

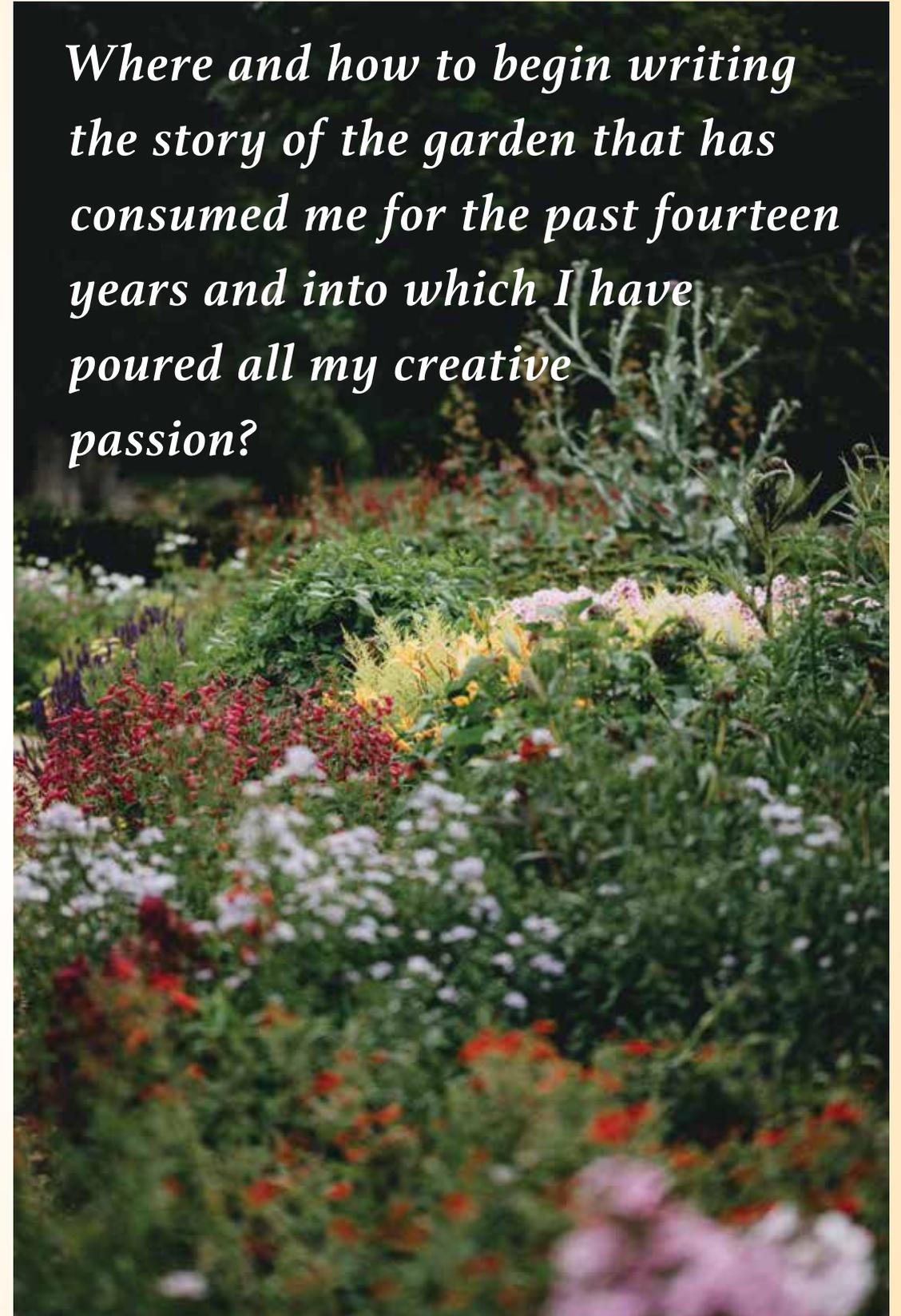
# The Whole World Comes to My Garden

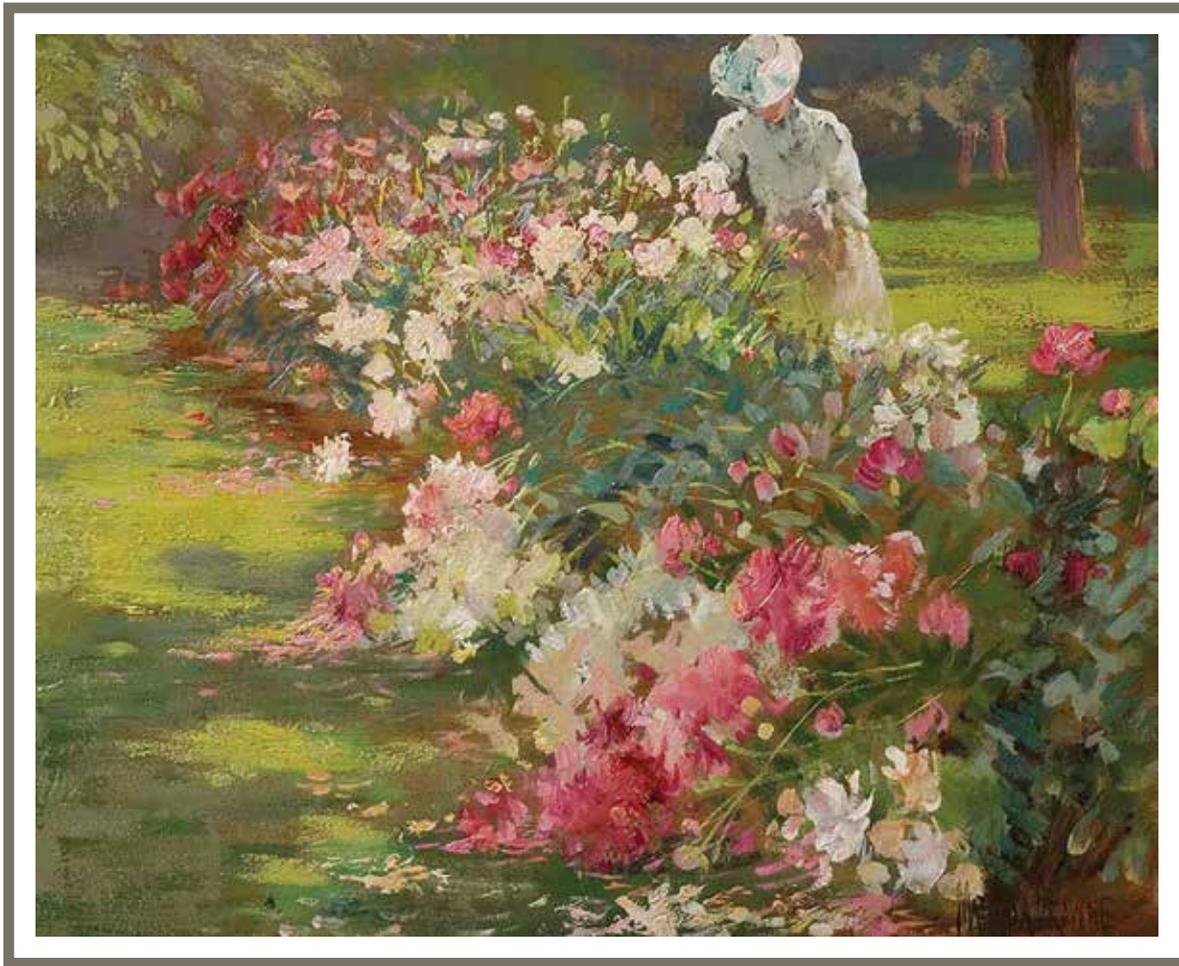
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*Where and how to begin writing the story of the garden that has consumed me for the past fourteen years and into which I have poured all my creative passion?*



Matilda Browne, *Peonies*, 1907.

It must start, I think, about forty years ago when I was living in Italy and read an article on the southwest region of the United States. I fell in love at once with the bright blue skies and sensuous, feminine mud architecture. I swore to myself that one day I would live there and kept that article for years until it eventually disappeared. We have all heard the saying “Beware of what you wish for,” and this is surely an example of how passionate conviction can manifest the object of our fantasies, even if later rather than sooner.

I spent the first twenty years of my life in England and then left the shores of perfidious

Albion for the warmth and exuberance of Italy, where I lived for twenty-six years. Nothing lasts forever, though, and for family reasons, I left Italy and moved to the United States. In 1992 I found the real estate I was looking for in Taos, New Mexico, purchasing an adobe (mud) house built in 1830 that I knew had great potential, though with no garden at all. I saw in a flash of intuition the vision of the garden I could build there. Only later did I remember the article I had read years before about the Southwest.

