CHAPTER 1

A New Garden Ethic

Acknowledging our love for the living world does something that a library full of papers on sustainable development and ecosystem services cannot: it engages the imagination as well as the intellect.

— George Monbiot

A common yellow garden spider has draped her web beside a birch tree and above New England asters and Virginia mountain mint. It's autumn and the asters are still in bloom, their almost gaudy pink petals guiding insects to the yellow pollen at their center, while the mountain mint is two months past bloom, its gray, pockmarked seed heads like small asteroids perched precariously atop telephone poles. In the mornings, dewdrops balance on every blade and filament of leaf and bloom, every silken thread of web, and every branch tip. By lunchtime the landscape spins with insects on wobbly ziplines, invisible paths etched by more than faith or hope, and far greater than simple purpose; it's as if the world is stenciling itself a design to follow.

On afternoons I make my rounds, noticing how each day brings invigorating new changes to the garden, subtle in the memory but sharp in the moment. The Sun is low in the south, but it's still incredibly warm as it penetrates into the darker areas beneath birch

and oak; out in the open, early fallen elm leaves are dry and disintegrate like potato chips underfoot, but in the shade they are damp and slick, holding tight to the places they cover.

While bees, flies, and moths work the late-season blooms, holdover grasshoppers spring like traps—each one excited by my snaking among the tight paths of this made-up world. Between the open sun of the main garden and the long depths of the side garden, I stop to visit the spider. Her web is empty and shows no signs of prey, not even a torn area she's been unable to repair. This goes on for days. An empty web perfectly formed, speckled with light and dusted by evening with blazingstar seed.

Without thinking too much about it—and with as much curiosity as I've ever had—I stalk a grasshopper in some nearby foliage. I work from behind where its eyesight is probably poorest, present an open hand two feet away, close in, and quickly cup it in my palm. It's not easy to overcome my reaction to hurl it through the air; its thumping, jumping, and scraping against my skin tickles uncomfortably like sandpaper. Running over to the web, I take aim and toss the undulating grasshopper. It frees itself one leg at a time, but then gets stuck again as it drops. That's when the spider darts, injects the grasshopper with venom, spins it in silk, and holds the body still against itself. Over the course of a few weeks, I repeat this ritual many times, failing as often as I succeed, engrossed in the way life becomes life.

But then I begin to feel troubled. Slowly, it seems clear I'm committing nothing short of murder. I might as well be poisoning my backyard with a fogger or tossing grenades into the plants. What have I done, forcing my will upon another living creature? Did I really ever believe that I was helping the spider through some act of compassion? Why did I connect more emotionally with the spider than the grasshopper? I had no right to choose which creature was more valuable, judging which had more worth to live by interfering in a natural process. I gave into my craving to see nature be nature for my own immediate gratification, too impatient or unwilling to sit by that web for hours waiting—and in

the process probably learning far more than I could imagine. This garden isn't nature. Even though I find necessary solace, comfort, and even pain here, I am no more a part of the wild echo than I was before the garden came along.

It's autumn I always crave, suffering through the torment of a slow spring, and then the sugary exuberance of bloom after bloom in the unending summer heat laden with mosquitoes and leaf blowers. Autumn is cold mornings frosting the leaves, warm afternoons fueling the wildlife, cool evenings sprinkled with distant smoke that sticks to my sweater for days. Autumn is the call of snow geese migrating far above; fresh swallowtails rising from dark places to lay one more brood of eggs; and then, eventually, a growing absence. I think it's the absence I love most about nature—the way clouds and foxes and bees are given definition simply by passing through a wide-open moment. It's the idea of negative space, I suppose, that the empty space or absence around an object lends profound meaning to that object. In drawing and painting, an artist makes the shadows first to create trees or stones, and perhaps this is what life is—shadows and voids creating what we interpret as feeling and nature, the real stuff we hold on to. It's not the ironweed or the bee that gives meaning, it's their having been in a moment then suddenly gone in the next. In autumn, and then in winter, the absence is so profound you can hear snowflakes hitting the ground, little paper jewels like a slow tide coming in.

While it's our presence in the form of gardens that brings nature to our urban lives, it's the wake or echo of our beliefs that lingers and reverberates the longest. The choices we make and the rules or feelings we live by create our gardens as much as the plants that inhabit them. In essence, our values are the negative space that gives landscapes their cultural definition, and in turn, guide our social and environmental principles. What we honor now in our landscapes is what will give life to future generations of humans, plants, and animals.

We know we have an innate "passionate love of life and of all that is alive," as psychoanalyst Erich Fromm put it in 1973. Fromm

labeled this phenomenon "biophilia," a term popularized by E.O. Wilson a decade later. Wilson insinuated there's a genetic basis for our subconscious desire to affiliate with nature. This desire is really only a weak biological urge, but it can be exercised to become more than muscle memory as we learn about nature—and especially as we spend time in it, whether we're walking a restored prairie, a wild wetland, or garden beds along city streets. Our biophilia can lead to deep emotional connection, a lifelong job, or passionate activism. For all but the most recent century, our species has lived in wilder environments, but 70 to 80 percent of us will soon live in or near cities. What does urban life do, not only to our psyche but to our biology, when we are more cut off from nature, from daily interactions with wildness? And maybe more importantly, what happens to our ethical codes and our ability to perceive larger changes in the environment, from longer growing seasons to fewer songbirds and butterflies? What happens to our response to the suffering and love of others—not just of other species, but even among our own?

