

## FOREIGN PLANTS AND AMERICAN SCENERY.

IT is not easy to explain why certain plants look distinctly in place in certain situations and why other plants look as distinctly out of place in the same situations. This is a matter which nature perhaps has settled for us. It is certain at any rate that combinations of plants other than those which nature makes or adopts, inevitably possess inharmonious elements which no amount of familiarity can ever quite reconcile to the educated eye. Examples of what we wish to explain abound in all our public parks, and especially in Prospect Park in Brooklyn, where there is more of nature than in any other great park, and where along the borders of some of the natural woods and in connection with native shrubbery great masses of garden shrubs, Diervillas, Philadelphus, Deutzias, Forsythias and Lilacs, have been inserted. These are all beautiful plants. They never seem out of place in a garden; but the moment they are placed in contact with our wild plants growing naturally as they do, fortunately, in the Brooklyn park, they look not only out of place, but are a positive injury to the scene. It is not that their flowers are too showy or conspicuous for such positions. The flowers of some native shrubs like the Elder, the Flowering Dogwood and the Viburnums, are as showy as those of any garden shrub. The reason is rather that we have become accustomed to see certain plants adapted by nature to fill certain positions in combination with certain other plants in a given region; and that all attempts to force nature, so to speak, by bringing in alien elements from remote continents and climates, must inevitably produce inharmonious results. Landscape gardeners have rarely paid much attention to this subject, or sufficiently studied nature with reference to the harmonious combination of plants in the construction of scenery, and especially of scenery intended to produce upon the mind the idea of repose. Nature, nevertheless, is the great teacher to which the artist who would hope to imitate her, however crudely, must ever turn for instruction and for inspiration.

[Editorial. *Garden and Forest* 1 (1888): 266]

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To the Editor of GARDEN AND FOREST:

Sir.—In GARDEN AND FOREST of August 1st, page 266, the law seems to me to have been laid down that the introduction of foreign plants in our scenery is destructive of landscape repose and harmony. No exception was suggested, and the word harmony was used, if I am not mistaken, as it commonly is in criticism of landscape painting, not of matters of scientific interest; not as if the question were one of what, in matters of literary criticism, is called "the unities."

That a fashion of planting far-fetched trees with little discrimination has led to deplorable results, no good observer can doubt. That these results are of such a character that we should, from horror of them, be led, as a rule, in our landscape planting, to taboo all trees coming from over sea, many of your readers will not, I am sure, be ready to admit, and if no one else has yet offered to say why, I will ask you to let me assume that duty.

Suppose anywhere in our Northern Atlantic States an abandoned clearing, such as in Virginia is called an "old-field;"—suppose it to be bordered by the aboriginal forest, with such brushwood as is natural to its glades and skirts straggling out upon the open;—suppose that mixing with this there is a more recent,

yet well advanced growth of trees and bushes sprung from seed, of which a part has drifted from the forest, a part from a neighboring abandoned homestead, while a part has been brought by birds from distant gardens, so that along with the natives, there is a remarkable variety of trees and bushes of foreign ancestry;—suppose a road through more open parts of the old-field, and that on this road a man is passing who, having lately come from New Zealand (or the moon), knows nothing of the vegetation of Europe, Asia or North America, yet has a good eye and susceptibility to the influences of scenery.

Now suppose, lastly, that this man is asked to point out, one after another, so that a list can be made, trees and bushes in an order that will represent the degree in which they appear to him to have an aspect of distinctiveness; No. 1 being that which stands out from among the others as the most of all incongruous, unblending, unassimilating, inharmonious and apparently exotic; No. 2 the next so, and so on.

The question, as we understand it, is essentially this: Would all of the trees and bushes that had come of a foreign ancestry be noted before any of the old native stock?

Some of them surely would stand high on the list, and some of much popularity, such as Horse Chestnut and Ginkgo and numerous sports of trees in themselves, at least, less objectionable on this score, as, for example, Weeping Beech and most of the more pronounced weepers; most of the Japanese Maples, also, and the dwarf, motley-hued and monstrous sorts of Conifers.

But, all? or, as a rule, with unimportant exceptions? So far from it, to our eyes, that we doubt whether, even of different species of the same genus, the visitor would not point out some of the native before some of the foreign—some of the American Magnolias, for example, before any of the Asiatic. We doubt if the European Red Bud, the Oriental Plane or the Chinese Wistaria (out of bloom) would be selected before their American cousins. It appears to us that *Rubus odoratus* would be noticed before *Rubus fruticosus*. Passing from the nearer relatives, it seems to us likely, also, that many of the European and Asiatic Maples, Elms, Ashes, Limes and Beeches would be named after such common American forest trees as the Catalpas, Sassafras, Liquidambar, Tulip, Tupelo and Honey Locust; that the American Chionanthus, Angelica, Cercis, Ptelia, Sumachs, Flowering Dogwood, Pipevine and Rhododendrons would be placed before some of the foreign Barberries, Privets, Spireas, Loniceras, Forsythias, Diervillas or even Lilacs. We doubt if the stranger, seeing some of these latter bushes forming groups spontaneously with the natives, would suspect them to be of foreign origin, or that they would appear to him any more strange and discordant notes in the landscape than such common and generally distributed natives as have been named. We doubt if Barberry, Privet, Sweetbriar and Cherokee Rose, which, in parts of our country, are among the commonest wild shrubs, or the Fall Dandelion, Buttercups, Mints, Hemp Nettle and a dozen others which, in parts, are among the commonest wild herbaceous plants, though it is believed all of foreign descent, would ever be thought, by such an observer, out of place in our scenery because of their disreputable and inharmonious influence. Two hundred years hence are not Japanese Honeysuckle, "Japanese Ivy" and "Japanese Box" (*Euonymus radicans*) likely to be equally bone of our bone in scenery? . . .

