gardens surrounding a house on all sides, extensive cultivated grounds of a large house that can merge into parkland, a domestic vegetable plot or allotment, and even a patio or yard if it has plants.¹ The proviso that it is outside would seem to exclude bottle gardens and even conservatories, which seems a shame, though not balconies, guerrilla gardens on vacant plots, or the transitory gardens created by homeless people.² My insistence on the inclusion of living plants could exclude some Japanese gardens and artworks such as Martha Schwartz’s “Splice Garden.” Excluding Japanese gardens of rocks and raked gravel seems controversial and certainly the qualities of care and attention that they can exhibit might suggest their inclusion on those grounds alone. Martha Schwartz would, I imagine, be pleased to have the “Splice Garden” excluded for the very reason that we might think the rock and gravel garden should be included. The “Splice Garden” (which contains Astroturf and plastic plants) is on the roof of the Whitehead Institute for Biomedical Research, which, as Schwartz discovered, had no water and no means of sustaining life. Thus the “garden” is a polemic about society’s wanting everything and quickly, but without wanting to invest either money or care. As she says:

This piece is all about the idea of the garden, and about what one expects from a garden – this mantra that it should be quick, cheap and green. We all want to see green but we don’t want to spend any money on it – yet we really love nature, right? This garden was an angry response to that. It was: If you want green and you don’t want to pay for it, here it is.³

Inherent in the idea of a garden is some kind of care or attention beyond the initial design. The actions by a person to nurture plants, to shape and develop, or just to encourage what grows, we call “gardening.”

How Gardening Improves the Land

The claim that gardening improves the land has been criticized from a perspective that sees any interference with nature as detrimental to the



land, and any engagement in such an activity as detrimental to the human character, as it reinforces the notion that nature is there for us to shape as we wish and bend to our will. Thus I need to establish that improvement of land is at least a reasonable supposition before moving on; the claim that we are improved by damaging or degrading something else would seem hard to defend.

When we garden we take a circumscribed area – usually already a garden, allotment, or a plot of thin soil over builder’s rubble – and we combine our labor, imagination, ideas, and expression of feeling with what is there. We might introduce new plants or artifacts in an attempt to improve on what was there. The crucial question, though, is *improve* in what sense, or rather whose sense?

If I began by setting out what I think makes a good garden, this would be an unsubstantiated claim or a statement of preference. It would be better, philosophically speaking, to arrive at a notion of a good garden via the examination of what is good about gardening. However, I don’t want Claim 1, *that gardening improves land*, to rest on Claim 2, *that gardening improves people*. That would reduce the role of the garden to something akin to an exercise bicycle: entirely there for us as a means to some thing that has nothing to do with the furtherance or wellbeing of the bicycle. It’s fine to treat exercise bicycles that way – I don’t have a problem with that – but not gardens. There needs to be some sense of improvement that is good for the garden itself, such that after the gardening intervention, it is in a better state than before, or perhaps in a similar state – rather than the impoverished one that would have resulted from our lack of intervention. Of course, I am using the phrase “good for the garden” as a kind of shorthand here for “objectively better regardless of our human preferences.” How, though, in a post-environmental philosophy context – where the dominant discourse has been about protecting wild nature from human interference – can we legitimately maintain that activities such as weeding and pruning are for anything other than the exercise of human power and preference?

I am going to suggest three gardening activities that we can say improve the garden objectively. The first is the role of the gardener in the endless toil of improving the fertility of the soil. The garden as a quasi-ecosystem does this itself, but the gardener engages with those processes through mulching and weeding, but mainly through composting. Composting is the major player here because it improves the structure of the soil (allowing the plants to develop healthy supporting roots), it improves water retention (necessary for plant survival), it increases the number of



micro-organisms that break down vegetative matter into plant nutrients, and it supplies the raw material of those chemicals and trace elements the plant needs. Thus by improved soil I mean soil that is more fertile or supportive of a rich and varied range of plant life. It is sometimes said of keen aquarium keepers that “they don’t keep fish, they keep water.” A focus on water quality brings in its train the ability to keep healthy fish specimens. Likewise the gardener is a soil keeper who attends to this background element as much as to the showy plants that attract the attention of the non-gardener. When ardent gardeners visit gardens open to the public they can sometimes be seen feeling the texture of, and smelling, the soil while their less obsessed brethren merely photograph attractive floral arrangements or, if already some way down that road, read the plant labels. As Karel Čapek puts it in his 1931 classic, *The Gardener’s Year*:

