



A GARDEN'S TEACHING

On a forested slope near fields and greater forests in North Carolina, EMILY PAYNTER spent five years wheel-barrowing dirt, hauled in by truck to heal the gouge created while her house was being built. Each restored section brought birds and weeds, bees and frogs, beetles and butterflies. Deer visit the abundant, dappled garden, graced only at noon by full sun.

Slope gardening means terracing. Stumps and logs, recycled bricks and ever-thriving day lilies worked as sturdy holders of dirt and compost. Weeds grew strong and tall in the newly laid soil, a gift for composting and, eventually, for the barren ground.

The first summer I had eight-foot pokeweeds. When many birds came to visit them, I realized a yard could provide shelter. One winter's deep and lasting snow, unseasonable for the south, had me looking for any source of food for the birds. The next fall I stopped cleaning out the flowerbeds and let the fall grasses grow. Several winters later a deep snow fell again. Birds came from everywhere to feed on the tall grass heads that poked above the snowy cover.



Daisies, iris, blackberries and peach in Emily Paynter's garden

Photo Emily Paynter

In spring we let the groundcover reach lush heights. No mowing until after the peak of flower bloom. I wondered about my sentimentality until we had apple trees, which absolutely must be pollinated. The peaches were self-pollinators and had always done okay. The first spring the apples bloomed, pollination was not a worry – hundreds of teeny and regular bees hovered over all the little lawn flowers, staying easily in the vicinity of the apple trees. And those Kudzu-like spreading *ajuga* that I had regretted sowing brought positive results with their colorful purple flowers that the bees adored.

One winter little yellow birds came. The bird book mentioned that they used thistle for their nests and I had just let thistle run wild. Now thistle is everywhere and I imagine that the little yellow birds will return as well.



Many of my traditional plantings – rhododendron, azaleas, magnolias, climbing roses, quince, daffodils, lilies, raspberries, butterfly bush – came from plants rescued from bulldozers clearing land or from cuttings given to me by other gardeners. Replanting takes courage, patience and honesty. First you have to make a reasonable guess about the best locale and wait to see if the plant takes to its new location. Then you have to be honest about how the plant is thriving. I've learned I can't put plants where I think they ought to be; they're only going to do well where they know they ought to be. I also learned that plants need companions. At first nothing would grow on the great sloping hill behind my house, the very place I thought I'd have a cut flower garden. The light

is filtered and largely east, no sturdy western sun. Each woodland plant I'd try would wither and die. Finally I plunked a variety of different plants in together. They all took, and I realized that plants, save for the walnut, rarely grow alone.

Our plant selection is largely impacted by the deer that nightly cut through the yard in their travels. Deer do not like aromatics, so I've begun depositing pots of these around the plants that the deer and I both love; so far the deer have stayed away. Most powerful are mountain mint and rosemary. These saved my roses, which the deer used to munch just as a beautiful bud would appear.

My original intent for the gardens was grand sweeps of color everywhere you looked. "Eye candy," our teacher would say. And maybe cutting flowers as an extra source of income. It took several years of plantings before I noticed the seasonal limits of the sun's journey overhead. By this time I'd shifted my motivation for placing and uprooting plants. I'd begun to notice the benefit for other living beings. So when I realized I was never going to have a grand English garden, I was content with one that harbored and nourished life all around it.

It truly is a garden always in need of trimming, pruning and thinning. Allowing the garden to grow itself little by little teaches me how to help other beings with whom I share this place. Besides the great happiness this brings, the areas most beautiful seem to be those where all sized plants and animals thrive easily together. ☺



Photo Emily Paynter

Emily Paynter is a member of the Kadampa Center in Raleigh, North Carolina. She has an interdisciplinary Ph.D. in the social psychology of learning and offers consultation services such as 'Heart Gardening,' helping individuals, through different projects, to connect with nature in a heart-centered way.

Frog's delight