There are two core philosophies that describe how we interact with and engage nature and environment.[1] The first is deep ecology, which explores the very heart of our environmental issues by directly challenging personal and societal values—which can be highly uncomfortable and even psychologically painful. Deep ecology wants to revamp the human systems that deny cultural diversity and biodiversity in nature, recognizing human culture as not the only or even primary culture. The second philosophy is shallow ecology, which promotes technological fixes to environmental issues, often using the same methods as a consumptive, industrial-based society that eroded nature. The main difference between both philosophies is that deep ecology regards all species as having essential wisdom to guide us forward, whereas shallow ecology primarily looks to humans for understanding and direction.

In a human-dominated world, we can't deny one philosophy for the other—they can and should work together. And both philosophies also share a common trait in biophilia, even if their

approaches are different. The challenge before us is to not just embrace shallow ecology as we exercise our biophilia. The technology already exists to make a profound difference on our impact on biodiversity, even if our political and cultural systems impede the technological applications. The true challenge, and the greatest opportunity, is in seeing all life as equal, all life as contributing to our culture and our homes, and all life as essential to the health and future of our nations. The challenge will be a change in our empathy and compassion, a rewiring of our society that supercharges our latent love for nature.

What this challenge boils down to is a new ethic—a landscape ethic—and in our cities, a garden ethic. This garden ethic is derived from Aldo Leopold's land ethic, as he relates in his book *A Sand County Almanac*:

> The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.... That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics.... A land ethic, then, reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of land.... We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in.... A land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it...it implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.

Leopold's ideas on environmental fraternity have radically influenced how we see, work with, and manage large tracts of wilderness and near wilderness. And while he is radical in that he presents a philosophy that's in opposition to our mainstream society of ownership and possession, Leopold is radical in another sense as well—in getting down to the root of our understanding, our care, and our innate love or connection with wildness. In a society

that sees wildness as sometimes threatening, or as something to be used in a brief moment for our pleasure or profit, Leopold insists we experience daily wildness as the more-than-real shadow that gives our lives definition and meaning—wildness is at the core of our joy and sorrow, it balances us as it tips us over.

Where we get into trouble with a landscape ethic or garden ethic, though, is the very word itself: *ethic*. Years ago I used the word *moral*, but it is many times more problematic than *ethic*, for it implies a rash judgment of puritanical undertones, a distinct if not damning "right" or "wrong." By using the term *ethics*, we open ourselves up to a larger dialogue that is not so much critical as it is practicing critical thinking, or deep ecology. This deeper thinking is what the Aldo Leopold Foundation explores in how we define and use the term *ethics*, specifically in two ways. The first is the idea that ethics help us decide how to live. The Foundation proclaims "they [our ethics] are prescriptive in that they tell us what we should or ought to do and which values we should or ought not hold. They also help us evaluate whether something is good or bad, right or wrong."

Ethics are also useful in explaining why wildlife and landscapes are important or valuable, and in describing the actions we can take to demonstrate those values. In other words, our ethical perspective is not just informed by one ideology such as economics or beauty, but by multiple perspectives at once that take into account the larger shared community; think on how a marsh not only filters drinking water and reduces flooding but is also home to wrens and frogs and snakes and lightning bugs. That marsh might also be a place of historical value, or reflect some sense of regional identity or pride. What personal values are being followed in the actions we take toward the marsh, and are those actions in line with our beliefs?

Somewhere in the mess of these two definitions is a garden ethic; one that links the human and nonhuman, the urban and the wild, the present and the future, and binds us to one another as part of a mutually supportive community. But if we can stretch

ourselves further—if we can strive and even succeed in seeing our world through the eyes of another species—we'll be able to go further than if we just agree that other lives are important, or everyone deserves a fair shake. What happens when other species are primary and humans are secondary, if even for a moment? What happens when landscapes stop being mostly for us, but are split more fairly between all species that give meaning to our country, our state, our city, and our homes? What happens when we put the good of others before our own immediate good? In love, as in a successful business, providing what someone else needs provides us with what we need, even if it takes a long time to see that benefit. If we decide not to convert a grassland to corn, not to put in a concrete median in favor of ornamental plantings, not to have a 100 percent lawn landscape around our house, we are making conscious decisions that benefit more than the immediate bottom line or a default mode of aesthetics. Over time, we are providing for the very real environmental needs not only of ourselves, but of other species as well.

