

Gardening

By Joel Brown, February 2009

“C’mon out back and have a look at my garden” are some of the most anticipation laden words in the language for me. Usually when I hear it I am just getting to know someone and making my first visit to their home. The avocation of gardening can tell you a lot about a new friend.

I grew up on a cattle property in southern Oklahoma. One of the true blessings of my youth (and I was aware of it at the time!) was that our quarter section was bounded by my fraternal grandparents’ place and theirs was next to my maternal grandparents’ property. With a walk of only a mile, albeit it through some of the most dastardly outlaw and man-killer animal infested territory on the planet, I could visit both sets of grandparents. Spring, summer and early fall visits always included some garden time. Their gardens were serious...not far from the house, big enough for serious exploration and opportunities to learn what food looked like before it hit the plate. Corn, okra, tomatoes, peas, beans, peaches, apricots, potatoes, strawberries, carrots, zucchinis (by the ton), cucumbers, apples--a food supply that would make health zealots and upscale chefs green with envy. Regardless of the efforts of the day, late spring and summer always involved late afternoon and evening work in the garden. ‘Will work for food’ had a completely different meaning than the cardboard sign version.

One of the fascinating aspects of travel is the opportunity to see gardens as museums. When my wife Peggy and I visit new places, we always try to schedule some time to see institutional gardens. For anyone traveling to Washington DC, the National Botanic Gardens are not to be missed. In Christchurch NZ, we visited one of the most spectacular rose gardens in the world. Particular favorites of ours are topiary exhibits. The topiary gardens of the mansions in Newport RI are both stunning in their complexity and entertaining in their whimsy. We have yet to visit Europe together, but the gardens of ancient castles are high on our list. Plenty of beauty, but very little to eat (unless you are a leafhopper or wood borer), but seeing the efforts and vision maintained over multiple generations is inspiring.

Our own desert is just coming into its own as a gardening Mecca. Until now, most people have either ignored the opportunities because of the aridity or tried to transplant their ideas of humid areas with green grass and rose bushes. A genuine concern for the environment as well as an understanding of native species and growing conditions has provided the impetus for an adaptation of gardening more suitable in the Chihuahuan Desert. Using intensive management techniques with native trees, shrubs and grasses has led to some very creative and imaginative gardens, although some require more appreciation than others.

Gardens can nurture our spirit as well as our bodies, and they can also reflect our values. Our private gardens show our individual values, our public spaces should show our collective values. The Unitarian Universalist Church of Las Cruces has some beautiful garden areas that reflect our shared values of peace and environmental concern and provide us with space to reflect and share. Our grounds committee has done an excellent job and deserves our thanks, best shown by using and enjoying their efforts.