Again, may we not (as artists) think that there are places with us in which a landscape composition might be given a touch of grace, delicacy and fineness

by the blending into a body of low, native tree foliage that of the Tamarisk or the Oleaster, that would not be supplied in a given situation by any of our native trees?

Is there a plant that more provokes poetic sentiment than the Ivy? Is there any country in which Ivy grows with happier effect or more thriftily than it does in company with the native Madrona, Yew and Douglas Spruce on our north-west coast? Yet it must have been introduced there not long since from the opposite side of the world. Would not the man be a public benefactor who would bring us from anywhere an evergreen vine of at all corresponding influence in landscape that would equally adapt itself to the climatic conditions of our north-eastern coast? . . .

Before agreeing that no addition can be made to our native forest, except to its injury, we should consider that trees for landscape improvement are not solely those that please simply from their fitness to merely fall quietly into harmony with such as are already established. Trees would be of no less value to us that, being adapted to our climate, would supply elements of vivacity, emphasis, accent, to points of our scenery, such as we see happily produced by the Upright Cypress and the horizontally branching Stone Pine when growing out of Ilex groves on the Mediterranean. And this is a reminder that some scholar has said that we can form little idea of what the scenery of Italy was in the time of Virgil from what we see there now. This because so many trees and plants, which were then common, have since become rare, and because so many, then unknown, have since become common. Is there reason for believing that the primitive scenery of Italy was, on this account, more pleasing than the present?

The present large majority of foreign trees that have been introduced with us during the last fifty years, and which have promised well for a time, have been found unable to permanently endure the alternate extremes of our climate, but that there are many perfectly suited with it we have abundant evidence. Does the White Willow flourish better or grow older or larger in any of the meadows of its native land than in ours? . . . But on this point of the adaptability of many foreign trees to flourish in American climates, only think of Peaches, Pears and Apples.

Brookline, September, 1888

*Frederick Law Olmsted*

[Mr. Olmsted's letter should be read with the greatest care and attention. No man now living has created so much and such admirable landscape, and no man is better equipped to discuss all that relates to his art. The position which GARDEN AND FOREST has taken upon the question of composition in plantations made with the view of landscape effect is embraced in the following sentence, extracted from the article to which Mr. Olmsted refers: "It is certain, at any rate, that combinations of plants, other than those which nature makes or adapts, inevitably possess inharmonious elements which no amount of familiarity can ever quite reconcile to the educated eye." This sentence was written with special reference to the fact that in Prospect Park, in Brooklyn, various showy flowered garden-shrubs of foreign origin had been massed among native shrubs growing apparently spontaneously along the borders of a natural wood in the most sylvan part of the park. The effect which this combination produced appeared to us inharmonious, and therefore less pleasing than if the plantation had been confined to such shrubs as may be found growing naturally on Long

Island in similar situations. How far the idea of harmony in composition in landscape is dependent upon association it is hard to say. Mr. Olmsted acknowledges that trees like the Ginkgo, the Horse Chestnut and the Weeping Beech would look out of place in an American landscape—that is, trees which have no prototypes in our natural, native scenery. But would the inhabitant of New Zealand or of the moon, whom we suppose to be totally ignorant of the vegetation of the north temperate portions of the earth's surface, find anything to jar upon his feelings in seeing a Weeping Willow or a Ginkgo or a Horse Chestnut growing with and among Hickories, Tupelos or Sequoias, which may be taken as the three peculiarly North American trees? Probably he would find the combination an appropriate and pleasing one, and no feeling of inharmoniousness would ever cross his mind. Foreign trees with American prototypes, like the Beech, Linn[den], Red-Bud, Plane, from which they can hardly be distinguished except by a botanist, do not jar upon the sense of fitness when used in landscape planting here, because for all intents and purposes they are the same as our own species, except that, as a rule, they never grow here as vigorously; and, therefore, are less attractive objects. The European Oak, if it would grow here, might replace the American White Oak, which it closely resembles, anywhere, and this is true of almost every European tree which has an eastern American representative. We certainly did not intend to convey the idea that all American trees could be associated together harmoniously. One of the broad-leaved Magnolias of the southern Alleghany Mountains would appear as much out of place, from our point of view, in a northern landscape, as any tree from any foreign land could possibly do. This same Magnolia, however, amid the broad-leaved evergreens and luxuriant growth of the southern forests, seems to form an appropriate and necessary feature of the forest scenery. The fact that the Barberry in New England, the Cherokee Rose, the Pride of China tree, or the Ailanthus in the Southern States, when these plants are naturalized, and have been familiar objects for generations, do not look out of place in the landscape, confirms our idea that fitness comes not from similarity or dissimilarity of form or color or texture, but from mental association. When we have seen certain plants growing together often enough and long enough—that is, when they have been "adopted" by nature, to quote our own words—we become accustomed to the combination. It is only new and startling combinations which shock our mental susceptibilities. There is nothing more startling (and whatever is startling can form no part of a restful landscape) than to come upon an Apple-tree, as one may sometimes do in parts of New Jersey, growing in the midst of a thick Pine woods, and showing that the land had once been tilled. But if Apple-trees grew in our woods, and we had always seen them there, the combination would not seem an unnatural one.

The truth is that great masters of landscape construction can combine material drawn from many climates and many countries into one harmonious whole, but the masters of the art are not many, and the planter who is not sure of his genius can wisely follow nature in her teachings of harmony in composition. Had this reservation been made in the article referred to, our statement that "all attempts to force Nature, so to speak, by bringing in alien elements from remote continents and climates, must inevitably produce inharmonious results," would, perhaps, have been less open to criticism.—Ed.]

[*Garden and Forest* 1 (1888): 418–419]