**Being** a gardener is one thing, but we have to speak of **building** the garden first. In

those early years I labored mightily, clearing out the weeds, building walls, paths, gates, pergolas, patios, water features ad infinitum.

Gardening is a challenge in the high desert with its hot dry summers and cold dry winters. I never thought I would miss the rains of England, but I have, if only from a gardener’s standpoint. We also have to battle earwigs, slugs (yes, even in this dry climate), and worst of all, swarms of grasshoppers that devour everything in sight. The basic soil is a problem, being dusty and alkaline. Over the years I have brought in tons of topsoil and have an enormous compost heap, which I tell everyone is the heart of the garden. And I amend, amend, amend every year, putting in soft rock phosphate, iron (chlorosis is a problem too), slow-release balanced fertilizers, compost from my pile, and mulch, which I apply abundantly twice a year, in spring and autumn.

The mulch helps keep the ground moist in our powerful sun, and I dig it in to lighten the heavy clay. Much of my soil was pure caliche (impure sodium nitrate), and it has taken years to make it productive. When it rains, it is easy to see why houses and pots are made of this mud, for the soil turns into a viscous, creamy consistency that will suck your garden boots off your feet.

In the early days, before perimeter walls were built, my garden was visited by a voracious flock of sheep, and neighbors’ chickens took up residence on my first, modest compost heap. I have had a family of skunks in residence all these years, and raccoons, which visit every summer, climb all over my bird feeders, scarfing down the birdseed. Chipmunks, squirrels, grass snakes, and hawks are also frequent visitors.

The first flowerbed I built was the

Swedish bed, so-called because I planted only blue and yellow flowers in it. It ran along the edge of a ramshackle wooden structure that I reconstructed and stuccoed, and which ultimately became the trattoria—the outdoor dining area. This bed is home to lots of delphiniums, particularly *Delphinium x belladonna* ‘Bellamosa’, their dark blue blooms are on rather shorter spikes making them less prone to being blown over by the severe winds we get in late spring. There is the dwarf *Delphinium grandiflorum* ‘Blue Butterfly’ with rich cobalt flowers. Lots of plumbago (*Ceratostigma plumbaginoides*) spread into dense mounds of low-growing, intense blue flowers forming a base from which yellow oriental lilies as well as daylilies, *Hemerocallis* ‘Stella de Oro’, rise with their continuous show of gold. Their abundant foliage also serves to disguise the yellowing leaves of daffodils and tulips at the end of their cycle. A magnificent yellow tree peony anchors the bed at the higher and wider end. Clambering on a trellis behind the bed is the blue *Clematis* ‘Will Goodwin’ and a dark blue *Clematis alpina*.

I love peonies, and since conditions here are similar to their native Gobi Desert, I created a Japanese walk of curving granite edged with herbaceous peonies, deep blue Siberian irises such as ‘Caesar’s Brother’, and the variegated cream and chartreuse *Iris pallida*. Covering the wall at the back of these groupings is a rampant *Clematis viticella* ‘Polish Spirit’, a curtain of purple blue setting off the mixed colors of the peonies and irises.

I use a lot of blue in the gardens to give a unifying theme to the various areas, not just blue flowering plants but also strategically placed large cobalt blue Vietnamese pots.

The backbone of the garden has to be the trees and shrubs, and I have planted lots of evergreens and deciduous trees over the years. The Colorado blue spruce in all its different shapes and sizes, from columnar *Picea pungens fastigiata* 'Wells Blue Totem,' to chunky 'Fat Albert,' to the front-of-the-bed pom pom *Picea globosa*, continues the blue theme. White fir (*Abies concolor* 'Candicans'), scotch pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), Swiss pine (*P. cembra* 'Swiss Stone') and bog pine (*P. mugo*) grow well, though due to drought in the past few years, many of the pines in New Mexico have been devastated by the bark beetle. Many 'Skyrocket' junipers (*Juniperous scopulorum*) grow throughout the estate to remind me of the cypresses that grow with such elegant abandon all over Tuscany. I also have an eastern redbud (*Cercis canadensis*) growing well, which is unusual because of its requirements for acid soil and moisture. A very pretty tree that grows in the meditation garden is a black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia* 'Lace Lady'). I wanted to grow a hazel tree (*Corylus contorta* 'Harry Lauder's Walking Stick') because I love its gnarly branches, but it will not grow in my zone. The 'Lace Lady', however, has a very pretty, twisty way of growing that satisfies my eye. Aspens flourish throughout the grounds, their delicate leaves making music when it is windy and their vivid autumnal yellow lighting up the garden when flowers are scarce.