A rose in flower, is, so to speak, only for the dilettanti; the gardener’s pleasure is deeper rooted, right in the womb of the soil. After his death the gardener does not become a butterfly, intoxicated by the perfumes of flowers, but a garden worm tasting all the dark, nitrogenous, and spicy delights of the soil.⁴

The second related activity that improves the garden is nurturing specific plants. Here the actions of gardening are activities that allow specific plants to flourish, things like staking tall perennials so they don’t blow over, watering tender seedlings, appropriately addressing any disease conditions, and preventing overcrowding by thinning and weeding. In this way the action of gardening allows plants to flourish in a way that, left entirely alone, they might not. There are, of course, exceptions that arise when we put together the first and second point, such as the soil nutritive demands of a wild meadow style of garden requiring it to be left on the hungry side rather than provided with compost. But these are exceptions that speak to the next point about knowing one’s land and what is possible and fitting there, and finding the best accommodation between what one is given and what is possible.

The third aspect of objective improvement of the garden that I want to lay out is how it relates to its context. The activity of gardening can, and indeed good gardening activity should, develop the land in such a way that is contextually appropriate. We could talk in terms of it harmonizing in some way with the house and the surrounding land. However, harmonizing should not be taken to mean in accord with dominant stylistic



preferences or indeed with just anything that happens to be around. For example, a neighbor's garden that has perhaps taken on a "vehicle breaker's yard" motif should not direct our plans.

To maintain a garden in a way that is not just a personal preference but is informed by a more grounded form of contextualization I would need to employ something like Warwick Fox's theory of responsive cohesion, which includes a conception of nested contexts with priority rules that obtain between them.⁵ Put briefly, Fox identifies three basic ways in which "things" – anything at all – can be organized or "hold together" (i.e., cohere): they can hold together in highly regimented ways (e.g., a dogmatic view, a dictatorship, or a formulaic novel); they can hold together by virtue of the mutual responsiveness of the elements that constitute them (e.g., a healthy organism, a democracy, or an exciting tennis match between equally talented players); or they can simply fail to hold together (e.g., a severed limb, the lawless, non-mutual aid version of anarchy, or an alleged art work that simply "fails to hang together"). Fox refers to these basic forms of organization as fixed cohesion, responsive cohesion, and dis cohesion. Though devised as the basis of an ethical theory, he provides examples across many fields – science, psychology, personal relationships, conversations, economics, organizational management, and architecture – in order to argue that our considered judgments about any field will always prefer those examples that most exemplify responsive cohesion as opposed to fixed cohesion or dis cohesion. For Fox, then, responsive cohesion represents the most fundamental value there is since we find it underpinning all other values. Whether in ethical systems and judgments or ice-skating partnerships we can see that it is not only common to the best examples of their kind, but it also picks out a feature that exists at their most basic level of organization. Thus, Fox refers to responsive cohesion as the *foundational value* and argues that we should seek to preserve and generate this value both in terms of the *internal* responsive cohesion that any item has and in terms of its *contextual* responsive cohesion. Just as this theory is already being applied in the architectural world,⁶ it is easy to see how we might apply it in the gardening world. In terms of gardens we can easily see that the overly rigid management of a space would not allow for the maximum dynamic, mutually enhancing flourishing of living things, and that it would be a kind of fixed cohesion where the parts might work together but in a constrained way. A monoculture supported by artificial fertilizers, or figurative topiary, would be examples.⁷ Or in terms of actions I need only call to mind the local park management where formal bedding schemes are



still used in some areas to good effect, but the plants are sometimes pulled out when they are just approaching full bloom because it is “time,” i.e., the specific day on the work plan, to change the display. A garden exhibiting discohesion would be one where nothing was supporting anything else and no healthy nutrient exchanges were taking place, or perhaps where alpinists have been planted in deep shade and cyclamen in all day sun.