Some argue that it's not realistic to expect humans to see through another creature's perspective, or to expect large, meaningful changes that revolutionize how gardens function. And yet, if we reach for an impossible dream, the improbable becomes more likely. Our reach must always exceed our grasp if we wish to achieve worthwhile objectives. We have to displace our sense of entitlement in all that we do, and have to start getting comfortable gardening with a viewpoint that is not entirely human. To be truly liberated, we have to be beholden to the functioning world, and to each other through its thriving biodiversity. For example, we should strive to make landscapes that are not only attractive and useful to us, but that are equally if not more attractive and useful to other species. Such a goal cannot be achieved by taking careful steps over decades, not if we are sensitive to the immediate realities of changing weather patterns, vanishing wildlife, and pollution; these larger environmental issues need radical thinking, dreaming, and action on an order of magnitude that inspires us

deeply and profoundly instead of teasing out our latent biophilia in small increments. We need urban gardens that exuberantly embrace wildness in its complex fullness, not in a watered-down echo that does us little good.

I don't want to live in a hollowed-out world, physically, emotionally, or psychologically. I don't want to know what it's like not hearing the arching cadence of a bobwhite in the nearby woods, or not being lost in the thick tallgrass where a majority of monarchs reproduce on milkweed each summer. Time and again I hear how native plant landscapes aren't possible, that it's necessary to meet people where they are, gently encouraging the addition of a few native plants here and there over time, or slowly removing lawn from public spaces. The implication is that one can go too far, too fast. This means we can't quickly expect anyone to embrace an urban garden that's lushly layered and brimming with wildlife, or one composed of plants from the local ecoregion that wildlife must have, or one that eschews thin foundation beds around homes filled with rock mulch that dries out soil. Where people are, though, is stuck in a culture that extracts life from the planet to satiate fleeting pleasure. Where people are is in a planet that can't wait another minute for us to wake up to our potential to be more than we allow ourselves within the warped systems we've created.

Without presenting viable options, without aiming for more than we hoped, how will anyone know another way? If our landscapes all look the same from state to state and country to country—using the same plants in the same ways—we lose our sense of self, place, and compassion for the community as a whole. In this spirit, we'll need plants that coevolved with fauna to revive life, and native plant gardens that emulate their wild origins to create a function that goes beyond supporting butterflies, cleaning water, or cooling the air. Native plant gardens bring the places we escape to on weekends or annual vacations into every moment; they make us part of the global language again by rooting us into a community. Native plant gardens awaken and exercise biophilia on levels we're just beginning to quantify but have always felt. That

reviving wildness with native plant landscapes isn't realistic may be a perception of a society stuck in a system of manipulation instead of cooperation, and a lack of social ethics that more of us are crying out for today.

It's in the muck and mire where we often grow the most. In doubt and confusion, the untouchable and even the putrid—in those moments and feelings that at first feel alien but can become so life-giving. As a child I didn't play in the dirt or raise caterpillars or bring decomposing animals into the house. More than one photo shows me squatting like a baseball catcher above mud or grass, carefully pinching a stone or a twig between my small fingers. I was afraid of every creepy crawly, from worms and spiders to birds and fish. Even when I was much older, I was careful not to slide across the ground, constantly aware of getting dirty. When I began gardening on my own as a thirty-something adult, those walls broke down. Slowly, I relished the cracking dirt molded to my back and arms that had mixed with liters of sweat. I wore the same ratty jeans day after day. I even wore shorts to expose my hairy legs and began taking my shirt off then washing myself down with hose water. If you'd known me before, you'd not have recognized the seemingly crazed guy gutting out a 95-degree afternoon. I was nasty with the earth.

Maybe I've just grown up or grown more comfortable in my skin, or maybe having a garden—literally bleeding in a place—has stirred something I never knew I possessed. I've raised monarch, swallowtail, and sulphur butterfly caterpillars for years now. I've touched their excrement and their diseased bodies, and I've held their liquefied remains eaten by tachinid fly larvae. I've carried spiders from kitchen to garden with guarded ease. I've buried birds covered in maggots. And I've pulled myself back from the soil with the speed of light when a centipede started working its way up my arm. Sometimes, I'll go outside to divide a plant just before I know a rainstorm will arrive, soaking up the still afternoon as

darkness grows and thunder spills closer. It's this unknown, this almost dangerous and certainly unfamiliar wildness, which gives me comfort in my pain and pain in my comfort. I go to the garden to be consumed, redistributed, and rebuilt without having to lose my life; every part of the natural world, from the "ugly" to the "pretty," makes me more human.

Gardens are one primary way to connect to the world, to lift the veil of our emotions, fears, and desires while holding a dialogue with the environment and species whose language we have lost over time. Each garden places us firmly within the context of all life, awakens us to the web, humbles us as we become aware of ourselves as a node in that interlinked web. When we touch the soil, we touch our ancestors and our children, we know the heartbeats of worms, birds, insects, and mammals with each scrape of the nail and each cut of the skin. The taste of our own flesh is in soil. When we nestle a plant into a newly dug hole, we are reaching out to bees that will gather pollen and frogs that will take shelter in a rainstorm. A garden is our grasping for the world as much as it is a giving to the world—who are we, where have we been, where we will go. A garden is the moment, now, every emotion, every bit of knowing and unknowing coalescing into a timeless equality of mind, body, and spirit. In our best moments, we are no less than a garden that serves life, not ourselves.