The two 'queens' of the garden are a weeping crabapple (*Malus* 'Red Jade'), covered in flowers reminiscent of apple blossoms, and a hawthorn (*Crataegus laevigata* 'Crimson Cloud'), which I planted outside my kitchen window so that I can enjoy its beauty all year. There are masses of white-centered red blossoms in spring, vivid red berries that

attract the birds in summer, orangey autumn foliage, and interesting peeling bark in winter.

The shrubs throughout the garden give much color and substance: from the early yellow of several forsythias to the later show of beautybush (*Kolkwitzia amabilis*); weigela ('Bristol Ruby'); the fragrant *Viburnum bodnantense* and *V. opulus* 'Sterile' with its jolly white snowballs; Japanese rose (*Kerria japonica*); a couple of heavenly scented dwarf honeysuckle (*Loniceras* 'Tiny Trumpets' and *L. korolkowii floribunda* 'Blue Velvet'); barberry (*Berberis*); and masses of lilacs (*Syringia vulgaris*), which grow all over Taos like weeds, giving the whole town a heady, old-fashioned fragrance when they are in bloom. I also planted some *Syringia vulgaris* 'Sensation' for their dramatic two-toned deep purple and white blooms. My garden would not be complete without two bright and cheerful reminders of my English heritage—the *Laburnum x watereri*; they remain more shrub than tree, but their bright yellow racemes light up the dark background of my woodland bed.

I have given names to all my beds: the Swedish bed; shrubby bed; river bed; rainbow bed, so named because I planted it with specimens from the red end of the spectrum to indigo, but this lasted only until my white potentilla in the green section turned yellow one year and brought to naught my human scheme; dry river bed with its meandering "river" of *Campanula* and white "foam" of *Cerastium tomentosum* 'Snow-in-Summer' among strewn boulders; meditation garden, all in white with a touch of blue; and the back garden, the Africa bed, so named because when I'd finished making it, it looked like the map of Africa. There is the sunset patio, filled with Mediterranean colors in raised beds, and the long galleria

with its chaise longue where I can lie and contemplate my sweet peas rambling on the trellis behind serried ranks of gladioli and inhale the heavy perfume of the many fragrant specimens (*Acidanthera bicolor* 'Peacock Orchids') that I love to plant each year.

The more productive part of my garden is the large vegetable garden in the southeast end where I grow lots of tomatoes, eggplant, zucchini, beans, onions, cucumbers, potatoes, horseradish, and herbs galore. Off to one side is my raised strawberry bed with espaliered apple and plum trees standing guard over it. I am also growing a pair of *Actinidia arguta* 'Siberian Gooseberry', which perhaps will one day cover the high perimeter wall they are intended to soften. Next to the vegetable garden is the cutting garden, which I plant each year with brilliant and various dahlias (named for Anders Dahl, a Swedish botanist and pupil of Linnaeus) and edge with the annual *Zinnia* 'Profusion' in either bright orange or shocking Mexican pink. These last are a boon to a busy gardener because they require very little deadheading. Presiding over the fruits and vegetables is a statue of the Virgin Mary set in the beautiful, though small, rose bed. It is difficult to grow hybrid tea roses in Taos, so I planted shrub roses such as the exquisite yellow 'Graham Thomas', a David Austen variety that forms a charming frame around Mary. I edged the bed with old-fashioned *Dianthus* for their spicy fragrance.

I have apple trees planted in my lawn, lots of plum trees, a Manchurian apricot, two cherry trees (mostly for the birds), and two very productive peach trees, 'Redhaven' and 'Reliance', which are definitely for human consumption. Prolific grape vines festoon two of my arbors.



Raffaello Sorbi, *Pruning the Roses*, before 1931.