However, even a garden that itself exhibits a great deal of responsive cohesion needs to do so within its wider context, including the widest context of all – the biosphere. Taking these considerations into account would not mean that the biophysical realm or “raw nature” always trumps any development, but that in the action of gardening the biophysical realm needs primary consideration. For example, the extensive use of peat, from fast disappearing richly biodiverse bogs, to enable the growing of particular ericaceous plants in soil that would normally be inappropriate for them works against the widest contextual responsive cohesion. No matter how well those azaleas seem to increase the internal responsive cohesion of the garden, they should be avoided or, if already there, perhaps given to a friend with naturally more acid soil so both they and the peat bogs can flourish, thus increasing the overall amount of responsive cohesion in the world.

Thus there seem to be enough reasons to put forward as a reasonable supposition the (to a gardener, commonsense) view that gardening can improve the land.

How Gardening Improves Us

Gardens, it can be said, play a fundamental role for many people in living “the good life” and here “good” ties in with the development of the virtues rather than with the increase in real estate values.⁸ With the three land improvements – increasing fertility of the soil, aiding the flourishing of plant life, and guiding the development of the land in a contextually informed way – the idea of improvement seems unproblematic. But what does it mean for a human being to be improved – surely not to exhibit bushier growth – and yet many of the terms already used about the land do commonly work as metaphors for what we tend to think of as improvements in human beings. “Cultivated” works in this way. But we also describe with admiration someone having a “fertile” mind. Emotional



“growth” has become a watchword for the human potential movement. We even say of someone who “comes into their own” in a situation or through a new challenge that they have “blossomed.” The vocabulary associated with flourishing plant life is used again and again, both literally and metaphorically, to describe flourishing human life. Physical health is carried across literally, but where the metaphor operates is in the transition from an expression of flourishing in the plant realm to an expression of flourishing in the mind and soul of the human being. (By mind and soul I do not mean to invoke some kind of mysterious entity unconnected with the body but, rather, aspects of our embodiment that are not a possibility in the plant realm.) The questions remain though – what does it mean for humans to be improved? And how does gardening as an activity bring about such improvements? I need to have an approximate answer to the first question in order to select the activities to discuss and also to be able to identify when such activities fall away from their “improving” form into various detrimental forms.

If we take a virtue ethics approach the terrain is clear. The improved human is one who, in the best way that their situation allows, lives a good life, and an important aspect of this is that they continue to improve and thereby continue to live an even better life. However, replacing “improved” with “good” does not help very much in setting down a marker for what this amounts to or how it would inform our actions or ways of being in the world. The standard criticism of virtue ethics is that this becomes a circular argument. That is, we develop the virtues to lead a good life and a good life is one that exemplifies the virtues. The solution to this criticism offered by David Cooper is to see the criticism as misplaced. It takes virtue ethics to be like other moral philosophies in stating a means to an end; obey this rule and the target situation will follow. But the virtues do not work in this end-gaining manner. The circularity is in fact a necessary part of the approach because it just is the case that, to quote Cooper, “there can be no question of first spelling out the nature of the good life and only then proceeding to identify the virtues, for no substantial account of the good life could be given that does not already invoke the virtues.”⁹ This would mean that by discussing the human virtues that come about through the activity of gardening we will at the same time be arriving at a picture of a good human being.

