

BOOKS

Neil Jorgensen

The Exuberant Garden and the Controlling Hand by William H. Frederick, Jr. Little, Brown, 1992. 342 pages. Hardcover, 230 color photographs and 38 appendices. \$50.00.

There is so often in landscape gardening a special difficulty: that gap so hard to bridge, between good design and good planting . . . the gardener or designer who can combine the two is a rare bird.

—Russell Page

A rare bird indeed! The horticultural ignorance of so many landscape architects is a great failing of the profession. But as both a master plantsman and a wonderfully creative designer, landscape architect William Frederick is a happy exception to the stereotype.

Beyond the surprise and curiosity of a planting book written by a landscape architect, *The Exuberant Garden and the Controlling Hand* is important in other ways. First, it is a book of opinion and personal knowledge gained from over fifty years of hands-on gardening; this experience alone would make it worth owning. Second, it is a book of case studies using actual gardens that Frederick has designed. Third, it is a visual treat both for its layout (designed by Susan Marsh) and for its illustrations. Fourth, it is a valuable reference book written for professionals and serious gardeners. Frederick has chosen his audience; he doesn't pander to the vast population of gardening beginners.

Though big and glossy, *The Exuberant Garden* is a far cry from the vacuous gardening "lifestyle" books—full of pretty pictures but little else of substance—that regularly appear in bookstores each spring. Its fifty-dollar price is about ten dollars higher than the average of these lifestyle books, but con-

sidering the wealth of information that Frederick shares, it is a bargain.

His organization is splendid. The book contains five chapters, one for each of five different kinds of gardens, among them gardens for viewing, stroll gardens, and swimming pool gardens. In each chapter, he compares several examples of that particular garden type. For each, he provides a clear plan, a rationale for the design, an illustrated list of the plants used, and a chart of bloom sequence to show how visual interest progresses through the year.

After each example, Frederick expands a particular design feature into a more general discussion on some aspect of garden design: one feature is a comparison of rectilinear and curvilinear design, another discusses fragrance, yet another suggests plants for winter interest, and so on.

The appendices, which account for over half of the book, are database charts of what landscape architects call "plant material," for those with little horticultural experience who might need a blue-flowered, three-foot-high, shade-tolerant, June-blossoming, Zone 6 shrub for a garden project. Even accomplished plantspeople would find these exhaustive lists useful to keep the various possibilities in mind.

After reading Edward Tufte's superb book, *Envisioning Information*, I am perhaps oversensitive to shortcomings in tabular layouts, but I can't help feeling that the design of these charts does not match the design of the main body of the book. The information in each could have been easily condensed onto one page, symbols used at times instead of confusing initials, the names of the plant families dispensed with entirely, specific Latin names given in italics, and notes placed at the

bottom of the page as footnotes rather than listed on a separate page. The charts are still useful, but a better design would have made them easier to read.

For years I have owned two copies of Frederick's earlier book, *One Hundred Great Garden Plants*, just in case I loaned out one copy and never got it back. I don't know how many times, when confronted with a vexing planting problem, I have turned to Bill Frederick for advice. *The Exuberant Garden* does not cover the same ground but almost begins where this earlier book leaves off.

My only other criticism of the new book—a minor one—is that since *One Hundred Great Garden Plants*, Frederick's sentences have grown in length, perhaps because many of his ideas are complex. Though his writing remains clear, sometimes making two sentences out of one would have increased the readability of the text. But even if you did not

read one word of the text—which would be a pity—the book is well worth owning for the garden plans, for the plant databases, and above all, for the sumptuous photographs.

I'll admit it: William Frederick is one of my gardening idols. For years I have seen snippets of his work in various publications. Three years ago and again this year, I have had the good fortune to visit his Delaware garden in person. The blue butterfly chairs against the brilliant bank of azaleas—the same view that is on the book jacket and frontispiece of his splendid new book—will always remain in my memory.

The Exuberant Garden and the Controlling Hand should be in the library of every landscape architect and serious gardener here in the East. And while you are at the bookstore, pick up a copy of *One Hundred Great Garden Plants*. That should be on your bookshelf as well.