Living in the high desert, with its endless vistas of rugged native shrubs like chamisa (*Chrysothamnus nauseosus*), sage (*Artemisia tridentata*), snakeweed (*Gutierrezia sarothrae*), and tough prickly pear cactus, water assumes an enormous importance. In order to nurture the gardens I have planted, I had to install an extensive irrigation system. The water comes from my own well on the property, and by the end of July, I am usually anxiously awaiting the beginning of our summer monsoon storms so that I can replenish the dwindling water supply. Even with the help of my system, I must hand-water for an hour or more every day to maintain my many hanging baskets and pots. In addition, I take water from the acequia network of ditches that have irrigated this land since the Spaniards brought the system with them to this area, and it was the Moors who took it in their turn to Spain during their nearly 700-year occupation. We also have the legacy of the “horno,” a beehive-shaped oven used by the Indian and Hispanic people of this region to bake bread and roast meat, also brought to the Southwest by the Spanish conquerors but Moorish in origin. Mine invariably provokes comments from out-of-state visitors, surrounded as it is by drifts of blue marguerite daisies and orange California poppies.



Anna Petersen, Breton Girl Looking after Plants in the Hothouse, 1884.

On a less practical, more aesthetic note, water enhances any garden with its soothing sounds that refresh the mind and spirit of those walking through it. I have built four water features over the years. The first is a series of waterfalls and ponds that cascade noisily in the sunken meditation garden. The sound of the water obliterates any other distracting noises and encourages introspection. When I constructed the belvedere terrace on the south side of the house, I built a Moorish fountain. This comprises a beautifully tiled panel that I bought in Ephesus, Turkey, many years ago, mounted on the wall with a spout in the middle of it, just like the street fountains in many Middle Eastern countries, spilling its water into a

Seljuk Turkish-inspired basin. Pots of annual flowers bring out the brilliant blues, yellows, and greens of the tiles, though the wonderful hue of Isfahan turquoise is yet to be found in the plant world. This is a favorite with the birds and my cats.

When I built the back garden courtyard, I installed a beautiful vertical rock, which called out for water every time I walked past it. Ever one to harken to voices, I obliged by converting it into a gently splashing waterfall with water running down a deep gash in the face of the rock into an irregularly-shaped pond below. This is a favorite with the goldfinches and chickadees; they perch on the face of the rock and drink from the cascading water. Lastly, in 2002, I built the Tiber river, crossed by the Ponte Milvio! I took the straight irrigation ditch and sculpted it into gentle curves. The water debouches from a mysterious grotto and from the stone face of Old Father Tiber. Several gentle steps down during its course make the water sing merrily, and the garden snakes like to lie on the adjacent rocks.

Perennials such as violets (*Hesperis*), larkspur, spiderwort (*Tradescantia*), bleeding-hearts (*Dicentra*), *Phlomis*, *Physostegia*, Delphinium, *Aconitums*, bee balm (*Monarda*), catnip (*Nepeta*), many shades and types of geranium and cranesbill, columbine (*Aquilegia*) in huge drifts, poppies, hollyhocks, checkermallow (*Sidalcea*), lavender, bluestars (*Amsonia*), globe thistles (*Echinops*) and many, many more adorn the garden from spring through summer. Later in the season come the blues of the small shrubs bluebeard (*Caryopteris*), *Perovskia*, and the perennial hyssop (*Agastache*) in all its shades of pink, blue, and orange; coneflowers (*Echinacea*) in purples, white, and now also in orange and yellow; blanket weed (*Gaillardia*), sneezeweed (*Helenium*),

phlox, and various daylilies (*Hemerocallis*). A particularly felicitous combination in late spring is the rose *Rosa foetida* ‘Austrian Copper’, with masses of brilliant red-orange blooms paired with blue *Geranium* ‘Johnson’s Blue’ and ‘Philippe Vapelle’.

My particular favorites for the shady areas are the luminous varieties of forget-me-not (*Brunnera macrophylla* ‘Jack Frost’ and ‘Hadspen Cream’). The blue forget-me-not flowers last for about a month, and during the rest of the season, the heart-shaped leaves get bigger and bigger and are good anchor plantings for the bed. As an under planting to *Brunnera*, I love the purple-leafed violets (*Viola labradorica*). Pasque flower (*Pulsatillas*), hellebores (*Helleborus*), *Lamium maculatum*, bishop’s hat (*Epimedium*), bugleweed (*Ajuga*)—which does well in the sun too—periwinkle and myrtle (*Vinca major* and *Vinca minor*), lungwort (*Pulmonaria*) and comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*) all brighten up the darker corners.