So many of our landscapes are a no-man's-land, scarred and abused, forgotten and misunderstood—remnants of our lack of knowledge or connection. They are absent of substance. Too many of our landscapes are made up of a single culture, a single species, a single way of looking at the natural world, all at the expense of biodiversity. Our suburban and urban planting areas are especially devoid of life, ecological function, and a sense of ethical interaction with the world; in some ways parks, arboretums, and botanical gardens also present a type of ethics that shows a deep divide

between species and place, so much so that it's hard to imagine any meaningful sense of biophilia exists.

Our manicured and unused lawns are inflammatory words hurled at the planet, places where we forcibly cast out life.[2] Foundation beds along homes, businesses, schools, and churches are sculpture gardens for a few misplaced, mismatched specimens a landscaper had left over from another job or were on sale at the supplier. Parking lots rush oily water filled with trash to clog storm drains and foul streams and lakes, instead of settling toward bioswales or rain gardens to be cleaned and filtered by plants evolved to do the job for free.

We live in a world of perfectly spaced plants that mimic headstones aligned in exact intervals. Wood mulch is more important to us than flowers. We clean up our gardens like they are living rooms after the children have gone to bed. We mow the world back on roadsides, hellstrips, business frontages, vacant lots, and parklands, beating any sense of wonder, awe, or love into submission. We've even set up laws that mandate this sort of forced submission upon nature to the point that any deviation from this norm is believed to be highly seditious, unpatriotic, undemocratic, and worth getting reported by a neighbor. And yet, Leopold reminds us, "nonconformity is the highest evolutionary attainment of social animals." For a species to evolve and grow, it must constantly be challenged from within and without; not conforming to social norms will help us foster healthy and necessary biodiversity. Our world is asking for gardens to be more, to light the way to a new relationship with nature, to be radical in their roots and their blooms.

While we treat our landscapes as simplified places and grudgingly necessary ornamentation, we also treat our more ornate public gardens as pieces of static art to experience, briefly ponder, and enjoy, then leave behind for the next physical stimulus. We treat plants like pieces of jewelry, fine dresses, and designer shoes, with the newest trend most proudly displayed in magazines and social

media pages. Instead of celebrating plants as parts of a global community, and highlighting what each can do for life beyond our own visual pleasure, we focus exclusively on a new leaf color or a new bloom shape, seldom considering or knowing how these alterations affect other species or the larger community or the repercussions of our choices over time. And while we may need the kind of aesthetic beauty gardens deliver in order to connect with nature, plants are far more than a visual commodity.

Simply put, plants are not art. What we do with them, how we honor their life processes as part of creating ecological function—that's art. It's frustrating when the talk is so often focused on how pretty a plant looks, not on what its deeper contribution is to life above and below the soil line. Our lives will vastly improve on many levels if we ogle a plant not just because we find it attractive but also because it's covered in larvae or supports beneficial soil bacteria. We've got to stop judging a plant by its cover and look beyond what it does for us alone. Plants are not for us. We just presume this to be the case because we live in a culture that views humans as primary, superior and all other life—all other intelligence—as secondary, here to be used only for our benefit.

Ultimately, the natural world is not here to look pretty for us. It does not exist in order to be decorated with statements of our exaltation of its beauty. That we find it so moving is a product of our biology, our linked genetics—call it a stewardship gene or at the very least a shared purpose. Nature is not something to extract resources from—whether that be in the form of fuel or as inspiration for paintings and gardens. The natural world doesn't need us, even though we may be part of the evolution of life figuring itself out. That we think nature needs us—that we assume we are fundamental to the functioning of life—is what alienates us from life and keeps us from becoming something far more. Because we can decode DNA or cure diseases or send people to the Moon is not evidence of our greatness, but evidence of nature's greatness in giving birth to us. Every organism on Earth is here not *for* us but *with* us, and the loss of a single species by our hands—whether

through damming rivers, deforestation, or carbon dioxide in the atmosphere—is an eradication of our own being.

Beauty is a fluid concept that strives to give clear definition to what we feel—what we love and fear, what we desire and despise. A garden as a setting for humans is beautiful only insofar as it helps us mitigate the more violent aspects of our culture and brings us into a deeper understanding of shared relationships across species. Gardens are not pretty. Gardens are not useful. Gardens are an orphaned species trying hard to find its way back home through the maze of its own culture, unsure of how to make sense of the journey or even how to make it. Gardens are essential tools to help us reimagine this epoch of humanity: the Anthropocene.[3]

Since we've created a soup of altered climate and threatened species, the world is now a garden we must manage to preserve some of its biological integrity—an unfortunate state of reality we've forced ourselves into. If the entire planet is a garden, how are we going to care for it? Should we? What will be the guiding principles? Will the world be just for us and our sense of beauty? Or will we open our hearts and minds and rethink beauty—a deeper, functional beauty designed for species and environments other than our own? The more we check our egos at the garden gate, the more we'll make gardens that work for a common good, that reconnect us to the world we're erasing, and even bring us closer to one another.