Some of these improvements can be brought about by other activities; my claim is just that gardening is a particularly rich source of improving activities and, as we will see, some of these qualities seem to be uniquely connected to engagement with other living things. I am not going to deal



with the obvious and very real benefits of physical exercise, fresh air, and having a wider area of activity than the office or sitting room. My focus is more on the inner qualities that physical engagement with the garden brings in its wake.

Let us start with something that is perhaps an obvious quality that is nurtured in the process of gardening – patience. Many gardening activities involve long periods of time between the involvement and the outer fruits of the involvement. Whether we are talking about planting radishes or an avenue of trees, both involve a delay between the action and the result that the action is intended to bring about. There is a sense in which, in the garden, things happen in their own time and a desire to see immediate results will impair our ability to properly engage with the activity of gardening. Impatient actions never seem to bring about the same degree of pleasure in the action, nor such pleasurable results. When a novice asks at a nursery when a Mulberry *Morus nigra* sapling could be expected to reach its label's purported maximum of 20 feet and is told "in the fullness of time," they have to move into a different way of thinking. To combine two adages, one could say that "patience is its own reward" and this is never so clearly seen as in the garden. Whether we call these things gardening virtues or not, what is clear is that, like virtues, they are fecund in the sense that the exercise of them brings with it their internalization and the ability to express them more often, or more deeply, or under more difficult circumstances. The impatient person just has to wait and in the waiting learns how to wait and that waiting is okay – even enjoyable. When little seedlings at last germinate and the seed leaves appear with the seed husk still attached to their tips the gardener can enjoy their sudden appearance all the more. In the nurturing of a garden we are thereby nurturing patience as a personal disposition.

It is in this context that we can see that the contemporary prevalence of gardening television programs and gardening supplies that promulgate an "immediate gratification" picture of gardening are missing the point. Perhaps they serve a purpose in getting the consumption orientated modern person interested in the possibilities of gardening and from that starting point a richer more engaged relationship can take root; but their "this could be yours tomorrow" message is a message that fits the time not the garden as either concept or reality. The agency of the plants and garden as a whole means that even with an appreciation of time we can never totally predict what will happen in the space between the imagining, planning, and implementation of the garden, and the garden as a mature instantiation. An experienced gardener needs something



of the reticence of Vita Sackville-West who, with Harold Nicholson, designed and developed one of the most acclaimed gardens in the UK, Sissinghurst Castle, including one of its most innovative and often copied “rooms,” the white garden. In her garden diary at the time of its laying out she wrote:

For my part, I am trying to make a grey, green, and white garden. This is an experiment which I ardently hope may be successful, though I doubt it. One’s best ideas seldom play up in practice to one’s expectations, especially in gardening, where everything looks so well on paper and in the catalogues, but fails so lamentably in fulfilment after you have tucked your plants into the soil. Still one hopes.¹⁰

In her reticence Sackville-West introduces another way in which humans can be improved by gardening, that is, with the introduction of some humility. As with patience, humility can be overdone. For example, in the face of oppressive social conditions too much patience with regard to bringing about change or too much humility on the part of those oppressed would be a bad thing. (Although, perhaps, it is correct to say that these attributes would no longer be patience and humility but rather apathy and subservience.) The activity of gardening promotes humility through the process of seeing our human plans and fancies overridden by natural processes in the garden. It is only when we come to see the activity of gardening as a form of collaboration with nature that the garden takes on the form that we now understand was right for us to want it to be all along. This might seem a minor aspect of human improvement, but it is where we can learn important lessons about the dangers of hubris.

