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A Gardener Plots Change

By: Tovah Martin 12/20/2007

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Perhaps you imagine that you're the only gardener perched in front of the drawing board right about now. Maybe you think that no one else sits around scheming to redesign their garden come winter. Well, I'm here to welcome you to the crowd. You're not alone. In fact, if you jammed all the local gardeners who are reworking their gardens this winter into a good-sized lecture hall, there would be standing room only.

I'm a case in point. My garden has gone through so many shifts that the geraniums don't even bother to unpack their bags. Shrubs go through an identity crisis, checking their labels to make sure that they're really perennials. Roots don't dare wander off because they know that if they stray far, the shovel is bound to come and sever their maternal relationship. And then they'll be scooped up and moved five feet to the right. Again.

I'm a compulsive replanter. After tearing out my foxglove garden in favor of dwarf evergreens forming a hopscotch of orbs in varying shades of blue, chartreuse and green, and then ripping out the long border and exchanging the dreaded valerian for a more benign brood of flowering shrubs instead, I'm totally out of the closet in the obsession department.

Recently, I've laid it out where everyone will notice, exchanging the unmowable portion of my lawn for sedums and thymes. Not only am I comfortable with constant flux, but I'm a strong proponent of revision. My new slogan being, "The thymes they are a changing." Like a certain breed of shoppers who invariably stand in the exchange line after the holidays have come and gone, I habitually exchange one good idea for the next. And winter provides the perfect forum for overhauls. So, that explains why there's a slew of catalogs with post-its sitting on my desk as we speak. That's why there's a scratch pad ever-ready by my computer with an ongoing list of red and orange dahlias. Because there was an Aha! moment (actually, that would be Aha! moment number 27) when I decided that the border outside the window of my office had to go. Or, to be more accurate, it had to be reworked.

Just for the record, this particular end of the border has been in place, unaltered, for 11 years. I figure that I've got my mileage out of it. It was planted when I first moved to Litchfield County, when I was deeply entrenched in my Pastel Period. Not only is it tired, in need of a face lift, and boring, but I've evolved. The relationship just doesn't work anymore.

So bring on the color, is what I say. Actually, the idea wasn't entirely my own. No, I stole it from Gertrude Jekyll. In the course of doing research for a story about the Glebe House gardens, I happened upon a hand-tinted photograph of a British border designed by the divine Miss J composed of smoldering reds, peaches, oranges and yellows. That very day, I decided that it wasn't possible to survive another season without a similar surge of color. I wanted to look out my office window, be smitten by burning shades, and be elevated above the abysses of writer's block. It's a dicey maneuver, I must admit. Mingling reds with oranges and yellows is dangerous water. But I've seen it done successfully in bouquets. And what fun is life without a challenge?

Miss Jekyll steered clear of magentas and went straight for cherry. When I ran that

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tack by George Schoellkopf, arbiter of taste in the color realm, he concurred. "Malignant magenta," is what I think he called it, I think. Gertrude Jekyll leaned heavily on plants that would be annuals for us-dahlias, snapdragons, and the like. My idea is to use perennials and shrubs instead, with a strong emphasis on colorful foliage rather than resting on flowers. It's not the easiest feat I've ever tackled. I've got to say that tearing out the cut flower labyrinth and putting in a pie-shaped, raised bed heirloom vegetable planting was child's play compared to this. Wrestling out the beebalm meadow behind my cottage and switching it out for a berried shrub stand was a relative piece of cake. I've got innumerable bulbs and seasonal perennials that need to be salvaged and relocated before I can really work the power switch out front. But hey, I'm practiced at this now. Change 'R Us.

Just to make sure that I wasn't whistling in the dark, I called Lee Link to find out if everything was going as normal in Sharon. Just as I suspected, Lee Link is also in the midst of a renovation project. Hers has to do with a former flower-filled front border. Good thing I didn't inquire about its health and welfare because her first words were, "I ripped it out." In conspiracy with Michael Trapp, she moved three multi-stemmed kousa dogwoods in place of the annuals and asked him to design a cobbled border to surround each tree. Then, each rectangle will get a different groundcover. The final cut hasn't been made yet on the groundcover selection. "I'm still dithering about that," she said. In justification, she explained that the border became unbalanced after July 14. But she's always been a strong proponent of moving on. "I do think change is good," she said. "It kind of revs one up."

Likewise, Kathleen Nelson of Kathleen Nelson Perennials in Gaylordsville is no stranger to revamping. She does it for clients all the time, but in her own yard, Nelson's newest initiative is to convert a gravelly area to garden. In keeping with the natives that prevail in her nursery, she's going for plants that can endure the sharp drainage but also perform. "A mass of soft, low native grass with a few flowers tucked above" is what she's envisioning. Her palette includes butterfly weed *Asclepias tuberosa* (normally chowed by voles, but she's hoping that the gravel protects its roots from pillage), *Eryngium yuccifolium*, and *Parthenium integrifolium* (wild quinine), *Oenothera 'Cold Creek'* (evening primrose), and *Aquilegia canadensis* (columbine) in the flower department. Mountain mints *Pycnanthemum muticum* and *P. tenuifolium* will furnish foliage/late season flowers and muscle out weeds, plus the grass, *Sporobolus heterolepis* (prairie dropseed), is slated to serve as a constant. Her strategy is simple-cram the plants in and let them fend for themselves.

Diana Bristol of Bloomingfields in Gaylordsville is also doing the botanical version of taking the bull by its horns-in this case, taking her roses by their thorns. Determined to go for low maintenance, she's seriously assessing her horde of French ultra-fragrant roses for their compatibility with our climate. Since her roses were smitten by a horror known as rose midge last summer, she's been somewhat disenchanted. What will stay? Definitely David Austin's 'Sharifa Asma' and the hybrid rugosas. Meanwhile, the vegetable garden is not imperiled, no matter how much labor it entails.

"It's a great joy; it's a way of life, and I've done it for 30 years," she said. But she's no longer a slave to a 40-year-old rooster topiary that formerly served as a focal point. "It just turned ugly," she said, "it was like a monster." After it got the axe last month, she was left with a big blank space and no firm plans for replacements. "It has me baffled," Bristol admitted, "but I'm glad for four months of stark winter to ponder the solution." Besides that, she's "looking critically" at the groundcovers and selecting geraniums, etc. that fill space to eliminate some of the weeding. "I'm passionate as a gardener," she explained, "but I'm trying to be realistic about it." Realistic? Really? What does that word mean?

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