

## In a Garden

Tomorrow marks the start of the 85th Chelsea Flower Show which is held annually in May by The Royal Horticultural Society and today we are having a congregational outing to the Chelsea Physic Garden. The Physic Garden was started in 1673 as a place in which apothecaries were trained to identify medicinal plants. These two events seemed worthy of recognising in today's address though there's no point in expecting any depth of gardening knowledge or wisdom from me. I can share one useful tip with any of you who have not been on the apothecaries plant identification course at the Chelsea Physic Garden and this is a tip which relates to weeding, a crucial issue for gardeners. When you are weeding your garden, the best way to make sure you are removing a weed and not a valuable plant is to pull on it. If it comes out of the ground easily, it is a valuable plant.

We British do love our gardens – one of our favourite radio programmes – Gardeners Question Time – is apparently listened to by as many people who do not have gardens as those who do have one. We spend large sums of money at garden centres and sales of gardening books flourish. But we know that when it comes to gardening, be it gardening in a garden or the gardening of the soul that Barbara Davenport spoke of in our reading earlier on – you can read about it in books until the proverbial cows come home but nothing compares to the actual task in which you get down on your knees, get your hands dirty and mess up your finger nails. Marilyn Barrett, in her book *Creating Eden: The Garden as a Healthy Space* says how valuable it is for us to deal with the small and repetitive tasks gardening requires of us:

*“Although weeding, cutting back, and transplanting are activities that may seem repetitive and never-ending, when seen as a necessary and integral part of the overall unfolding of the garden scheme, they become purposeful rather than boring. In fact, what may appear on the surface to be tedious physical work may, in the actual doing, be spiritually liberating. In taking time to contemplate the small — in observing the details of our gardens — we can experience life on a manageable scale.”*

Barrett also points out that gardening does not require a garden as such – the same insights may be gained from a single house plant or a pot of herbs growing on a window sill. A single growing plant may teach us more than a library of books, it is said.

The history of gardening makes a fascinating study. Thirty thousand years ago or more our forebears were starting to domesticate animals and to grow crops, moving away from their previous lives as hunter gatherers. We humans were starting to reshape the landscape of the planet so that it would work better for us. There's evidence that by around 5,000 BCE people living on these islands now known as the British Isles had started the task of clearing dense forests. And it is far earlier than that that people in what is now the Indian sub-continent were planting gardens – not farms – gardens – created for pleasure alongside the growing of medicinal herbs. And those gardens were often created by monks, devoted to contemplation of the divine, and seeking to create a haven from the world – a place of peace and tranquillity in which to nurture their spiritual lives. Penelope Hobhouse, in her book *Gardening Through the Ages*, 1992, p. 11. writes that:

*“The first western gardens were those in the Mediterranean basin. There in the desert areas stretching from North Africa to the valleys of the Euphrates, the so-called cradle of civilization, where plants were first grown for crops by settled communities, garden enclosures were also constructed. ... Gardens emphasized the contrast between two separate worlds: the outer one where nature remained awe-inspiringly in control and an inner artificially created sanctuary, a refuge for man and plants from the burning desert, where shade trees and cool canals refreshed the spirit and ensured growth.”*

When I read that I immediately remembered the gardens of the Alhambra created by the Moors as well as various monasteries I've visited over the years. I thought of the images of the hanging gardens of Babylon that I've seen, said to be one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The gardens were supposed to be the work of Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar, famous for his capture of Jerusalem in 586BCE and taking the Jews into captivity – by the rivers of Babylon, where we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. The hanging gardens are described by various writers, said to have been built by the King for his beloved wife who missed the mountainous greenery of her homeland in Media – now northern Iran.

The gardens are described as a feat of engineering built high up on brick terraces linked by marble stairways. Yet despite various descriptions scholars now think that of all the 7 wonders of the ancient world, the hanging gardens of Babylon are not likely to have existed.

But they do exist don't they in our minds and it is in our minds, in our souls perhaps, that we most have need of gardens, of beauty, of a sense that paradise is indeed a possibility for us, flawed and troubled human beings, living in a flawed and troubled world. Paradise, deriving from the old Persian word for garden – pairidaeza. Fear not I shall not start to explore another favourite topic today – just what did happen in that garden of Eden and who was to blame for it?! Nor shall I touch another vital question – would we want to live in paradise anyway? Wouldn't we Unitarians and others of a liberal persuasion be forming an escape committee!? No, all that can be saved for another sunny day.

Let's instead ask - what can caring for a plant or a garden teach us about caring for our souls?

We know the importance of improving the soil and watering the earth. We as people, just like plants, are individuals and have particular conditions to which we are ideally suited. Just as the wise gardener gets to know their plants so a wise person gets to know themselves and ensures if at all possible that the optimum conditions are provided for comfort and growth. A date palm will not flourish in a damp swamp, moss does not like the desert.

Time spent working in a garden reminds us that there are things we can do something about and there are things against which we are powerless. When we watch a plant grow, when we notice the trees coming into leaf once more each spring, then we bear witness to the mystery of existence. Gardening and observation of the natural world reminds us to stand in awe and wonder before a great unknown, whatever our theology – there is a power and a mystery about life here on earth which we humans do well to remember – acknowledgement of such a mystery tends to bring us a much needed humility and a healthy reminder of our place in the scheme of things. Gardening and life will at times have us kneeling.

Finally I think gardens are there to be enjoyed and to have fun in. Gardening is a process – it is never completed, never perfect – the moment is now – in a garden as in all other areas of life – what can we do but seize the day, appreciate now, accept imperfection, find pleasure in life despite its slugs and mole hills and weeds and multitudinous other challenges.

With that in mind I end with a small garden joke that I saw on a display at Kew Gardens yesterday – Question? What is green and runs round a garden? Answer – a hedge.

Amen.