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‘As the yellow rattle ripens’

Gardening craft as socio-ecological place-making

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the doing of gardens and explores how amateur gardeners relate to gardening craft in their everyday garden practices. Based on qualitative empirical work, this paper discusses how different craft methods and caring practices are employed as memory work and as a means to connect to, and create, the garden as a socio-ecological place. Based on the gardeners’ narratives, the garden is discussed as a web of self and a place where the meeting between the gardener and the more-than-human are central incentives to gardening. Gardening is an active place-making that goes beyond modifying the materiality of place. Rather, garden craft is narrated as reflecting the gardeners’ underlying relationship to and understanding of plants, soil and animals. It is the means through which gardeners connect in an embodied way to ‘the nature’ of the garden. Garden craft is proposed as an art that is passed on between generations. Gardening craft can be improved by an increased understanding of the temporality of the garden and by developing a sensitivity towards the complex socio-ecological relationships that shape a place. It is concluded that garden craft is understood as central not only to how the garden is constructed as a place but also to how the gardener relates to the garden as affecting, and being affected by, the current environmental crisis.

Keywords:

Gardening, memory, place, socio-ecological, craft.

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on *the doing of gardens* and explores how amateur gardeners relate to craft in their gardening practices. I approach gardening as an active place-making activity that involves not only the materiality of place but also an entanglement of various subject relations

and time scales. Although gardening takes place in the present, it is also an activity that reaches backward through memories and the formation of landscape as well as forward in time by planning, dreaming and looking after the garden.

The paper draws on qualitative empirical work carried out with Swedish amateur gardeners. These gardeners vary in age and in the geographical location where they garden. Some of the gardeners have allotment gardens in urban contexts, and others have large gardens in rural contexts. They are all enthusiastic gardeners, and gardening consumes a large part of their spare time. Therefore, not only do they have a garden, they are also actively engaged in gardening and consider themselves 'serious gardeners' (Gill, 2017, p. 10). The paper is part of a larger research project carried out to understand the underlying motivations of gardeners and how gardening affects relations to place and environmental care.

In this paper, the focus is how participants relate to gardening craft. I address gardening craft as place-making, as memory work and in relation to the environmental crisis. Collectively, these aspects show how different craft methods and caring practices combine social and ecological considerations and how this makes the gardener connect to, and create, the garden as a place.

Placing the garden

This research draws on a geographical understanding of place. Place is not simply about location and materiality; it is also about the affective relationships between humans and their places (Tuan, 1974). These relationships are not only socially and culturally positioned but also constantly in flux. Through our everyday practices, we create meaning in and through the places and materiality with which we interact. Sack (1997, p. 132) refers to this process as the 'web of self and place'. Thus, as we engage in places and their various subjects, they also become loaded with meaning.

In gardening, relationship to place becomes very direct as gardening necessitates an understanding of place and the processes that shape it. This understanding can involve the location, relationship to the surrounding landscape and other things, such as the type of soil, existing flora and fauna, weather, climate and the rhythms of how all of these interact throughout the year (Cele, 2023, p. 118). The garden is in a constant dialogue with its elements and the tools and practices used there (Seiler, 2022, p. 200). As Cooper (2006) has argued, it is the relationship to place that separates gardening from other creative activities (Tuan, 1974). Engaging in gardening means to develop an embodied way of knowing, which means fine-tuning a sensibility to the place you are in (Cele 2023, p. 122).

Entanglements

Gardens are entanglements of various subjects and processes. The creation and maintenance of gardens pertains not only to humans arranging 'nature' but also to the interaction between humans and what can be referred to as more-than-humans in the gardens (Benett, 2010; Moore, 2022). It is, in the words of Cooper (2006, p. 155), a specific relationship between living organisms and human creative activity. Moore (2022, p. 52) refers to gardens as biocultural creations and emphasises how the cooperation of various life forms and specifically plants construct gardens. Other forms of more-than-humans, such as stones, tools and soil, are also actively involved in this process and sometimes, as with soil and its complex micro-life, it is difficult and perhaps not relevant, to distinguish the difference between subject and object.

Gardens are also entanglements in time. The garden exists in the present but this existence is dependent on the practices and conditions of the past (Ingold, 1993). As the gardener engages with the garden, she moves in a materiality that is the result of past processes

and conditions, but her work is aimed at the future. The mind of the gardener also often moves across time-scales and engages with memory as much as with plans for the future. Gardens comprise a process, and creating gardens involves being aware of, and work with, these continuous changes (Cele, 2023: 119). This process varies among gardeners and is related to ideas about what a garden is and should be and how this creation is achieved through gardening craft.