Ultimately, if gardens are art, maybe it's in the spirit of art as an attempt to express the inexpressible, a way to bridge how we interpret the world emotionally, how we internalize and experience life, what we value in our most authentic moments of reflection and connection. Art as a revolution, perhaps. And yet many gardens and greenscapes—places most folks call nature—are not meaningful nature in the biophilic sense, and certainly not in the ecological, practical, or ethical sense. When gardens aren't supporting local flora and fauna—life endemic to that place and pushed to the margins—they fail to be the models of democracy and freedom we imagine them to be. A designed landscape that does not see

beyond the human is a landscape devoid of the human. It's devoid of forgiveness, mercy, hope, equality, and community.

It's essential to rethink our gardens, to probe their meanings and expose how and why we make them, to question and hopefully invigorate the world we alter. When you walk through a garden, what is your first response? What is your second response? What do you leave with? Are you first overrun by your senses, by color and texture and shape and scent? Do you stay focused on the cacophony of color and texture, or are you also able to slow down and focus on a moment, a microcosm of life within the landscape? How long do you linger? Why do you go? Are you motivated after you leave, underwhelmed, overwhelmed?

A designer plans for texture and intrigue, as well as how water moves through a landscape and how people use the space. A garden proclaims status as well as belief. Lawn, walls, the number of trees, the arrangement of plants, all are an aesthetic of both emotion and culture. Since gardens are human-centered creations, too often ecology and wildlife get only lip service or greenwashing to appeal to social trends or the marketplace. By extension, the idea that plants and wildlife first and foremost must bring us pleasure limits our sense of wonder as well as the independent lives of other species, not to mention our sense of right and wrong. For example, is it right to place a plant in our garden beds however we see fit, without considering its natural associations with other plants, soil life, and fauna? Is it right to place that plant without considering its needs as primary, and the needs of the ecosystem it is entering or creating as more important than our own?

If a biophilic garden begins with the pretty or beautiful—a fairly subjective sense defined by both an individual and their culture—then it shows the human eye as arrogant. A garden is then a negotiation between our arrogance and the perceived arrogance of a wildness we constantly battle. Gardens tend to fight back wildness and make it legible; they mold nature into something

we understand and are comfortable with. But in that victory of conquering nature through gardening, we lose a deeper understanding of wildness and ourselves. We set up ourselves and our gardens as an ideal, one that excludes deeper levels of meaning. As we cultivate this shallow ideal, we might feel that something is awry. It's the imperfection or incongruity of our actions we grow uncomfortable with—our inability to feel safe within or be part of the natural community, how our concrete and oil and pesticides work to subdue nature and ease our alienation from it. The art of a garden is the simultaneous practice of immersion and avoidance, of gardening for life and against it. Yet what is art but at first a very personal, and then ultimately very public, struggle with our place in the world and our understanding of what it means to be an apex species—one with a fluid ethical code dictated by emotion?

Maybe what it comes down to is this: if the primary and essential way we see the world is through aesthetic experience, then we've denied power and efficacy to our other senses, as well as to our relation to the larger web of life. Our gardens say a lot about our belief in ourselves and the natural world, about who and what we respect. Gardens have deep meaning when they are created and managed to benefit other species, even other humans. Shifting the perspective beyond our own can feel strange and disruptive. But art should be disruptive. And being composed of other sentient, living organisms with their own distinct life processes, gardens have value and meaning beyond their artistic representation. Why we make them and how we design them reveals the extent of our social responsibility, as well as our awareness of how the world works and what ecology really is.

Gardening from a larger-than-human perspective can also be empowering. In this time of climate disruption and mass extinction, gardens are becoming places of activism, where we work to get at the root of our disconnect with nature and each other while rocking the boat. This is obvious in urban food forests, community vegetable gardens, and even more so in front yards turned to meadows, sitting areas, or anything other than unused

conventional lawn. Activism of any sort always makes another group uncomfortable—that's part of the point. Radical ideas can always appear to undermine the status quo, ideas and beliefs we accept or trust blindly because they've seemingly always existed and appear stable or trustworthy. An activist seeks to question the validity of a belief or a circumstance, to test that validity against an ethical code, and to either accept or rewrite the beliefs and codes based on new information and experience. Such an activist will run toward conflict and debate in an eagerness to refuse what's been given to them, to not accept at face value something they feel is unjust. And such a person will present a new perspective to others that doesn't necessarily invalidate a counterpoint, even though the first emotional response will be to think that's the case.

I'm reminded of what Kumi Naidoo, past executive director of Greenpeace, said about the origins of the organization being anti-Vietnam-War Quakers who believed in bearing witness: "If there's an injustice in the world, those of us that have the ability to witness it and to record it, document it and tell the world what is happening, have a moral responsibility to do that. Then, of course, it's left up to those that are receiving that knowledge to make the moral choice about whether they want to stand up against the injustice or observe it." In this vein we have an ethical responsibility to reflect on what is and isn't happening in our gardens, even if that makes those who adhere to the status quo uncomfortable.

