

Over and Under the Rainbow

A Gardener Comes to Terms with Green

by **DANIEL MOUNT**

A FEW JUNES AGO my friend Theo came out to our farm in the Snoqualmie Valley for a visit. As we walked around the perimeter of our property, where our efforts at control crumble into the gorgeous chaos of Carnation Marsh, she had only one simple comment.

“It’s *so* green.”

It was *so* green; where we hadn’t mowed the reed canary grass was waist high. Every leaf on every willow was climaxing in photosynthesis. Moss pelts on the trunks and boughs of the alders were spongy with the recent rain.

June is the greenest month, at least here in the Evergreen State. So when Theo repeated herself, “It’s *so* green,” pitching her voice higher and raising the volume, singing actually, it was hard not to agree.

Theo taught me to write, or at least gave me the kick in the butt—albeit a tender kick—I needed to get rolling over the page with a pen. Rarely short of words, she is ripe with story. So when she repeated for the third time, “It’s *so* green,” even higher, even louder, I had to laugh.

In delight, of course.

On that day there was nothing better to say, no greater truth than greenness. And her seemingly mindless repetition of that fact worked like an incantation on me. And woke me out of a disgruntled spell that saw only weeds, not green.

Green is an ancient word. It has changed little in pronunciation, so linguists tell us, since it was first spoken. It shares the same root with the words “grass” and “grow.”



The Lady Bird Johnson Grove, Redwood National Park, California. *Photo: Daniel Mount*

It has also become a strong marketing tool for reeling in eco-conscious consumers. Notoriously red Coca-Cola went green last year with its new low calorie “Life” cola. Green, the word, and green, the color, sell.

Even herbicides are packaged in green.

When I started this color series with red, touting it as my favorite color, by no means did I intend to dethrone green. Red, its opposite, might be the spark that ignites life, but green is life itself. Would there be any life on this planet without the green of photosynthesis? Before there were garden-worthy plants, before there even were flowers, the primordial soup of the first oceans, rich with algae, began pumping out oxygen at a frenzied rate, creating an atmosphere and making life as we know it possible.

The color green is also the life of a garden. But we do not see green in the garden like we see red, or yellow, or violet. We are immersed in green in the garden, making it nearly invisible. Yet it is this invisibility that makes it so powerful. Permeating more than our sight, it becomes the very air that we breathe, literally and figuratively.

Alison Hoblyn, author of *Green Flowers*, says green “provides a kind of comma, somewhere to rest the eye between stimulating and opposing color areas.”

Maybe it is this restfulness that makes it so easy to ignore.

As a cool color, green recedes, makes way, but also says, “Go!”

Green is permissive, letting red and orange shine. Green is companionable, embracing yellow and blue affectionately.

But green on green can be flat.

Still, there is something inimitably tidy and quiet about the all-green garden, where texture and form hold sway. Something we gardeners like to muss up with color, like latter-day Jackson Pollocks, splattering orange and pink, blue and purple across the green we consider simply a canvas. I am only criticizing because I am guilty.

I learned my first real lessons about green from the master florist Heiko Kalitowitsch, who I worked under in Germany. He insisted that bouquets should never be



Chinese mayapple (*Podophyllum pleanthum*) growing in the woodland garden at Bellevue Botanical Garden. Photo: Daniel Mount

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more than one-fifth flowers. But the bouquets he made were never dull. Every week, olive branches were shipped in from Israel, mastic from Italy, boxwood from Belgium, and even salal from the Pacific Northwest. There was no end to the varieties of green at hand in his shop.

And there is no end to the varieties of green available to us West Coast gardeners. Maybe green is too readily available; we want orange heucheras, red coleus, and black mondo grass. We bore easily.

Is green really that boring? From the sulfuric char-treuses of spring to the drab olive green of coniferous Northwest winters, our evergreen year is one of dynamic change, if we would just see.

Ubiquitous green is pagan in part, envious at times, even nauseating, if you will.

If red is lusty, green is sensuous, a gentle caress, not a thrust. Green is delicious, too. It is pistachios, avocados, and limes. My grandfather—an estate gardener like myself—would lecture us kids to eat our “green feed,” as if we were livestock. Green is

good for you. And good for the environment: green roofs, green energy, and green medicine.

Green is good for the economy, too. The dollar is green, after all.

In the 14th century, the word green took on a new and novel meaning. It became a verb, not meaning “to turn green” like we might use it today, but meaning to desire earnestly, to yearn. We gardeners, I believe, live yearning.

I have long held that this yearning was for control, a yearning to dominate nature, to turn chaos to order. It’s an exhausting task. I judge others’ gardens by how weed-free they are, how well-pruned, how well-designed. How free of chaos.

Nothing exemplifies this aspect of gardening more than the expansive lawn, or the well-clipped hedge. Nothing implies freedom from chaos more than a great flat surface of green.

Once I watched a client as he pulled into his drive. He stopped his car and sat staring off across the lawn. I wondered what he was up to from my hideout



ABOVE: *Pelargonium* and *Sedum palmeri* in a green glazed pot.

LEFT: Opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*) seed pods in early summer.

Photos: Daniel Mount

among colorful perennials where I was weeding. He later told me he liked to stop and look at the “sea of green” when he pulled into the drive to clear his head.

Green does clarify the mind, calm the nerves, and heal the anxious.

“For millennia and throughout world cultures,” Robert Pogue Harrison, Stanford professor and social critic tells us, “our predecessors conceived of human happiness in its perfected state as a garden existence.”

Living outside the Emerald City of Seattle in an agricultural valley feels like being on the front lines of this “pursuit of happiness,” this ordering of chaos. As you drive through the valley a ruffle of willows along the waterways or acres of feed corn are as calming as an expansive lawn. But stop and try to garden and you’ll come face to face with a plague of non-native grasses, and acres—literally acres—of creeping buttercup.



ABOVE: Aquatic horsetails growing along the Staircase Rapids trail near the Skokomish River in Olympic National Park.

ABOVE RIGHT: *Hosta* ‘Blue Angel’ and silver lady fern (*Blechnum gibbum* ‘Silver Lady’) in a shade garden designed by Gavin Martin.

Photos: Daniel Mount



Green is also the wildest color. In the early 19th century the color green first became emblematic of the natural world, as different from the human world. Remember, the Industrial Revolution was just beginning to fire up its engines. Jungles are green, and meadows. Even deserts are green. And every crack in the urban environment sprouts weeds.

Paolo Pejrone, Italian landscape architect and writer, titled one of his books: *Il Vero Giardiniere non si Arrende* (*A Real Gardener Never Surrenders*). Is it surrender that I regularly put aside the tools of my trade: the mower, the hedger, and the weed-whacker? Is it surrender to leave behind my exhausting efforts to order nature for the comfort of chaos? To push through the willows, knee deep in reed canary grass? To sit on a mossy log where all I can see, and all I can sing is: green, green, green?

This essay completes Daniel’s romp through the horticultural rainbow.