Judith B. Tankard

The Golden Age of American Gardens: Proud Owners, Private Estates, 1890-1940, by Mac Griswold and Eleanor Weller. Harry N. Abrams, in association with the Garden Club of America, 1991. 408 pages. Hardcover. \$75.00.

Not since the Garden Club of America sponsored the publication of *Gardens of Colony and State* over sixty years ago has there been such an impressive attempt to record an important era of America's rich garden history. The earlier publication presented a rarefied view of select colonial gardens known to the GCA at the time. It was edited by Alice B. Lockwood, who assembled contributions from the club's membership network. As soon as the two large folio volumes appeared in 1931-34, handsomely designed and produced by Scribner's, they rapidly became a major

document for a number of the gardens, many of which vanished within a few years.

This present publication is a worthy successor, and one hopes that it will enjoy an equally valued existence. The inspiration for the new book is a collection of over 1400 hand-colored glass lantern slides originally commissioned by the GCA to document representative members' gardens. After the original collection was reassembled about a dozen years ago, it was augmented by 60,000 35-millimeter slides of other American garden images—postcard views, plans, and black-and-white photographs. That enlarged collection, now known as the Archive of American Gardens, is housed at the Smithsonian Institution where it is presently being catalogued and where, after 1993, it will be available for use by researchers. Unquestionably the collection provides extraordinary visual documentation

of a long-vanished era, and the present authors set out to create a book around the material. Their initial task was to identify the gardens shown in the slides, and by the end of six years of research, they had unearthed enough information to fill many volumes.

The publisher is to be commended for undertaking the project, but it is regrettable that the opulent book-publishing standards of the 1930s have become as obsolete as many of the gardens described in the book. The realities of present-day trade publishing apparently precluded spreading the information out over the multiple volumes the project deserved, setting the text in a readable typeface, and presenting the book in a larger, more traditional format. The minute point size selected for the back matter is a tragedy, as the reference material alone is worth the price of the book.

Reproductions of the over-colorful slides form the backbone of the book. The previous book was enhanced immeasurably by the half-tone illustrations, so it is refreshing that the present book has been created entirely around archival images in an era when glossy photography emphasizing color and detail is the norm. The slides that were hand-painted in the studio range from enchanting to lurid, but it is the black-and-white photographs that reveal more about garden design.

The chronicle of American estate gardens prior to World War II, when the economic conditions that supported such activities changed dramatically, is arranged geographically from the Northeast to the West Coast, loosely following the trail of land exploration, development, and culture. With tantalizingly brief entries on some of its notable gardens, each region cries out for its own individual volume. Unlike *Gardens of Colony and State*, which seems a quaint period piece in comparison, the book treats that vast expanse of America between Mississippi and California.

American estates were more than homes of millionaires; they were the regal family head-

quarters for newly established American dynasties. The style of architecture and gardens was a mix of eclecticism and the latest advances in artistic and cultural developments as promoted in popular English-style books and periodicals of the time. In horticulture, the lessons from England were sometimes abused, as in Mrs. Curtiss James's all-blue garden in Newport that relied heavily on annuals and expensive tricks to create the effect; at times the climate proved a challenge, as in the case of Lila Vanderbilt Webb's "Shelburne Farms" in Vermont where the terraces overlooking Lake Champlain were decorated with tubbed bay trees.

Uniquely in America, women were able to play an enormous role in shaping the character of some of these gardens, whether through their own writings and the development of the garden club movement, or through the work of design professionals. Outstanding contributions to garden design in the country house era by women such as Ellen Shipman and Marian Commin are presented alongside the better-known work of Charles Platt and the Olmsteds, thereby providing a viewpoint not often stressed in more traditional studies of the period.

Even though the book has scholarly reference material, including forty-five columns of endnotes, thirty columns of bibliography, and extensive caption information, the text is more contemporary than scholastic in style and is thereby accessible to a broad audience. Skimming, however, is not possible. Whether a novice to the field of garden history or a seasoned professional, one is encouraged to work through the book, slowly digesting the wealth of information. A newly corrected second printing is expected early this summer.

The authors, the publisher, and the Garden Club of America have produced a serious but splendid book that deserves a permanent place in libraries and book shops, alongside equally notable studies on the American country house.