

Weeds

Now that I had been coming regularly to Alexander House (for so it was designated on a card I had put on the door to let people know they were in the right place), I had begun to notice that all was not the same as when I had begun teaching there two weeks ago. In the living border between the little frame house and the expanse of asphalt that fronted it, parking lot and roadway, there was a constant changing of the guard.

The building belonged to the owners of the nursery around the corner, and the two properties were connected by a strikingly landscaped isthmus that bespoke their mastery of their craft. Arranged with an artist's eye, this was an assemblage of plants designed to complement each other with regard to color, height, and texture. A formal garden arrayed along a ribbon, it created an effect reminiscent of those old plantings in the hearts of the great cities of Europe, and it was enhanced, as they so often were, by the occasional sculptural element.

This was a living display and a dynamic one. As one kind of plant finished flowering, another would come into bloom. Today the buds by the front porch had just opened, surrounding the steps with a burst of black-eyed Susans and adding a vibrant note to the kaleidoscopic yellows and purples basking in the full sun of that southern exposure. At their base was unfolding a vegetative drama of succession among the succulent sedums, as the stalks of the hens, having shed their blossoms, were falling off to reveal the chicks, the progeny plants growing beneath them. Dramatic cedars, chartreuse with edges of brilliant gold, towered at the edges, ringed by clumps of bright yellow coreopsis below, marking off the corners.

As you rounded the bend, deep pink coneflowers introduced another color phase and mood. Here by the roadside were the reds, beginning with the roses,

whose waning blooms were silhouetted against the covered window, backlit by the afternoon sun; I had been watching their shadows sway in the summer breeze as I gave turns at the adjacent table within. Then came the pink and blue hydrangeas, ushering in, as you turned the next corner, the contemplative cool-colored plants of the north side. It was shadier here, under the flowering dogwood, and this was the home of the lavender hostas, the pale blue Swiss mountain flowers, and the ferns, interspersed with blue spruce, the first of which you could see from the window. Here also could be found the meadow sage, notable for its powers of rejuvenation – remove its spent flowers, and it would replace them with new.

This then was what surrounded the teaching space – a living symbol for the change of state that we were working to facilitate within, with its progression from opposing tensions to calm release. It may be significant that at first I failed to notice a discordance. But it was undeniable that there was an occasional interloper, clearly not deliberately introduced to complete the palette. Once you started to see them, though, they stood out clearly, interrupting the otherwise harmonious tapestry of vegetation. They were weeds, an undesirable element, and to become aware of them was tantamount to eradicating them. Dispatch them forthwith, and you restored the integrity of the overall pattern.

How, I wondered, could I have failed to see them before? But the very next day, there were more. Had I missed them lurking in the understory or had they sprung up overnight? As quickly and thoroughly as they were removed, more would appear, now that I knew to look for them. Where were they coming from? A gardener friend explained that that was just how it was: There were always more appearing where you had just weeded, once you developed an eye to recognize them. The most you could do was to deal with them as you came across them, one at a time. Gardening was a process, never complete. And this was the best metaphor of all for what went on in the little house, where we all, myself included, were continually uprooting the unhelpful to make room for new growth of our own choosing.