Of course, gardening can become an expression of hubris like no other. To manipulate the land, to constrain living things, and to bend everything to our own will with no regard for what these things are or how they would be without our intervention, is exactly the mode of domination to which environmental philosophy has developed its telling critique. But hubris is also to do with not being willing to be helped by, or to lean on, others, or to learn from tradition.¹¹ In the activity of gardening we quickly learn that working with the grain of nature rather than relying only on our own ideas, and learning from others, is so much more effective and pleasurable. For example, I was so beguiled by the pictures in gardening magazines and seed catalogues of the plant *Cerinthe major purpuascens* that I tried to grow it three years running in my yard, each year with more elaborate preparation such as germinating the seeds in autumn and



overwintering them indoors. Even in the best year they were straggly little plants – nothing like the iridescent purple flowers and glaucous blue-green leaves in the pictures. My yard receives nothing like the amount of sun that these particular plants need and eventually I had to recognize that my apparent need for these plants was just a misjudged want, an attempt to bend the situation to my will rather than to read the situation and understand what would really flourish there. Now the yard is filled with many different types of fern: some bought, some given by friends, some just turned up by themselves, that grow larger, greener, and healthier looking every year and the glossy emerald green clumps or delicately waving fronds bring me great pleasure. It is not the case that I have the humility thing sorted for all time and any situation (after all, how could such a statement be made!), but through such experiences, in collaborating with nature in a garden, little shifts are made in one's approach to the world and the shift towards humility for most of us is a good thing.

Gardening as a social activity has many ways of developing social virtues. Despite the stereotypical picture of the cut-throat competition of village flower and produce fêtes, with their Machiavellian characters locked in decades of animosity over who can grow the biggest marrow, in fact, any visit to an allotment site or garden open day will reveal the depth of sharing that takes place even among strangers. People share technical knowledge and tips, they share cuttings, seeds and surplus plants, they share gluts of vegetables and cut flowers, and all with such insistence that it is hard to leave a garden empty-handed or unenlightened about yet another way to avoid carrot root fly. This generosity is partly learned from the fecundity of the plant world. Many gardeners when pruning a bush cannot resist the temptation to pot up a few of the strongest cuttings “just to see” if they might take root. Then, once rooted and growing strongly, the problem emerges of having nowhere to plant them out. The friend, relative, neighbor or, indeed, complete stranger with a rather more sparsely planted garden becomes the obvious recipient. The abundance of seed produced by plants just seems to call out for being saved and shared around. The seemingly magical appearance of even more courgettes on those few plants prompts the gardener to pass on this largesse of nature and even extend the, now internalized, virtue of sharing to what can less easily be spared. (Though I have to say, this never extends to parting with their own compost!)

Another type of social sharing is that of the garden as a space for others. Here the idea of responsive cohesion can be again pressed into service,



this time to find the correct balance for the garden regarding its place within the social realm. One could ask questions such as: Has my control over the neatly manicured garden left nowhere for my children to play? Has my encouragement of robust, wind-dispersed species left my neighbors with a weed control problem in their vegetable beds? Has my nourishing of plants left nowhere for anyone in the house to hang out some washing? For an example of gardens that exhibit a high degree of responsive cohesion in the social realm we could look to the design and maintenance of William Morris's various gardens. His gardening principles include respecting the surrounding landscape and building traditions, being productive and beautiful with an emphasis on native plants, and keeping established trees wherever possible. His gardens always included spaces for sitting, for playing, for walking; social spaces for others to share in the work and the pleasure of the garden.¹²

My next gardening virtue I call, simply, recognizing reality. Gardening brings us face-to-face with the world, and with gardening, unlike say the latest findings in physics or neuroscience, it is with our world *as experienced by us* in the context of the home environment. We need to be able to meet the world as it is, not how we have created it in our imaginations. The significance we create for ourselves in the world has to accommodate how the world is, and engaging in this accommodation is another counter to our hubristic tendencies. This is a means to what Iris Murdoch calls "unselfing" that goes along with the recognition of reality as separate from ourselves.¹³

In gardening this recognition of reality comes about through an embodied engagement rather than, for example, the way we might come to understand some fact about the world through reading a book or watching a documentary. And it is learning through embodied engagement that brings about the change in character that lies at the heart of this notion of improvement. In gardening we carry out actions that are for the good of the garden itself and in doing so we recognize that there is a garden outside of our plans and desires that can express itself rather than be putty in our hands to use for whatever we want to express. In our imaginative, creative work in the garden we do express ourselves, but partly through making space for the expression of the other. It is in this regard that we can see the overly constrained garden or the thoroughly acontextual garden as demonstrating flaws of character in the gardener.

