

1937

## EC5544 The Influence of a Garden

Mrs. William Steyer

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IN AGRICULTURE AND HOME ECONOMICS  
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5544

1937

THE INFLUENCE OF A GARDEN

Mrs. Wm. Steyer

My topic is a familiar one. We find many references to gardens and the things of the garden in the Bible. It is a place dear to each one of us, especially the garden of our childhood home.

"Old-fashioned flowers! We love them all!  
The morning-glories on the wall,  
The pansies in their patch of shade,  
The violets, stolen from a glade,  
The bleeding-hearts and columbine,  
Have long been garden friends of mine.  
But memory every summer flocks  
About a clump of hollyhocks."-----Edgar A. Guest

I sat down on the wide seat under the old elm tree near a gorgeous clump of them, while my hostess gathered some of her choicest flowers for me to take to a neighbor who was ill. From a passing auto came a shriek of amusement in a high girl-ish tone. (She surely did not realize how far her shrill voice carried.) "Oh, girls! Just look at that old woman in the sunbonnet! Isn't she a scream?"

I felt my face burn with shame for such inexcusable rudeness, and with resentment that my dear old friend should be the target for such a shaft of ridicule, and I turned to her to voice my indignation.

But she, serene and unruffled, remarked calmly, "Roses and lilies and hollyhocks all blooming their prettiest for her--a whole garden full of God's glorious beauty--and all she could see was an old woman in a sunbonnet. How can folks be so blind and so queer?"

As I went on my way to deliver her gift of blossoms and a cheery message, the thought came to me that she had lived so much in her garden that its beauty and its sweetness had become a part of her; and it was this benign influence that made her so kind and so well loved in our little village.

For no one can long be associated with a garden without being the better for it. When you walk there, wrapped in its color and its fragrance, you are conscious of a kindly feeling even toward your dearest enemy.

You observe the flowers and their growth in different locations and soils, and you find that they reach out for a better chance in life--like human beings. With more room, better food and free air, they grow much finer.

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The stately trees remind you that "the groves were God's first temples," and the garden's peace impels you to exclaim: "How strikingly the course of nature tells, by its light heed of human suffering, that it was fashioned for a happier world!"

True garden lovers share their treasures with kindred spirits, and in time a garden comes to have sacred memories, as Edgar Guest notes in "Living Flowers":

"I'm never alone in the garden," he said,  
'I'm never alone with the flowers,  
It seems like I'm meeting the well-beloved dead  
Out here with these blossoms of ours.  
And there's never a bush, or a plant, or a tree  
But somebody loved it of old,  
And the souls of their angels come talking to me,  
Through the petals of crimson and gold."

"I'm never alone with the flowers," he said,  
'I have many to talk with, and see;  
For never a flower comes to bloom in its bed,  
But it brings back a loved one to me."

The love of a garden is as old as the human race. Our first parents were set in a garden--that wonderful place called Eden--wherein we are told, in the third chapter of Genesis, grew all plants beautiful to behold and all that were good for food. It was well watered. Ideal conditions, yet even that garden required care, for they were bidden to dress and keep it, thus making work and responsibility a duty and a privilege, even in Paradise.

As this garden was the scene of man's downfall, in the person of Adam, so also was a garden, the garden of the Tomb or the Resurrection, the scene of man's recovery, in the person of Christ. No wonder that we have an affinity for the garden and an inherent longing to share in its fruition and its beauty.

Your garden may be a window box, a foundation-planting, an ambitious border of perennials, a wonderful rock garden, or a pool; or it may be like that garden,

"That little Dutch garden,  
Where useful and pretty things grew;  
Hearts-ease and tomatoes and pinks and potatoes,  
And lilies and onions and rue."

or it may be a bed of bright annuals. But whichever it is, large or small, it is a privilege to work there, with God, in the creation of beauty.

