Sweet Meadows

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Topics: Environment, Gardens & Design, Perspectives

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Tucquala Meadows in early summer: a perfect mix of spikes and umbels, globes and plumes. Author's photographs

. . . the essence of gardening per se is really an interpretation of

At Tucquala Lake, I parked my truck in a riverside campsite. The acrid cloud of dust that had followed me for ten miles up the

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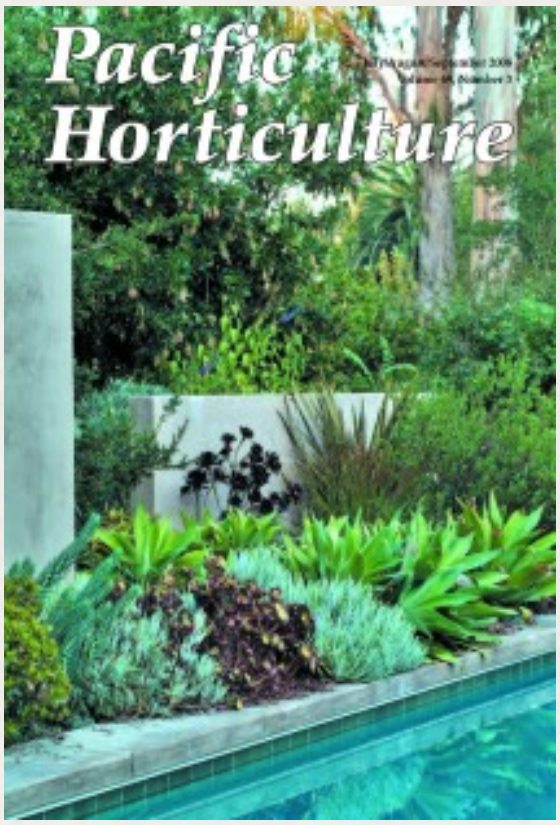

JOIN OR RENEW Join or Renew

the pleasures of the countryside, of floral delights of waysides and woodland, encapsulated and expressed in the garden milieu. And it is always a very personal experience, between man and nature.

John Feltwell, *Meadows: A History and Natural History*, 1992

Forest Service road settled. I walked out into the meadows surrounding the lake and hugging the lazy meandering upper Cle Elum River, which runs between the Cascades and the Wenatchee Mountains. It was late June, yet it was still spring here. The trickle of wildflowers that dotted the dry landscape along the road became a deluge. The flower-flooded terrain tingled with a verdant freshness already gone from the lowlands. I set up camp quickly, as dusk took over the valley with the shadow of Goat Mountain. Wandering the graveled dirt road that follows the river's course,

I stepped off the road into the meadows. Quickly knee-deep in a green sea, I was bathed in a sweet fragrance that rose not from individual flowers but from their unity. This fragrance, solid and orchestral, drew me into adoration as I walked. My eyes wandered through this species-rich ecosystem, recognizing and naming what plants I could. Then a breeze rippled the surface, blurred my discerning eye. I could not put my finger on it. The meadows lacked the contrivances of a garden, yet were more beautiful than any garden I had ever seen. They were honest and lackadaisical, not worked.

I had been a gardener for nearly twenty years at that time, but was growing tired of what I had variably called "my job," "my calling," or "my love" over those years. That spring, it was feeling more and more like a job and less like love. What had brought me to this valley was not the desire to see more plants but to escape the green world. The nearly ceaseless gardening year of the Pacific Northwest made me yearn for snow. Not ski-slope snow, but the snow that blanketed my childhood state of Wisconsin, bringing a halt to gardening from December through April. I knew I could find it on the still snowy mountaintops

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of the Cascades.

