

Lanna —
I think many students
esp. in plants class should
be there. — P. Paca

Why gardens—and plants—matter

BY BARBARA PACA

When I was studying for a BLA at the University of Oregon, I remember being somewhat shocked at a professor's indifference to plants, and the emphasis on "paving over" and "low maintenance." □ I was keenly interested in creating and preserving gardens. This, I was told, was "not really landscape architecture." While my colleagues were

praised for planning parking lots and corporate office parks, my work was considered somewhat reactionary and elitist.

Now the field is marching forward in an ever-expanding fashion. Yet many basic skills integral to our profession are no longer receiving the attention they deserve. They need to be relearned before we can progress. With grave predictions being made regarding the environment and increasing pressures on open space, landscape architects need to know more about plants and their requirements, especially trees. Now more than ever, we need to be in a position to create feasible landscapes with environmentally responsible solutions to the problems of maintenance.

For example, it seems reasonable to require landscape architects to read drawings competently. We also need to be conversant in horticulture and have a basic knowledge of botanical names. Not knowing the names of plants, let alone their growing habits, impedes our ability to plan a successful landscape design.

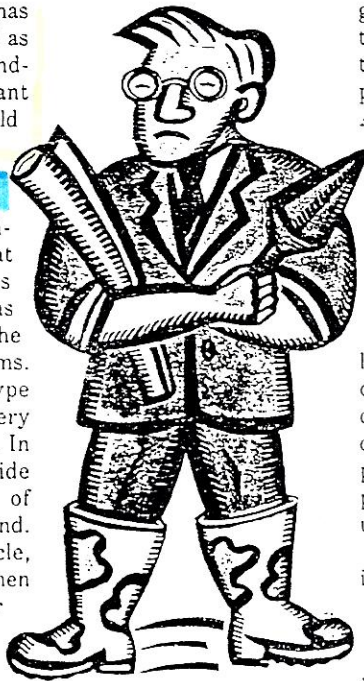
Many architects and engineers consult with landscape architects falsely assuming that we only prepare planting plans—"shrubbing up" a building or softening the edges of an urban plaza. It's ironic to discover that many of us are now incapable of even this simple task. As

James Urban, ASLA, has said, "If architects had as many roofs leak as landscape architects plant trees that die, they would be out of business."

Too often, landscape architects stick to the method of foundation planting that uses trees and shrubs to create dense screens rather than define the edges of outdoor rooms. Unfortunately, this type of design calls for a very limited range of plants. In turn, nurseries provide only a few varieties of plants to meet demand. Coming back full circle, landscape architects then select inferior species or specimens from the limited palette, leading to unsound plantings destined to perish.

Another curious wrinkle is the landscape architect's desperate wish to be regarded as "professional"—that is, unwilling to get their hands dirty—completely divorced from the hands-on world of pruners, shovels and gum boots. The National Park Service's Charles Birnbaum, ASLA, points out that the first landscape gardeners to shift to the more professional status of "landscape architect" were Andrew Jackson Downing and Alexander Parmentier. Both were accomplished gardeners and proud owners of leading nurseries.

For both historical and environmental reasons, landscape architects need to recapture an intimate



understanding of plants. A wide spectrum of plants is one hallmark of a great garden. Conversely, monocultures are unstable. The infestation of one insect can devastate an entire forest; the hemlock woolly adelgid, for example, now threatens the future of Eastern hemlocks. We must know how to create healthy, balanced landscapes.

Landscape architects might ask, "Who needs gardens, anyway?" There are historical answers. In the thoughtful selection of plants, the landscape architect can bring the inhabitants of a site closer to nature. Traditionally, gardens have provided a setting for higher thought. In antiquity, the exhedra

garden existed as a place to walk while discussing the finer points of philosophy. During the Middle Ages, a profound reverence for nature had strong religious connotations. The cloister garden harbored prayer and meditation. By the 18th century, gardens such as Stowe in England could subtly express political ideals. All of this occurred through a sophisticated use of plants, which dominated the landscape plan and enhanced the topography, as well as statues and buildings.

I first became involved in gardening and historic preservation because there I found women role models. St. Clair Wright, former chair of the Historic Annapolis Foundation and one of the great garden preservationists in this country, influenced me at an early age. Aware of the historical importance of plants, she believes that beautiful landscapes result from a disciplined union of classical design principles and the practices of horticulture and plant husbandry.

Perhaps, too, my interest in plants originates from the notion, for better or for worse, that women were skillful plant handlers—most likely because they were shut out from more technical training, such as in agriculture, architecture and engineering. According to Mac Griswold, the garden author, the first of the American female "profes-

sionals" consisted of the trio of Marian Coffin, Beatrix Farrand and Ellen Shipman. A founding member of the ASLA, Farrand had a vast knowledge of horticulture. She wrote the plant book for Dumbarton Oaks, one of the great books on long-term garden maintenance. The tendency to associate women with planting continues, and is well illustrated by the work of such disparate designers as Lynden Miller and Isabelle Green, ASLA.

I am learning the need to broaden, not limit, my education. I studied art history, and as a result, gained an understanding of gardens as art forms. While working toward a doctorate at Princeton University, I find myself, oddly enough, working for arboriculturists, learning the most mundane details of landscape maintenance. This strange duality is providing me with a more pragmatic approach to landscape architecture and a sense of equilibrium in my theoretical work.

Strengthening the weak links in the field will maintain the viability of our profession. A knowledge of horticulture, in addition to responsible stewardship of the land, must be on our agenda if we are to ensure our professional role in the preservation and re-creation of the environment. □

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