

Informal and Wild Gardening

By Norman Taylor



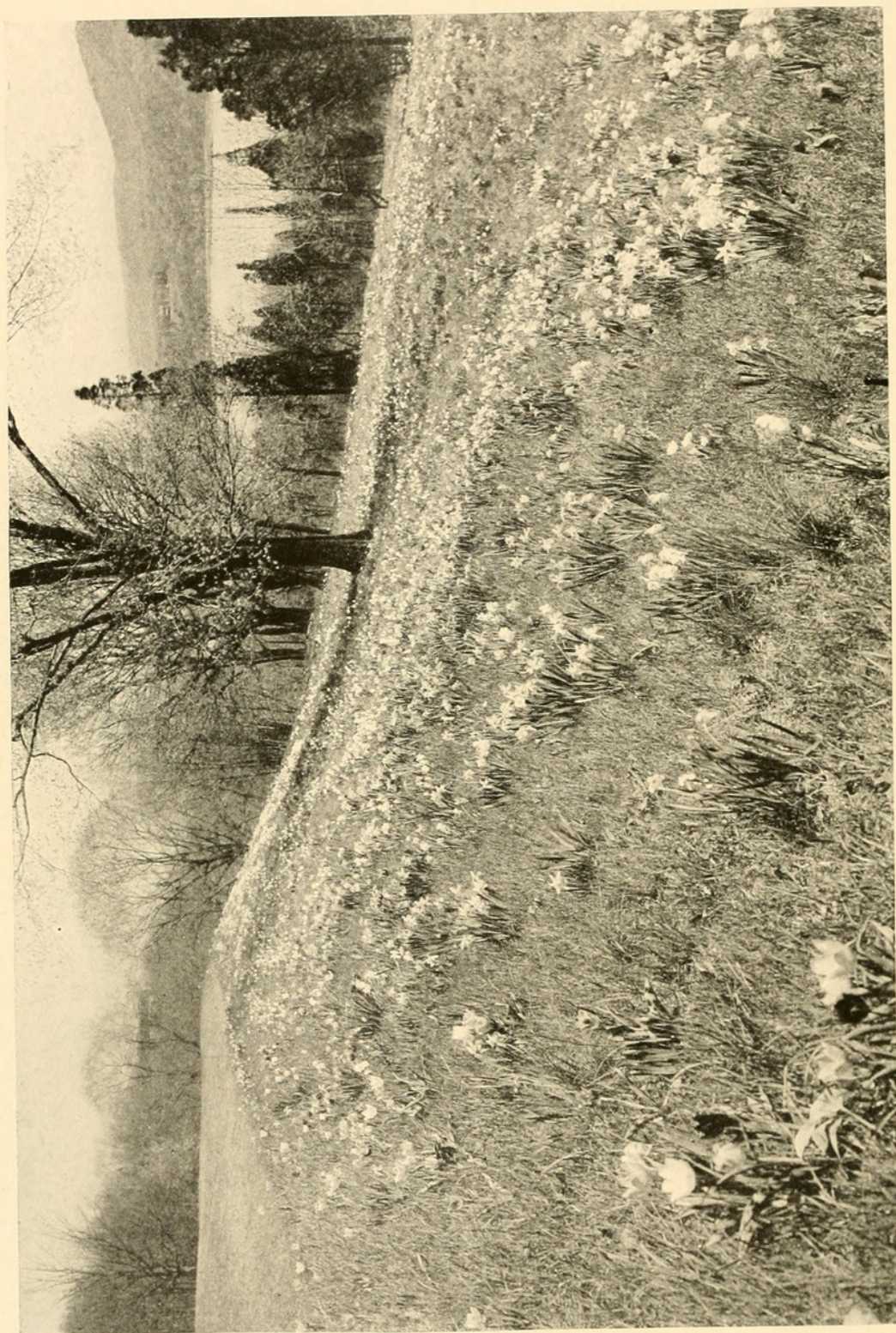
IT IS hoped to present in this, and later numbers of the JOURNAL some account of wild and informal gardening. Not much of this has been practised in America and there are so many places that would be improved by plantings of this nature, that there seems a real need for descriptions of the materials and methods.

Of course there are several different types of wild gardens and the suitability of such informal planting for any particular locality must be decided with some care. The present issue will deal with

Woodland Gardens

Many garden sites in our American landscape suffer from the formalities of stiff and regular planning, adapted from regions with a different climate and topography than our own. Much of the country in the northeastern United States was virgin forest in the early days and this forest *motif* serves today as a sound basis for the wild garden. It matters little that great clearings exist now in these once primeval forests, that cities and farms and gardens have cut great gaps in a forest region perhaps unexcelled in the temperate zone. The outstanding fact, at the present time is that these forests supply the foundation upon which to build a wild garden.

It will be objected at once that other types of wild gardens, such as rock or seaside or meadow gardens have nothing to do with this forest covering. While this is true, all such gardens *do* have a great deal to do with the natural conditions that have



NATURALIZING DAFFODILS AND TULIPS
CRAGSTON, HIGHLAND FALLS
MRS. J. P. MORGAN

given them their names. In other words these apparent exceptions merely prove the rule that wild gardens must first of all show fitness to their environment. For it is fitness to its environment that measures the success, artistically and horticulturally, of all wild gardens.