Barclay's willow (*Salix barclayi*)

Mount Daniel

The next day, I woke and prepared to climb the glaciered peak of Mount Daniel. As I drove to the trailhead, I could barely keep my eyes on the road. Tall mountain shooting star (*Dodecatheon jeffreyi*), quamash (*Camassia quamash*), and stream bank lupine (*Lupinus rivularis*), blooming in swells of pink and blue, drew my eyes to the meadows. Ribbons of mauve elephant's head (*Pedicularis groenlandica*) and white slender bog orchid (*Habenaria saccata*) flowed like a current through the emergent grasses. The

meadows opened and closed along the river's course like a series of rooms in a well-designed garden, delineated by stands of dark alpine fir (*Abies lasiocarpa*) and clusters of Barclay's willow (*Salix barclayi*), flushed silver with new growth. There is no doubt in my mind why foresters and botanists poetically call these ecosystems parklands. What seemed like a park, however, was wilderness, made evident by the steep backdrop of mountains clothed in alpine fir and silver spruce (*Picea engelmannii*).

I hiked up the switchbacks of Goat Mountain until I reached the snowfields. Ah, the beloved snowfields; I swilled the pollen-free air with both nostrils. The seamless whiteness bleached even the memory of green from my mind. Then, rarified air and sedative snow-blindness induced a nap. When I woke a few minutes later, it felt as if months had passed. The whiteness had grown tiresome quickly. I craved once again the world of color and life. My retinas tingled with memories of the meadows below.

It took the rest of the day to return to the valley floor. Dusk, again, was shadowing the meadows, yet the light remained ambient and strong, making each meadow flower shine. Red and yellow mountain columbine (*Aquilegia formosa*), white pestle parsnip (*Lomatium nudicaule*) and purple boreal aster (*Aster alpinus*) scattered across the meadow like dawn on water. Everything seemed to be waking in the evening light.

Sharp-toothed angelica (*Angelica arguta*)

A Sweet Fragrance

The sweet fragrance rose again as the cooling air gathered moisture in the valley. I fed on it like a hungry man. Maybe the break from gardening I longed for wasn't the winter's bleaching whiteness, but merely a need to "stop and smell the roses." Spring leaves little time for the professional gardener to savor the beauty; he's too busy creating it.

Most people take their breaks in gardens and find them restorative. I find them agitating, full of weeding, digging, pruning. Sometimes, I cannot even look at a garden without seeing work. This place would have none of that.

There were no weeds to pull, nothing needed watering, nothing needed transplanting. It was perfect as it was. As a gardener, I was unarmed—there was no work. Recognizing that was enough gardening for me. I tarried over some "weeds," some foreign grass that probably arrived in the belly of a packer's mule. I entertained the idea of eradicating the invasive, but, although I still think it a good idea, I resisted.

I was in love with this place and that was enough.

In the morning, I walked out into the wet meadows around my camp. I slopped tea as I drowsily navigated the uneven ground of a fisherman's path to the river. I crouched to hold the fleshy flower of the shooting stars, which grew in dramatic magenta swathes on the river's boggy edge. As if night had washed everything clean, a new aroma rose in the dewy first hushes of warmth. A new meadow was waking, with a sweeter fragrance.

The word "meadow" appears in many old forms in languages as diverse as Sanskrit and Irish. It comes directly from the word "mead," the name of a fermented drink made from honey and water; it is also a form of the word for "sweet." Perhaps the early peoples of Europe noticed the preponderance of bees sweeping the flowery fields of their nectar, and thought of them as places of sweetness.

The Cle Elum River meanders silvery through the meadow

The Allure of a Meadow

I stood up from my examination of the shooting star and looked out over this complex ecosystem. Meadow, what are you? I almost asked aloud. The answer came

slowly, recorded in glacial history and human history. Meadows, once integral to temperate cultures, are vanishing under modern agricultural methods. Yet, their primitive allure endures.

An enthusiasm for meadows has permeated human culture for centuries. The first gardens most certainly recreated the colorful meadows of the countryside. Even the Mughal gardens of India and Afghanistan, essentially geometric, allowed space for a flowery meadow and invited in the countryside. We extend this same invitation in our homes by using floral fabrics, often based on meadow motifs, for curtains and upholstery. We even dare to name some subdivisions, mown weekly, Meadow Brook or simply The Meadows, as if life rang with cowbells and buzzed with honey bees. We have traveled far from that ease of life. Now, in our fast-paced world, one buys meadow seed mixes in a can.

