



Horticulture as human therapy

CHARLES A. LEWIS • JCG Spring 1985

HORTICULTURAL THERAPY is concerned with the manipulation of plants not as an end in itself, but rather as a means of achieving specific benefits for people.

This view is in sharp contrast to the typical horticultural viewpoint, which is primarily focused on plants. For most of horticulture, plants are to be discovered, studied, and researched. From this largely unquestioned perspective, horticulture exists because of plants.

However, no plant ever needed to be discovered, identified, studied, artificially propagated, bought or sold! Plants can exist without people, but not so for horticulture. The whole of horticulture exists not for the benefit of plants (because of the plant's interest in being grown), but rather to satisfy *people* who are interested in growing plants. Human curiosity and human intellect are the pivots on

Illustration: THE HUMAN TREE, Hans Grien, Stassburg, 1515

which horticulture moves. I often find that horticulturists are so deeply involved in looking at plants that they have extreme difficulty perceiving its human aspect. Only when we see horticulture as existing because of a perhaps innate human interest in plants can we truly begin to appreciate the human dimension of horticulture.

TIES BETWEEN PEOPLE AND PLANTS

We need not look far today to find evidence of strong ties between man and vegetation.

As observers of the green world, we respond to plants not under our care. Consider striking views of scenery along a highway. Motorists seeing these views want to stop their cars, even though they block part of the road, to enjoy the scene. Since stopped cars along highways creates a traffic hazard, highway engineers, knowing that people will stop to gaze, spend tax dollars to construct pullouts where drivers may park safely to enjoy the view. No one questions this common sense response to such deeply rooted human behavior.

At a more personal level, consider our use of plants. The human affinity for living vegetation finds expression in the increasing use of plants to adorn our built environment; not only in outdoor settings, but also indoors in homes, offices, and hotels. The Boston Fern of Victorian days has been replaced today with Swedish Ivy, Spider Plant, and the darling of indoor plants, *Ficus benjamina*.

The need to integrate plants into buildings is nothing new. Recorded in antiquity are the hanging gardens of Babylon. In Victorian England, it found expression in schemes for landscaping rooftops and interiors. The Plaza Hotel in New York still has its Palm Court. Today's buildings attest to our strong desire for bringing plants more intimately into our lives. Examples are everywhere, ranging from potted plants perched on filing cabinets and windowsills, to the Ford Foundation Building's enclosed garden, with glass walls eleven stories high so that office workers might look out on the garden.

Today's architecture has absorbed the greenhouse into its skyscraper. Increased costs for construction of and maintenance of plant-filled atria seems to be justified in

terms of satisfaction gained by the people who use them. Guests in hotels designed by John Portman are aware of his extensive use of plants.

Portman says:

"I use elements of nature to make a connection between the built environment and the human psyche. They are a human-environmental connection."

In another mode of experiencing plants, we become participants, intimately involved with the plants we grow. Here the person is no longer an observer. Instead, we become directly responsible for the well being of our plants. If the plant wilts, the gardener waters; if it lacks vigor, the gardener adds fertilizer or provides additional light, and so on through many nurturing activities. By close observation, the grower learns to understand plant responses as a kind of language by which the plant signals its needs.

The long intimate encounter between person and plant can lead to subjective personal feelings. If the plant grows, the gardener feels successful and proud. If the plant does not grow, the gardener feels sad or even gets angry. These personal feelings delineate human aspects of horticulture.

In order to see the human aspects more clearly, consider horticulture as a process. Its products – potted plants, flower beds, manicured lawns, and pruned shrubbery – are easily seen, but what do we know of the processes that produce such phenomena? The process includes all the human thoughts, actions, and responses which take place from the time the gardening activity is first contemplated, through planting and growth of seed, to tending and enjoying the mature plant growing in its pot or garden in its particular ecological and cultural context (a context that itself is complex and rich in human meaning). Deep personal feelings (and benefits) can be seen as byproducts, effects unintentionally produced by the "simple" act of growing a plant.

THE HEALING EFFECTS OF GARDENING

The human impact of plants reaches beyond the personal to influence groups of people at the sociological and cultural level. In low-income areas of cities across this country and in Canada, research clearly demonstrates that gardening

has a particular healing effect. Just as gardening helps individuals gain pride and self-esteem, it can help to revitalize neighborhoods, reduce vandalism and create a new sense of neighborliness. Because people planted flowers and vegetables, streets have been cleaned and buildings repaired and painted. I think such healing effects of gardening represent yet another human dimension of horticulture.

What intrinsic qualities of plants encourage people to respond in such positive ways? In the artificial world created by urban humanity, living plants do dependent on the gardener for care if they are to survive. Yet, in a world of constant judgment, plants are non-threatening and non-discriminating. They respond to the care that is given them, not to the gender, culture, intellect or physical capacities of the gardener. It doesn't matter if one is black or white, has been to kindergarten or college, is poor or wealthy, healthy or handicapped – plants will grow if a gardener gives proper care. A garden provides a benevolent setting in which a person – any person – can take first steps toward confidence.

Plants communicate messages concerning life qualities to those who tend them. They display rhythms different from those of the human-built environment. Their growth is steady and progressive, not erratic and bizarre. Gardeners see a continuous, predictable flow of change from seedling to mature plant. They see that change need not be disruptive, but can instead be part of a dynamic stability. How different this is from our technological society, where the flow of life is constricted, by schedule and regulation, and must change rapidly to accommodate fads and other distractions; and where people are under constant threat from new man-made terrors!

GREEN RHYTHMS OF LIFE

Plants take away some of the anxiety and tension of the immediate “now” by showing us that there are long, enduring patterns in life. It takes time for a cutting to grow roots, for a seed to germinate, for a leaf to open. Plants respond visibly to the sun in its daily course, and signal the change of seasons. These rhythms in plants were biologically set in their genes by the same forces that set human biological

clocks. An oak tree has looked like an oak tree for thousands of years. There is a certainty in knowing that a rose is a rose is indeed a rose - at all times and in all places.

And thus, we arrive at horticultural therapy. We draw on the same beneficial qualities of horticulture, the human dimensions, to heal and rehabilitate. Horticultural therapy includes all aspects of human responses to plants: physical, psychological, aesthetic, and spiritual. Gardening, an intimate association with plants, can bring peace and serenity to the landscape of the human spirit, helping those in need find a more satisfying life.

As Elaine Penwardin, a scholar turned greenhouse grower, says in her book *It's the Plants that Matter* (1967, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, UK.):

“. . . while pursuing the humblest occupation such as planting or cutting flowers, I had perceived as a chink of light through a door opened quickly, a greater plan of things than our programme for the year, a larger world than that surrounding us, and one universal pattern of things, in which all existence has its place. . . .

I have felt peace descend upon me while I have handled plants, so that rhythm and harmony of being has been brought about. That harmony is the beginning of health. All of us need that harmony, for we are all to some extent disordered by conflicting desires, imprisoned by habit, or fevered with ambition and opposing strife. There is a universal pattern, a pattern that flows like a stream, like the moving pattern of a dance. It is possible, even through such contact with the earth as I have had, to be drawn into that pattern and to move with it.”