By mid-June the annual plantings fill the gaps in the perennial beds and the cracks between the flagstones. Riotous masses of orange California poppies; the pink, white, and red of Shirley poppies; edgings of fragrant white Alyssum and *Lobelia* ‘Cambridge Blue’, cascading over the edges of the Tiber River; and later on waving masses of cosmos, the tall presence of sunflowers that the finches love so dearly, and many frost-sensitive salvia present a full color palette.

By the beginning of June, it is safe to bring out the plants in pots that I have overwintered in the house. We usually have our last frost at the end of May, though we sometimes have one in June. Out come the bougainvillea, oleander, fig tree, plumbago, Meyer lemon tree, *Rosmarinus officinalis*, and

a South African cabbage tree. And out from storage come the Italian terracotta pots and all the cobalt blue pots, which are filled each year with different combinations depending on what is available at the nurseries. The reliable geranium is always featured, and petunias, marigolds (*Tagetes*) and various sages (*S. Coccinea*, *S. Gregii*, *S. Guaranitica*, *S. 'Indigo Spire'*, and the flashy *S. Leucanthia*). Tiny blue or white waterhyssop (*Bacopa*) make a good show in pots, as well as bright orange or intense blue pimpermell (*Anagallis*), and the beautiful shades of *Calibrachoa* droop abundantly over the edge of the pots, not to mention the upright yellow, red, orange, and trailing purple verbena (*Lantana*), which are so sturdy in the really hot and exposed spots.

Complementing them are the foliage plants such as the burgundy knotweed (*Persicaria*), the lime-green or white-and-dusky-green variegated spur flower (*Plectranthus*), variegated ivies, and chartreuse or black potato vines.

Planting the pots is like composing a different symphony for each one of them every year, usually with happy results. Of course, success depends on regular watering, frequent feeding with a high phosphorous fertilizer, regular clipping and general primping and pampering.

The courtyard at the back of the house is a whole separate garden, dominated by the raised Africa bed with a wrought-iron arch in the middle festooned with honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens* 'Dropmore Scarlet'), blue clematis (*Clematis integrifolia*), and the extremely vigorous (some might say invasive) sweet autumn clematis (*Clematis terniflora*). These colors were chosen to match the cushion placed on the seat beneath the arch.

Dominating the Africa bed is a weeping

Siberian peashrub (*Caragana arborescens*), which is late to break dormancy, but when it does, its cascade of small, yellow, pea-shaped flowers is a sight to behold. Shrub pines (*Pinus mugho*) and dwarf blue spruce (*Picea pungens*) also cluster between massive rocks at one end, while at the other, shallower end (South Africa!) are staghorn sumac (*Rhus typhina*), a tightly clipped forsythia, and the rather unusual leadplant (*Amorpha canescens*) with spikes of tiny orange-eyed flowers.

Cascading from the rocks to the ground are swatches of creeping phlox (*Phlox subulata*), bellflowers (*Campanula carpatica* and *C. cochlearifolia*), sunrose (*Helianthemum nummularium*), pinks (*Dianthus* 'Baths Pink'), the silver leaves and lavender spikes of sage (*Salvia daghistanica*), ornamental horehound (*Marrubium rotundifolia*), juicy iceplant (*Delosperma nubigenum*), germanders (*Teucrium*), and my favorite of all, ornamental oregano (*Originum libanoticum*), which with its masses of pendulous papery green bracts adorned with frilly pink tutus always elicits gasps of admiration from my visitors. Another local rock plant, hummingbird trumpet (*Zauschneria arizonica*), puts on an extravagant display of red-orange trumpet flowers that the eponymous birds adore. Scattered throughout the bed are masses of the happily self-seeding columbine (*Aguilegia sibirica*), which rear their perky blue heads eight inches about the ground huggers.

Two sides of the courtyard are ringed by raised planter beds, two of which hold massed annuals, usually snapdragons (*Antirrhinum* 'Bronze Sonnet') and blue petunias, or blue sage (*Salvia farinacea*) flanked by the vivid *Zinnia* 'Orange Profusion.' The other, long bed, holds small evergreens and perennials, from peonies to the bright lupin-like spires



Jenny Montigny, *The Gardener*, before 1937.

of indigo (*Baptisia australis*), to monkshood (*Aconitum*) and sneezeweed (*Heleniums*), to daylily (*Hemerocallis*) and giant hyssops (*Agastache*), cranesbill (*Geranium*), and cinquefoils (*Potentilla*).