Method

The paper draws on research carried out with 52 amateur gardeners from different socio-economic backgrounds and geographical contexts in Sweden. The gardeners were selected from a larger sample of participants (157) who participated in writing letters about their gardens after being encouraged to do so through gardening media. The participants were asked if they wanted to participate further, and of those who accepted, 52 were randomly selected for more in-depth studies. These studies consisted of interviews with the participants in their gardens. I also performed participant observations of craft-based tasks in the garden. The interviews and some of the participant observations were recorded, and photographs were taken. A journal was also kept to capture observations that were not recorded. Audio-recordings were subsequently transcribed. The material has been analysed by thematic analysis. The content in this paper focuses on the aspects related to craft.

Memory and tacit knowledge

Aspects of craft are present throughout almost everything that is discussed during the interviews. Gardening is ultimately about *doing*. The participants emphasised that gardening craft is not about learning a craft and then being able to master it but rather about learning basic techniques. However, performing the craft is communicated as demanding time to practice techniques and cultivate a sensitivity that helps one understand when it is time to perform the craft. The participants often reiterated how gardening is characterised by repetition (Seiler 2022, p. 183) and how this repetition is necessary to improve one's skills and the ability to 'read' place and plants.

Several of the gardeners narrated their craft practices as something that was learnt from older relatives, friends and neighbours. This finding reflects how embodied and tacit knowledge is often best learnt by interaction and communication with knowledgeable people (Bentz & Rannver Rafnsson, 2022; Ingold, 2013, 2018). The gardeners had known many of these people, and remembering the craft and performing it in the garden can be considered active memory work. Performing what they had learnt meant that they were carrying on a tradition, and it connected them to the person who had taught them the specific craft. For some participants, this work also involved using specific tools that had been inherited. For others, the intangible knowledge of the craft, that is, the tacit know-how as well as the actual technique, was most important. As expressed by one participant,

I learned how to prune by my grandfather. He was a master. I was always with him as he worked. I learned every aspect of it: techniques and how to care for tools. But it is something more. It is a sensibility in your arms, shoulder and hands, the softness in the body that is necessary to master the technique. It is something that...yes, I can almost feel my grandfather in me as I work. (Man, 57 years old)

Here, gardening craft is proposed as an art that is passed between generations. This art can be improved by an increased understanding of the temporality of the garden and by developing a sensitivity towards the complex socio-ecological relationships that shapes a place. Gardening

craft is also an embodied knowledge, ‘a softness’. These aspects were often expressed by participants as a humbleness towards the craft of gardening. Mastering craft involves more than the tools and techniques:

Our garden is quite large, and we keep this part as a meadow. That means that I have to cut the grass with a scythe, and it is quite hard. But I learnt this where we spent the summers as a teenager (...) It is a tricky thing, knowing when to cut it: not too early as you want the flowers to set seed, and not too late...but then I remembered. We used to stand and listen as the wind swept through the fields. And then you could hear it, the yellow rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*)! As the yellow rattle ripens, it makes this sound when it moves, like paper, or I don’t know how to describe it, and then you know it is time to cut the grass. So, now, I listen (Woman, 28 years old).

Gardening craft, as Seiler (2022, p. 185) has expressed it, is a form of knowledge that resides in both the body and mind. The story of the yellow rattle shows how the memory of performing a craft and having been taught the techniques of cutting grass with a scythe enabled this woman to resume this practice. However, the story also shows that she moves beyond the embodied learning of techniques. This transcendence involved an increased learning process of trying to find the yellow rattle, first in the meadow, and when failing, getting involved in trying to buy seeds, thereby understanding its wider ecological importance in meadows (by weakening the grass), introducing it to her meadow and then as it slowly established, working towards developing her ‘listening’ (Lawrence, 2022). This is an example of how gardening craft is entangled in materiality, memories, learning processes, the ecology of place and the various species and subjects that co-create the specific features of gardens. This example also shows how practices traditionally connected to agriculture, such as meadow management, are now also considered gardening.

GARDENING CRAFT AS PLACE-MAKING

Gardening craft is immersed in ideas about what kind of gardeners the participants want to frame themselves as and, ultimately, what they want their gardens to be. One aspect that was often revisited was the attitude towards plants and in particular self-seeding plants. There was a distinct division between the participants who embraced self-seeding plants and those who did not. For the latter group, it was important that the garden was tidy and that plants ‘stay where you put them’. These gardeners worked hard weeding their gardens and digging the borders and were very particular about what plants they put in their compost to avoid spreading seeds. For this group, it was also common to dig up and get rid of plants that behaved in ‘the wrong way’. This method of gardening could be largely connected to ideas about what ‘a proper garden’ should look like and the importance of tidiness. However, this approach was also connected to garden ideals, which can be subject to change:

I have always enjoyed forget-me-nots, honesty, hesperis... but I’ve found them almost unbearable to have. They self-seed everywhere. Everywhere! But then I watched this Zoom thing with Fergus Garrett¹ and how he worked with leaving space between perennials and putting them in there and then taking them away, like you would with annuals. It changed how I think about them. You really can make them less messy. And apparently, they’re good for the bees. (Woman, 63 years old)

For this woman, who had been taught the importance of tidiness in gardens, the blowsy self-seeders were almost offensive, and she spent a considerable amount of time weeding them out even though she enjoyed the flowers. However, after gaining new inspiration from a lecture, she became aware of techniques to address with these plants. She changed her planting

schemes and started to pot up seedlings instead of throwing them away and began to plant them out in an orderly way. Here, gardening techniques and ideas about what and how the garden should be is clearly connected, but they are not static. This relationship is a process and, as many also pointed out, there is no such thing as being fully taught in gardening. Learning, adapting and analysing are always necessary in response to the continuous changes of a garden. These changes are related to plants’ biological characteristics and behaviours and thus also remind the gardener that gardens are, to some extent, also nature.

Gardening craft and the environmental crisis

Almost all of the participants expressed how the garden was an important place for their understanding of the environmental crisis and where they felt that they could act, to some extent, on it. Craft methods were the centre of this discussion.

As Ginn (2017) has expressed, gardeners are active within a wider societal context in which an increasing disenchantment is often experienced as part of everyday life. However, the gardeners discussed how the garden was enchanting and how interacting with the natural elements of plants, soil, water and rocks produce feelings of connection and amazement (Bhatti et al., 2009). It is the nurturing of subjects in the garden that generate these feelings. How the participants expressed this feeling was related to how they perceived the garden in relation to nature and to what extent they were aware of and actively cared for plants and wildlife via their gardening techniques.

There was a distinct link between how aware the participants were about the ecology of their garden, how concerned they were with the environmental crisis, such as climate change and bio-diversity loss, and the tools and practices they choose to use in their garden. Several participants described how they noticed the effects of the environmental crisis in their garden, such as a lack of bees, increasingly dry summers, warmer winters and changes in harvest times (see also Skog, 2023). These changes caused them to adapt their gardening techniques to what they perceived as being more caring towards other species, which often meant returning to handcraft and more manual and traditional tools but also involved allowing the garden to become ‘wilder’ by tending to it less. This involved negotiation processes, learning more environmentally friendly methods and then actively considering the increased work load and changed aesthetic of the practice. Notably, extensive socio-economic and cultural aspects intermingle here. Although it is not possible to perform a full analysis here, one example is that the participants strongly disagree about what are considered proper tools. The use of a robot lawn mower was considered an attractive status symbol by some participants and an unnecessary toy that is harmful to wildlife by other participants. Similarly, some participants considered returning to the use of traditional tools and techniques utterly ridiculous, whereas other participants (primarily those who disliked the robot lawn mower) considered them necessary and attractive. There are also political connotations here because the garden and its practices are used to reflect the social and cultural capital of the owners (Taylor, 2008). This reflection was achieved by connecting environmental awareness to tools and techniques and exploring how this connection results in different materialities in the garden.

CONCLUSIONS

What I want to show in this brief paper is how gardens are discussed as a ‘web of self and place’ (Sack, 1997), where the meeting between the gardener and the more-than-human are central incentives to gardening. Gardens are processes in time, and gardening craft often have roots in the gardener’s personal histories while they are used to shape the garden for the future. When

the participants discuss their gardening ideologies, their memories and relationships to the ecology of the garden, the employed craft methods and how they are understood are central to how the garden is perceived as a socio-ecological place. Thus, the garden consists of social and ecological processes that shape how materiality is manifested and experienced. It is the combination of social and ecological aspects that connect the gardeners' subjectivity to the ecology of the garden. This premise is central to how the gardener relates to the garden as affecting, and being affected by, the environmental crisis.

Also clearly expressed is how gardening craft is about not only simply using suitable tools and knowing the appropriate techniques but also about the tacit knowledge necessary to read a place and understand when and how things appropriately occur. This tacit knowledge is explicitly connected to relationship to place and particularly to the process of interacting with the more-than-human aspects of the garden. It is not only a quiet knowledge that rests in the body but also an active and continuous learning process that connects the body and mind. This processual knowledge is an entanglement of understanding plants, soil, wildlife, rainfall, the change of season and all other subjects and temporalities that shape the when and how of gardening practices. This knowledge also expresses the social and cultural micro-history of a person and her journey into gardening.

Gardening craft strengthens relation to place as well as plants and other subjects who inhabit it as it involves seeing and understanding place and deciding how to nurture and care for it (or not). The specific techniques and tools influence how, and to what extent, this relationship is nurtured. Gardening craft, which is also communicated as relational is not simply about the gardener doing and seeing but rather the gardener doing and seeing *together with* the more-than-humans of the garden.

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