We live with an echo that reverberates back and forth between landscape and human culture, between cropland and cheap food, between action and hope, between health and sickness. How we treat each other and ourselves is reflected in the landscape, in our gardens. As we erode diversity of species and places, we erode not only nature's resiliency but our own. The greatest injustice of our time may be the eradication of native ecosystems, the erasure of entire life forms, and the capacity of one species to ignore those injustices. Wildness is that which we fear to hold close to us, for it might show how far apart we are from one another.

Every time I plant a milkweed, I both interrupt and intercede in the world—I hinder and help in the same action. My act of making a sustainable urban garden is a remaking of nature, a way to connect myself through proof and belief that I have the power to heal us all, to move deeper into the cycles of life even as I disrupt or alter them in the garden and in every aspect of my modern Western life. I drive a car that uses gasoline to pick up new plants or a needed tool. I order supplies from a distant business that uses fossil fuels to package and ship those supplies. I heat my home with natural gas, the production of which poisons groundwater, shakes the Earth, and erodes wildlife habitat. Even my garden clothes are polyester blends, plastics made from oil that slowly break apart in the wash and accumulate in the bodies of aquatic species. And that's where modern life gets problematic. One myth of a garden is that it rights systemic cultural wrongs such as human supremacy or capitalism or deforestation—that we help the environment, get in tune with nature, and inherently practice sustainability simply by using plants. Another myth of the garden is that any garden, any composition of plants, is better than no garden at all—that it doesn't really matter if you use a large proportion of native plants or not as long as the plants you use are fitted to the soil, light, and climatic conditions. Sure, the thinking goes, native plants are an important component, but a successful garden's main benefit is to sustain itself with little input from us while maintaining its aesthetic value.

Too many of our human political and cultural beliefs are imprinted on our gardens and their nonhuman inhabitants. Plants and bees are not people, and their culture is radically different from ours; yet like every other minority—from prairie dogs to Native American tribes—we impose the dominant culture on them in myriad ways. We are colonizers who replace the culture of the oppressed with the culture of the oppressor, whether that's through our plant choices or in how we arrange those plants. A garden can be a way to bridge our seemingly disparate cultures, but it's also often a way to exercise domination over others in the

name of one's own joy, happiness, and sense of personal freedom. If this control is primarily what a garden is, then perhaps gardens will, in the end, always fail to move us into a better relationship with other species and ecosystems.

Author Joy Williams notes that "the ecological crisis cannot be resolved by politics. It cannot be resolved by science or technology. It is a crisis caused by culture and character, and a deep change in personal consciousness is needed…. This is essentially a moral issue we face, and moral decisions must be made." Our gardens are not free of ethical consideration. They are a part of nature even if they don't often function naturally, and how we make them will always be a direct reflection of what we value. We have to choose what gardens mean and what they are to be, and perhaps in doing so, fundamentally change our worldview through the lens of garden making itself. But are we capable of doing so?

Ultimately, our cultural and personal assumptions make us feel safe. They provide a sense of order and predictability around a wild life we feel is chaotic and could turn on us at any moment. These feelings stem from our hard work to disconnect ourselves from nature and its processes, rhythms, ebbs, and flows—for example, through lives lived indoors and being unaware of how our food is produced. Our massive and complicated brains provide us the ability to transcend existence through reflection and thinking outside the box; this is how we can not only perform complex tasks but also analyze them abstractly. If we build a new shed out back, we're not just thinking about how to do it and what it will look like; we're also thinking about what it will feel like in the landscape, what it will be like looking out from inside, and how we might use the shed in different ways years down the road. We might even consider who else will use the shed after we are gone, or how it exemplifies who we are.

Of course, our brains can also lead us to alienate ourselves from the world—especially since they are programmed or evolutionarily hardwired to see chaos as a threat to our survival. The irony is that what we perceive as threatening chaos is really supreme cosmic

order. Everything, from dark forests to deep oceans and seasons to even time itself, is magnificently ordered. And yet anything we can't comprehend in an instant through simple, non-abstract thought is labeled chaotic by our first, instinctual response. But we are more than our instincts. We are also evolutionarily hardwired by our experience of beauty and other emotion-driven judgments, programmed to experience them in ways defined by what our culture shares in media and what we experience in our daily lives from birth to death. Our first touch and other sensory encounters shape how we touch and process the world from then on. Our first tactile experiences with a perfume or a wool blanket are how we will forever experience perfume and wool blankets—and this is how we process beauty as well as comfort, as well as every other emotionally defined experience. Beauty as an occurrence or an idea is shaped by our religion, our parents, our friends, and our teachers, as well as by how much money we have to access physical beauty, or to have the leisure time to think philosophically about it.

