Of (Two) Gardens: Book Review

Phyllis Andersen

Men come to build stately, sooner than to garden finely; as if gardening were the greater perfection.—Francis Bacon, Of Gardens (1625)


In his introduction to A Greater Perfection, the landscape architect Laurie Olin notes that being well connected to situation and setting is one of the most compelling ideas in garden design. Both Les Quatre Vents, Francis Cabot's magnificent garden on the Saint Lawrence River in Quebec, and Highgrove, the country estate of the Prince of Wales in the British Cotswolds, illustrate the essence of being "of a place."

Both properties were developed as a personal journey through gardenmaking. Neither Cabot nor the Prince of Wales worked from a professional master plan, although both called on expert advice from time to time. Both of these books reveal much about the gardens' creators as well as about their gardens. Francis Cabot appears to be a forthright and exacting individual. The challenge of his remote site suits him well. The Prince exhibits a playful modesty, a concern for both nature and art, and a surprisingly hands-on approach to enhancing his property.

Les Quatre Vents is well known in the garden world, since Mr. Cabot is the founder and chairman of The Garden Conservancy, an organization devoted to preserving exceptional private gardens in North America. He has lectured widely on his gardenmaking efforts at both Les Quatre Vents and Stonecrop, his home in Cold Spring, New York. We profit greatly from his decision to write this book after years of demurring ("too many books about gardens"). We learn here of his early ties to this piece of land—the childhood summers exploring the spruce and balsam fir forests—and of his own decision to expand his parents' simple garden when he inherited their property in the 1960s.

Les Quatre Vents sits within a thin slice of Zone 4, warmed by the river but surrounded by the daunting Zone 3 climate of the Laurentian Mountains. Cabot is an avid plantsman who clearly enjoys the challenge presented by the area's restrictive growing conditions:

If the snows arrive before the ground freezes and last throughout the winter, the horticulturist can proudly display plants that thrive only in the Himalayas or in Scotland. In the worst of years, when the snows don't come until it is too late, or even when an atypical winter thaw destroys the snow cover, it is another story, and a humbler horticultural outlook prevails.*

In telling us how he framed the structure of his garden, Cabot refers frequently to the dramatic topographic conditions of the site and to the native forest that surrounds it. He created a series of garden spaces using native species as his framework, counting on their hardiness to free him to give special care to the more vulnerable plants that create the lush displays within each garden room. Although spruce budworm undermined this strategy for a while, he continues to build alleys and hedges of thuja, paper birch, amur maple. Some garden rooms have historic associations: a white garden was

inspired by Sissinghurst, and a watercourse emulates Geoffrey Jellicoe's work at Shute. Some features evoke exotic locales—a swinging rope bridge modeled on those in Nepal; a series of Japanese structures built by a master carpenter from Japan; a Chinese moon bridge constructed over a woodland stream against a background of amur maple, golden aspen, and dark green thuja.

In recreating the life of this garden Cabot gives credit to the gardeners, craftspeople, consulting architects, and artists who offered advice, designs, or hands-on labor, and he is careful to reveal his own mistakes (and those of others). He notes his debt to Rosemary Verey's *Englishwoman's Garden* and tells a delightful story of following Russell Page as he walked around the garden giving an intensive, two-day critique. “Get rid of the fuzz,” admonished Page, referring to plants that interfered with vistas, or paths that meandered awkwardly and detracted from important features. Cabot’s text of struggle, gain, and loss in the garden is belied by photographs that show a perfect garden, but it gives a sense of the growth and change that are an integral part of any garden.

*Les Quatre Vents* is the summer home of Cabot's family, but it is used for cultural events and is open to the public on appointment. In the book's afterword Cabot gives some valuable advice to garden visitors, based on his own experience as owner and traveler: avoid traveling in large groups, but if you must, break off and enjoy the garden as a solitary experience.

Unlike Francis Cabot, the Prince of Wales does not have multigenerational ties to his land. He purchased Highgrove in 1980 when it was a rather simple, late-eighteenth-century manor house set in a featureless landscape—just what the Prince was looking for, as he “didn’t want other people’s dreams and ideas.”

His goal was to anchor the house with a series of linked garden rooms. The boundaries between the garden and the working farmland that forms part of the property are blurred. This results in part from the gentle topography of the site, but certain garden features also help integrate the formal garden scheme into its country setting: the linden-lined entry drive underplanted with wildflowers; the fenced pasture, visible from the house, for Aberdeen Angus cattle and black Hebridean sheep; the wildflower meadow, an area of much experimentation that is closely monitored by the Prince.

The Prince of Wales has a very public interest in organic gardening and in natural history studies. His complex composting program produces both high-quality leafmold for potting mixes and a less nutrient-rich product for mulches. The local constable assigned to the property for security reasons collects data on dragon and damsel flies while making his daily rounds. The Prince maintains an orchard of rare apple varieties from the National Fruit Collection. He had the expert advice of the Marchioness of...
Salisbury, a noted organic gardening specialist, and Miriam Rothschild, the British naturalist, early in the planning process. At the end of this book, the head gardener, David Howard, gives a short overview of organic gardening at Highgrove.

Nevertheless, the garden itself is an inspired contrivance: the golden yews lining the central thyme walk—each trained into an eccentric shape by the staff gardeners; a ten-foot-high glass pyramid filled with ferns in the woodland; the "park pale" deer fence of cleft oak, adapted from a Roman design, that encloses the chicken run. Even the walled kitchen garden, cultivated according to strict organic principles, rivals the potagers at Villandry in formality of design.

The garden reflects the Prince's strong support of traditional architectural forms and of the British craft tradition. In the designers Julian and Isabel Bannerman he has found sympathetic minds that can adapt traditional forms into garden elements of great originality. The column bird—a gigantic stork-cum-heron poised on a nest atop a column—was rescued from Victoria station in London; the stumpery is an artfully arranged tangle of upended stumps that support a lush display of hostas, hellebores, ferns, and euphorbia. Small touches by other artists and craftspeople—a Chippendale bench with bright blue struts, small wall plaques designed by contemporary artists using classical themes—make this garden intimate and intriguing. The Prince takes his role as patron very seriously, and it is to his great credit that the artists, gardeners, and assorted other experts who helped plan and make the garden are not only named and included in the photographs, but also identified by their previous experience and training.

Like Francis Cabot, the Prince of Wales opens his property to public tours and to a growing number of small conferences related to programs he supports. A conference center of golden Cotswold stone, called the Orchard Room, is a recent addition to the property.

The gardens described in both these books draw on traditional garden forms and historical references. While they cannot be called modern, they are clearly gardens of their own time. Both translate local vernacular forms and materials into original garden features. Both owners continue to experiment with plantings and structures—the Prince of Wales, for example, continually edits his plantings in an effort to find disease-resistant varieties with significant ornamental value, and Francis Cabot rethinks color schemes and plant combinations as new cultivars become available. One hopes that this personal quest for perfection is captured if these gardens take on a greater public role.

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