The bed that runs along the north side of this area is dominated by the magnificent Eastern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana* 'Can-aertii'), which I named Great Spirit because it seems to bless the garden, and right next to it is a showy locust (*Robinia* 'Purple Robe'). Nestled in the protective embrace of Great Spirit on the other side is one of the miracles of this garden: a crimson-leaved Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum*), now going on six years in my garden. To compensate for our dry climate and

alkaline soil, I dug a very large hole and filled it with lots of my own compost mixed with soil, and included commercial water-retaining crystals. Evidently, the mix was right, and the shady location next to the little rock waterfall suits it well, for it grows well each season. More spruces, green and blue, an English oak and pines give privacy and wind protection, and scattered throughout the entire area are masses of aspens (*Populus tremuloides*), including the rather different Swedish variety with pinkish leaves and an upright growth habit.

Every autumn I have been planting an average of 1,500 bulbs, which are now multiplying happily, so early spring starts

with snowdrops (*Galanthus nivalis*), crocus and iris (*Iris reticulata*), to all shapes, sizes, and colors of daffodil, narcissus, jonquil (*Narcissus*), glory-in-the-snow (*Chionodoxa*), *Scilla*, grape hyacinth (*Muscari*), windflower (*Anemone blanda*), starflower (*Ipheion*), *Allium*, *Fritillaria*, trout lily (*Erythronium*), and, of course, the elegant reigning queen of all bulbs, the exquisite tulip in all her extravagant incarnations.

Most of the walls in the garden are draped with climbers. I must have at least thirty clematis, climbing roses, wisteria, trumpet vine (*Campsis*), Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus inserta*), and the most elegant of all, porcelain berry (*Ampelopsis brevipedunculata*), with white, pink, and green variegated leaves and clusters of berries that range from white to blue to turquoise to dark indigo as they ripen. Morning glory (*Ipomoea* 'Heavenly Blue') and the scarlet 'Cardinal

Climber' of the same family are two of my favorite annual climbers, as is the showy hyacinth bean (*Dolichos lablab*), popularized in North America by Martha Stewart.

It took ten years for the garden to really establish itself, and the first few years saw little obvious growth. We have a saying in these parts: "The first year it sleeps, the second year it creeps, and the third year it leaps." To be honest, it takes four to five years for things to start growing in. Another thing I point out to people is that a garden is only as good as its soil. Healthy soil means vigorous growth and fewer insect problems. I practically never use sprays, preferring to introduce thousands of ladybugs, lacewings, and the fascinating praying mantis. I created this garden for the pleasure of many and that includes my cats, the myriad birds that come to eat and

drink here, and the raccoons, skunks, squirrels, and chipmunks that pass through. A few years ago, at the end of a very dry summer, I had a bear up my apple tree—exciting to view from the safety of the house!

In 2001 my garden was featured in a program on Taos on HGTV, a national television channel, and the next year a big article with lots of photos came out in *Sunset* magazine. Since then I have opened my garden to the public for three months each year on Wednesday afternoons and watch people's enjoyment as they eat their picnics in various nooks and crannies of the garden or congregate in the trattoria. A hundred people easily get lost in all the secluded sitting areas around the gardens, and many come several times a season, bringing out-of-town guests with them. I have hosted national tours and many international visitors, hence the title of this piece.

With such a garden as this I don't have time for a social life in the conventional sense, but the garden itself is my social life. It is also my great life instructor, teaching me patience in particular. Every spring I walk around the garden and ask what is dead and what is alive, and in the early days, before I knew any better, I was known to dig things up a little to see if there was any life there. Now I have learned acceptance of what is. After all, if something dies, that is a great opportunity to rethink things and plant something new and different in its place. The quest for beauty is paramount and endless.