Of course a garden must be pretty. Our cityscapes and suburban homes, our urban parks and roadsides, all of these must share in our cultural idea of pretty if we are to maintain a sense of social cohesion that comforts us. Our vision and other senses are what draw us into a place, give us the feeling of repose or joy or safety that we seek. We prefer landscapes that appeal to our animal instincts; we desire to be protected by cover and to see danger approaching from a distance. Maybe we tend to insist on open lawns and meadows in more public or unfamiliar places because we have a primal wariness about what might be lurking around the corner. However, in our home landscapes, safe behind fences and in places we walk every day, we may tend to yearn for seclusion, shadows, and cloistered sitting areas, places where we can let our guard down.

Our culture dictates that a pretty garden is an easily legible one. For some people, this expectation of legibility also extends to wild landscapes, but because of our disconnection from nature, wild places are less and less legible to us. We do not readily perceive

order behind the seeming chaos unless and until we accumulate ecological knowledge, which helps us understand and recognize natural patterns and processes.

Finding reliable patterns helps us hold on to our reality and feel safe, and then even joyful. When visiting a garden, we first see and hold onto basic patterns of repeated form, color, and texture. Yet what makes us feel safe and joyful often diminishes the safety and joy of other species. There is an opportunity in balancing the seemingly disparate needs of our own instincts against the comfort (or presence) of other species. We can stretch our own definition of what is comfortable in a wilder garden, allowing a deeper connection with nature if we are willing to temper our instinctive responses. If we can ask our gardens to be more, then maybe we can be more—maybe we can refocus who we are and become greater than we dreamed.

We are in the midst of an evolutionary rewiring as we come out of our species' relative infancy on the planet. The industrial revolution—the industrialization of life—is calling into question our physical and psychological balance with nature. The juncture of personal desire and an ethics of expansive, inclusionary existence for all life is invigorating our response to the environment and our role in it. We are experiencing growing pains as we delve into ethical issues in landscape design, just as we are experiencing them in conversations around gender, religion, and race. We are becoming more than animal as we struggle to find out how animal we really are.

Gardens console us, welcome us, connect us. They bring us moments of peace and reflection. They help us doubt. They humble. They teach. They make us smarter. They heal. Because gardens do so much for us, they can be at the center of rethinking our ethics for nature and beyond. Unfortunately, we also idealize our gardens, place them on a pedestal so magnificent they almost seem untouchable and impervious to critique or change. We need more

mindfulness in gardens. I wish every gardener could spend a week sitting by a sunflower observing every insect, every interaction, every raindrop and breeze that affects the plant. If we could see the garden through the perspective of a sunflower, would we become different gardeners? How would our practice change? How would our interactions with flora and fauna, with humans, morph in the coming months and years?

A garden is not at any stage a pristine Eden, and neither is nature. It is not a place of exclusion or seclusion. A garden is not an idealization of perfection or a perfected idealization. A garden is not for me, but is a nexus of everything I did not understand or realize before I had a garden—other lives, other needs, other moments.

A garden, once created, is a selfless expression of faith as processes beyond my control are set in motion. A garden is created not with self as the centering, ordering property, but as everything else as centering and ordering—as the passing shadows of other lives given definition and shape by the deeper reality of the landscape.

A garden will never quite be nature, and it will always be limited by our conception and perception of what nature is in our eye at one moment in time. A garden is an interpretation, and as a result is as fallible as we are in our knowledge and beliefs, which change through discovery and practice. But just as we can and should evolve, the garden can and should evolve. When I look out my window into the garden, I don't see myself as instigator or even creator. In the end I hope to not even see myself at all. The garden is the sunflower turning to face the daylight, pollen in the bloom and nectar along the stem that attracts ants and butterflies and bees and beetles. The sunflower is the instigator and creator. The sunflower is the moment a garden ceases to be a garden and becomes a conduit to freedom from the tyranny of our human-made reality, a reality too often divorced from nature.

It's another autumn in the main garden I started nine years ago. It's the second autumn for the front-yard prairie garden and the first autumn for the new backyard meadow that I sowed and planted directly into the lawn. Already the oldest garden is like my fifteen-year-old cat—dependable, loyal, communicative, punctual, and a true friend. The other gardens, well, I'm not too sure what they are—wild kittens who need a guiding hand and who are teaching me that such a hand doesn't have to be so direct, that in fact I'm the one being taught.

Out front along the avenue of concrete and short-clipped lawns, my little designed meadow of native grasses and flowers sways with butterflies, moths, bees, and wasps. I was careful to keep plants only one to two feet high within six feet of the sidewalk, to use drifts and masses of taller grasses like little bluestem and flowers like rattlesnake master. Asters gone to seed give themselves into the air like puffs of inverse snow, all in the form of tiny wings pulsing against the wind. In late summer monarchs and skippers weave themselves around the spires of rough blazing-star seeking nectar, and goldfinches carve open the darkened seed heads of coneflower, calling out in sharp alarm as I walk to the mailbox. I startled a prairie toad one day who was resting in a clump of bristleleaf sedge. Invigorated by the wildlife using the new space, I tore out the dogwood shrub that was in too much shade and put in an entire sedge bed with autumn-blooming calico aster, careful to weave my way around a small hole that launched foraging yellow jackets into the sky.