A meadow, as author Patricia Hampl describes it, is a parcel of land covered with at least fifty percent grasses. It may be a cultivated field for hay or grazing, or a “natural” field, one left fallow to regenerate. Meadows began to cover Europe in the Iron Age (circa 500 BC), when the removal of trees for both burning and building exposed large tracts of land. Herbaceous plants colonized these open spaces quickly. The semi-annual scything of the meadows set the agricultural rhythm. On this continent, Native Americans burned vast tracts of land annually to encourage the sweet herbaceous plants that attracted game.

At 3,400 feet, the Tucquala Meadows lie halfway between the peak of Mount Daniel and the sea-level city were I live. Sub-alpine meadows, like these, are sparse in grasses, hosting trees and shrubs only on the drier edges of vast planes of herbaceous plants. They rose not from humankind’s clearing and cutting, but below tree line in an area where trees cannot take hold due to excessively damp soils—soils that afford a myriad of herbaceous plants a place to flourish in rambling communities.

The word “tucquala” comes from the Yakima language and means “fish”—most specifically, small fish, like trout that teem in the clear waters of the valley. The Yakima tribe visited these meadows annually to fish the rich waters of the Cle Elum River, until the early 1990s. They also came to burn the hills, to encourage the blueberries and fodder-rich meadows that attracted elk and deer.

Tall mountain shooting star (*Dodecatheon jeffreyi*)

Knowledge and Inspiration

When I returned to Tucquala Meadows, I brought my hand lens and Hitchcock and Cronquist’s voluminous *Flora of the Pacific Northwest*. Believing that by

knowing the plants intimately I might know the whole, I botanized for hours. I waded into the damp meadows. The bulbous blue blossoms of monkshood (*Aconitum columbianum*) rose like strings of bubbles through the frothy white surface of cow parsnip (*Heracleum maximum*) and sharp-toothed angelica (*Angelica arguta*). Below the surface, columbia lily (*Lilium columbianum*) and magenta paint brush (*Castilleja parviflora*) spread from clusters like colonizing coral. I looked out at the whole, remembering what Piet Oudolf, Dutch proponent of naturalistic planting, has to say about the balancing of spikes and umbels, globes and plumes. Nowhere have I seen his ideas so gracefully executed as in these wild meadows.

My shorthand notes were clipped reminders to myself: use false hellebore (*Veratrum californicum*); try to find the long view and emphasize it; combine orange with gray. I noted the painterly, almost pointillistic, distribution of color. An intricate pattern of competition strategies is at work here, botanists would say. What I saw was cooperation, much like the cooperation I would like to establish in the perennial borders I tend. Then the wind moved the great fabric of the meadow like the surface of a kaleidoscopic sea. Definitions blurred. That's when the meadows, as definable as they are, asked me to stop. I realized this "stop" was what I was looking for.

On my most recent trip to Tucquala Meadows, I walked up the gravel Forest Service road, getting coated with dust as people drove by on their way to the trailhead. I moved off the road onto a peaty path that followed a creek. I took off my hiking boots, stuffed my socks inside and walked barefoot toward the river. The cool moist soil oozed like a sponge under my feet. I wondered which of my gardening clients might like a damp peat path in their garden for barefoot walking. The creek slithered silvery through the meadow. The glassy surface caught a bit of blue sky. A clump of fringed grass of Parnassus (*Parnassia fimbriata*) bloomed on a tussock of moss; the five-petaled, fringed flowers were snow white.

Then I looked out at the meadows. I thought about the first meadows—not those created by clearing and cutting, or even sub-alpine meadows like these, but the earliest meadows that appeared at the edge of receding glaciers around 12,000 BC. I thought of a hungry hunter crossing the game-rich meadows, of how his eyes may have opened to the colors and his nostrils to the scents. A desire, not a hunger, may have stopped him for a brief moment—a desire to capture this beauty. Maybe our first notions of a garden were born in such a moment.

Later, as I rattled down the graveled road, a bittersweet feeling came over me—a feeling I often notice when leaving Tucquala Meadows, but was only coming to understand. The bitterness came from leaving a place I love, a past we no longer live. The sweetness came from remembering love.

That's why I became a gardener.