That gesture of making space for the other is at the core of why and how gardening improves humans. By gesture I don't mean the outer



expression of, say, letting that *pachysandra* continue to spread under the trees because even though unplanned it just seems right. I mean the inner gesture that makes that possible – possible, that is, to allow and possible to see the rightness of doing so. This inner gesture is one of openness. Generosity of spirit does not quite capture it, as generosity seems to suggest we have something of value to give; what we do is not give, but hold back to let the other be.

We are taught this very easily by the plant realm. Recall if you will the experience of coming across a first flower bud, perhaps the first snow-drop or crocus in spring or any flower that wasn't there ... then suddenly it is, and we smile, don't we? This experience is very special in one's own garden. Not special in the sense of "Great, I planted that and there it is doing exactly what I wanted"; no, in that instance of first encounter, the flower finds that openness in us. Our wonderment at this being opens our hearts and in that openness we receive something and are improved by it. To call this experience pleasure, even a higher pleasure, requires that we take away pleasure's hedonistic overtones, or perhaps we should just leave pleasure behind and call it grace. We receive something from nature and in that instant, in that involuntary smile, we recognize that we have been touched. The experience is uplifting in a way that no self-imposed attempt to cheer up, nor any personal effort to be open-hearted, can ever achieve. These shifts in consciousness and their attendant potential to improve one's character do not work in the same way as exercising one's biceps, and yet there is something of the same process of engaged activity involved. What is distinctively different is that we cannot garden in order to cash in on those benefits. Katie McShane expresses this point in the context of loving nature:

Ironically no matter how good for us caring for nature can be it cannot be done for only self-serving purposes. Love of nature or respect for nature, if it is really love or respect, has to take us outside of ourselves and our needs. We reap the benefits of such a relationship by not having our eye on the prize of reaping the benefits.¹⁴

By engaging with gardening practices in order to nurture the plants and improve the soil and respond appropriately to the wider context of nature and the social realm, the lessons and skills of patience, humility, experiencing reality, caring for the other, and being open-hearted are learnt and deepened. Gardening can therefore be said to improve both the garden and the gardener.



NOTES

- 1 I mean “yard” in the UK sense of a concrete or paved area behind a house with pots of plants rather than the US or Australian sense of what we in the UK would call a garden.
- 2 M. Morton and D. Balmori, *Transitory Gardens Uprooted Lives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
- 3 M. Schwartz, quoted in T. Richardson (ed.) *The Vanguard Landscapes and Gardens of Martha Schwartz* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), p. 95.
- 4 K. Čapek, *The Gardener’s Year*, trans. M. and W. Weatherall (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1946), p. 37.
- 5 W. Fox, *A Theory of General Ethics: Human Relationships, Nature, and the Built Environment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).
- 6 T. Williamson, A. Radford, and H. Bennetts, *Understanding Sustainable Architecture* (New York: Spon Press, 2003).
- 7 I. Brook and E. Brady, “The Ethics and Aesthetics of Topiary,” *Ethics and the Environment* 8, 1 (2003): 127–42.
- 8 D. Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- 10 V. Sackville-West, quoted in P. Nicholson (ed.) *V. Sackville-West’s Garden Book* (London: Book Club Associates, 1974), p. 16.
- 11 D. Cooper, *The Measure of Things* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 163.
- 12 Jill, Duchess of Hamilton, P. Hart, and J. Simmons, *The Gardens of William Morris* (London: Francis Lincoln, 1998).
- 13 I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 91.
- 14 K. McShane, “Anthropocentrism vs Nonanthropocentrism: Should We Care?” *Environmental Values* 16, 2 (2007): 169–86; J. O’Neill, “Happiness and the Good Life,” *Environmental Values* 17, 2 (2008): 125–44.