The other thing that never ceases to amaze me is the generosity of nature and the abundance of the universe, which is all around us. It is sufficient to pour out the hundreds of seeds from a single dried

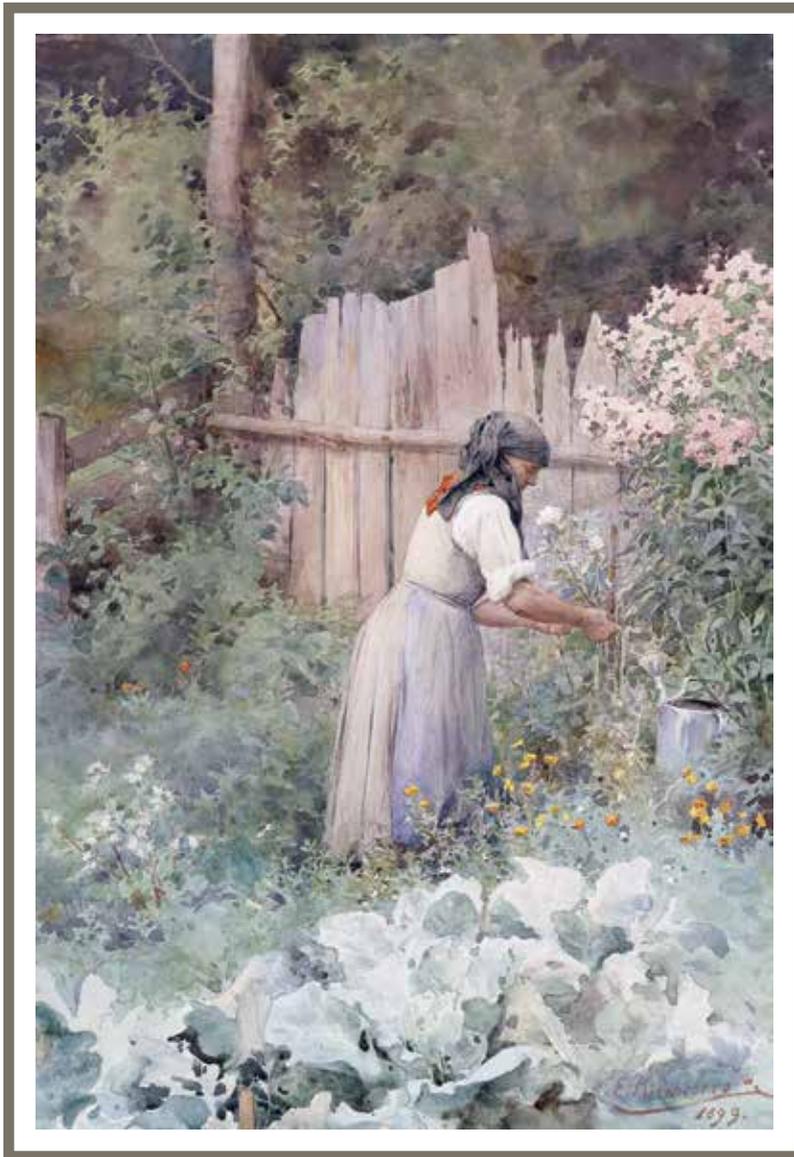
seed head of a poppy (*Papaver somniferum*) to know that we need never run short of anything, and the gay abandon with which volunteers appear all over the garden, sown by birds or perhaps carried in the compost, attests to the dogged survival instinct. William Blake saw the world in a grain of sand; I see grace, beauty, and abundance in a poppy seed.

It is the process that is important in gardening rather than the end result, which is an illusion anyway because a garden is in constant flux. What better way to keep in shape physically and to remain at peace with the world than to spend hours in the garden quietly communing with the plants, sometimes even singing to them. My garden responds very well to Mozart!

There is a Chinese proverb that I particularly like: "If you would be happy for a month, kill a pig; if you would be happy for a year, take a wife; but if you would be happy for a lifetime, plant a garden."

When winter comes, with snow and temperatures way below freezing, I light my fire and read with joy my garden visitors book. I open all my gardening books and peruse them, planning new and better cultivation and a few experiments, and enjoy the rest that comes with shorter days.

Alas, owing to this climate, I cannot grow plants such as azaleas, rhododendrons, camellias, and the unicorn of the plant world, the hauntingly beautiful blue poppy (*Meconopsis betonicifolia*) and its cousin *M. cambrica*, the vivid yellow Welsh poppy. My consolation is that there will always be more gardens to build and different species to plant. And one day, just one day, perhaps I shall live in a climate zone where I can grow ALL the plants I love so dearly. 🌱



Ernestine von Kirchsberg, *Farmer in Her Garden*, 1899.