Out back in the new two-thousand-foot meadow, I added another three hundred or so juvenile plants—nodding onion, smooth aster, pale purple coneflower, ironweed, and poppy mallow. Already last fall's hundred plugs are bringing in pollinators and pushing their roots into the clay soil that we tend to find unforgiving, but these native plants need to thrive. Each day for a month, in the late afternoon I startle a young rabbit who's feasting on the fescue lawn I've ignored—it lets me plant within just a few feet before running off into the shrubs. At night, lying in bed when

I can't fall asleep, I busy my mind with thoughts of the landscape. I don't count sheep, I count plants—what was added, what could be added, what was lost. I imagine short grasses supporting taller wildflowers, roots touching and talking and helping one another; I imagine larvae eating leaves and heading for the thick shelter of switchgrass to pupate; I imagine birds scraping at the covered ground for seeds, so loud you'd think they were mountain lions pouncing on their prey.

I took away another 150 feet of lawn to make room for a gravel patio where I can sit and watch the young meadow evolve; now, in total, our quarter-acre lot might have 500 to 750 feet of lawn left—I can mow it in ten minutes and get back to being in the garden. In midsummer, from the deck I hear dozens of bumble bees working wild senna, buzzing their bodies to shake the pollen loose. In early fall, I can smell zigzag goldenrod from across the beds, a scent that's the spitting image of my late grandmother's perfume.

Winter is coming tomorrow night after a long, dry fall. It's November 16 and the temperature is 80, the latest 80-degree day in recorded history for the city. In two days it will be 42 degrees with wind chills in the low 20s. I will miss having the windows open and the cardinal's voice flooding the house as it chips away at twilight; I will miss letting our cats out as I plant the new gardens and they sun themselves in the young grasses; I will miss the very late sulphurs scrambling to find faded blooms long since absent of nectar; and I will miss the grasshoppers who, in the still heat of a June-like afternoon near Thanksgiving, jump loudly from leaf pile to leaf pile and whose world may be growing larger in this small suburban island that I now leave to them.

It's time to rethink beauty, to reimagine our gardens and urban landscapes as we move into an uncertain future. Our gardens matter not because they can literally save species, but because they are a call to action to be more than we let ourselves be. Gardens are living testaments to our wonder and joy, our part of the larger

world and participation with all life. Gardens matter because they bring birds and butterflies closer to us, they help release endorphins that make us feel happy, awaken dormant connections in our neurons, maybe even spur empathy as we learn again to care selflessly for other species simply because it's the right or ethical thing to do. Gardens matter because they call us to act on issues of social justice, bringing nature and opportunity to those humans and other species who are marginalized by our culture. Gardens move us out from ourselves into a community of selves that depend upon and celebrate one another.

When we learn what our landscapes can do, how they can directly help wildlife and serve as ethical symbols for people—when we learn how essential native plants are, how gardens can sequester carbon and provide pollen and serve as larval hosts and rebuild our homes—then the choices we make after these revelations carry even more weight. Do we choose to garden for ourselves only, for our idea of beauty alone, or do we more fully—more equally—integrate a selfless gardening that builds ecosystems composed of essential native plants and designs that mimic the natural, wilder areas just beyond the garden fence? Or do we embrace our role as an indifferent species, a species bent on emotional and physical conquest that will undermine our health, happiness, and peace in the years to come?

Does a large home need all that grass and boxwood parterres? Does that style fit the regional environment aesthetically and ecologically? What happens when we go against the ecological grain of our home places, when we can't or won't accept the natural processes, beauty, and purpose of our immediate world? What happens to a species that sees landscapes as never quite right, never perfect enough, not entirely what we want? Does that species lose any right to be part of the larger world, does it lose its identity and potential to be something better?

Our gardens matter, and the way in which we create them, grow them, and rethink them matters on a level far more important than whether they simply function aesthetically. While we arguably

must find a garden beautiful, and while it will always be a kind of artifice, the truth is the entire world is now a garden we have made. How we tend it, how we honor those species we've ignored and betrayed, will say much about who we are and who we will become. Our legacy won't be how pretty our gardens looked; our legacy will be how gardens and other managed spaces woke us to a revolution of belonging in this world, a renaissance of ethical thinking that helped us evolve into our fullest potential as stewards of life and gardeners of our own hearts.

In the spirit of an evolved landscape community, here is a new garden ethic for this century.

Your garden is a protest. It is a place of defiant compassion. It is a space to help sustain wildlife and ecosystem function while providing an aesthetic response that moves you. For you, beauty isn't just petal deep, but goes down into the soil, farther down into the aquifer, and back up into the air and for miles around on the backs and legs of insects. You don't have to see soil microbes in action, birds eating seeds, butterflies laying eggs, ants farming aphids—just knowing it's possible in your garden thrills you. It's like faith, and it frees you to live life more authentically. Your garden is a protest for all the ways in which we deny our life by denying other lives. Plant some natives. Be defiantly compassionate.