Some time ago I read an article in the American Home magazine by Norma Knight Jones on "Gardens and Morals" which contained much food for thought. She wrote in part:



"A garden answers the very first laws of a definite morality, because it deals with fundamentals. A garden breeds patience, hope, faith, perseverance, and love. You have to be patient in your love for a garden, you have to be devout in your faith, and you have to be hopeful in your perseverance....The morality of the soul concerns itself with these universal virtues. These qualities, in any country or race make for decency, civilization and culture. These qualities, which in some degree lie dormant in each human being, ally themselves with the forces of Nature. To be patient, as the earth is patient for its recurring life and vigor; to be hopeful, as the silver birch is hopeful for its returning splendor; to have faith in the return of summer following the death of winter; to love because you create: These are evidences of a definite inner morality.

"It is curious how all these sterling and important virtues come to the person who makes a garden. Where, in this world of doubts, is the simple act of faith more inspiring and more stubborn than in the actual planting of a tiny seed? Where, in this impatient world, is the attribute of patience more assiduously applied than in the slow process of garden making? Truly to make a successful garden is to practice every ethical virtue.....

"The whole history of education is incorporated in gardening. The ideal--the working plan--the labor--the consummation--all take their place in the mental education by gardening. And the moral education is particularly apparent, for a failure in a garden is never a defeat. It is an experience, and by experience we learn to live. As in all education, the reality rarely approaches the ideal, but we have the soul satisfying experience of attempting the ideal. Rarely, indeed, does the answer to my garden look like the picture in the seed catalog, but I have gained the strength of trying..... Years matter very little in this job of making a garden. Just so long as we can bend our back and focus our muscles, a garden is a possibility. And it is true education, for it is never finished.....

"A certain fine regard for order is the true basis of existence. By gardening we are instilled into the orderly procession of the season; the steady march of life and death; the sweet precision of things done in their proper time; in fact, the whole orderly plan of the universe profoundly understood.....

"There is a keen awareness of the mystery of life in the steady routine of the garden. The dull, dormant seed, sunken into the warm bosom of the earth; the welcome slash of the silver rain; the wonder of the first green shoot; the bud; the blossom; the seed; the whole cycle of life unfolded and made known.....

"A garden is a two-edged blessing, as are all blessings, magnifying its beauty and value equally to its creator and its beholder.....Even if we do not share it in the strictest sense, its riot of color, its soaring fragrance and its natural beauty belong to any casual passerby.....

"If we can make our community garden-conscious, we have added to the happiness of the world, and that is no small achievement. For we need beauty, and kindness, and happiness. All over this harassed world, we need the qualities that come from unselfish cooperation.....All those splendid and fundamental virtues that we put into the making of a garden will in some measure find their way into the heart of the beholder."



So we muse upon the lessons of the garden: its strength and its fragrance; its miracles of growth and its memories; all its absorbing interests. Many thoughts come, and bits of half forgotten poems, for the poets of all ages have had much to say of the things of the garden. Its sub-conscious influence on us for our own good is voiced by Bryant in the old familiar poem, "Thanatopsis":

"To him, who, in the love of Nature, holds communion with  
her visible forms, she speaks a various language.  
For his gayer hours she has a voice of gladness and a  
smile of eloquence and beauty, and she glides into his  
darker musings with a mild and healing sympathy, that  
steals away their sharpness, ere he is aware."

Its active influence on us for the good of others is summed up by Edgar Guest in the closing lines of his poem on "Beauty":

"There is beauty in the lily, and there's beauty in the hills;  
There is beauty in the blossoms, wet with dew the morning spills;  
But the richer, lasting beauty, which the world forever needs  
Through its days of tribulation, is the beauty of our deeds."

Its manifest influence on our spiritual life is acknowledged by the insistent question, both of the wonders and the glories of the garden, "If God so clothed the grass, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall He not much more clothe you, oh ye of little faith?" (Matthew 6:30), and our certain and reverent answer, "Yes, verily! for Thou who art the Author and Creator of the garden's miracles, from everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God!"