Because so much of our area was forest and because that type of landscape is still the dominant one, it is to the forest that we must turn for our ideas in the making of woodland gardens. And to the discerning the forest will be no meagre storehouse, for in it is to be found not only the design but a profusion of materials for carrying it out. Any forest area may suggest dozens of schemes for developing a wild garden. It will certainly and most delightfully unfold to its devotees a constantly changing panorama of flowers, silently coming to bloom and as silently making way for their followers. The usual type of forest will supply us, then, both with the *design* and the *materials* for our woodland garden.

Design for the Woodland Garden

There can be no very precise directions for making wild gardens. Their construction is so much a matter of the utilization of the materials at hand, so largely dependent on local conditions that any suggestions, beyond very general ones must be more or less confusing. The things that should be considered so far as design for the garden is concerned, are: (1) shade, (2) slope, (3) soil conditions.

A consideration of these in detail will show that upon one or more of these conditions, or upon their combination, will depend whatever in the nature of design is to be attained.

1. *Shade*. Perhaps this is more fundamental than any other one thing in deciding to have or not to have a woodland garden. If the area is well forested then there is little to be done except plan informal trails that may suggest themselves to anyone wandering casually through the woods. In such cases there is not so much the making of a plan as the utilization of a site with the least possible disturbance of the natural conditions.

It is the natural condition of shade and the age-long decomposition of leaves without interference that make the forest floor so valuable to the wild gardener. Nothing that destroys this shade, nothing that involves much grading can be attempted with safety. Even the trails had better be curved, not so much for effect, as to break up the wind-sweep that a tunnel-like cut through the forest will create. These trails, too, must never be paved or covered with gravel. The capacity of any gravel walk to dry out the lower strata of air in any garden is great, in a wild garden it may be fatal. Ashes and earth mixed or better yet the natural earth, make the best paths, both horticulturally and esthetically.

Very little virgin forest is now left to us, so that it is nearly certain that the woodland garden will have to be planned through a second or third growth woods. In all such there has come up a great growth of shrubs and thicket-vegetation that will be troublesome to the woodland gardener. Perhaps the best way to overcome such troubles will be to leave between the trails large masses of such thickets, and to cut them out along the edges of the trail. The effect of this will be to provide irregular beds disappearing in the thickets behind, in which to grow the plants. If the trails have been properly planned, so as to pass close to certain large trees, a great boulder, or along side a stream for instance, then the cutting out of the thicket growth in patches will provide little embayments in the forest. Such places framed by the shrubs and trees back of them, quite out of the wind, make splendid places for the naturalization of woodland plants in masses. By this procedure we have provided such a setting for our plants that they will be thoroughly at home.

The effect of these miniature openings in the undergrowth, each with a group of plants that could not be grown in open garden beds, will be delightful. And this not only for the beauty of the woodland flowers themselves, but principally for the fitness of the site for growing just the sort of plants found in such places in the natural woods. There is here no question of imitation of nature, for if the thing is skillfully done it is



CLINTONIA
CLINTONIA BOREALIS



WILD AZALEA
AZALEA NUDIFLORA

practically nature itself. All that is done by clearing out the undergrowth is to bring the forest floor back to the state of most primeval forests where the bushy undergrowth is not apt to become a mere thicket as it is in so much of our second-growth woods. A winding trail, with branches to a nearby spring, to a boulder, or perhaps to a great forest monarch, lined with patches of rare wild flowers, what picture could delight the mind's eye of the woodland gardener more than this? Yet it is not only feasible but in many cases the best sort of gardening that one can do. If there are woods and the usual American landscape, such a scheme has everything to commend it. The artistic advantages of using the materials at hand, of pitching your garden in the key of the surrounding landscape, must appeal to those who rebel against projecting purely formal and often inharmonious designs upon American gardens.

2. *Slope.* This will in some cases decide what type of woodland garden you can develop. If the grade is very steep everything that will prevent washing out of the humus must be done. Rocks, trails, beds, anything that will hold the soil in place must be utilized, perhaps also, some ground-covering plants used in certain parts of it. Even stepping stones or steps, in such places, had better not be directly up and down, as in the spring thaw they may become little more than gullies that drain off that most valuable asset to the wild garden,—the humus.

3. *Soil Conditions.* For woodland plants it is nearly axiomatic that we need woodland soil. This is made up largely of decomposed vegetation and in many cases it is somewhat acid, often too acid to grow vegetables in without liming. But more important still it is the home of microscopic organisms upon which many of the most beautiful wild flowers depend for getting their food. It is not yet fully understood just what the relationship of these organisms to the roots of certain woodland plants really means. Mr. F. V. Coville has demonstrated that only in acid soils can be grown certain plants of the heath

family, and in such acid soils these organisms are known to grow.

If the site of our proposed wild garden does not have natural woodland soil, deep and rich and black, though light and well drained, then the work of making our garden, or even the type of garden, may have to be studied in considerable detail. If the other conditions described under shade and slope are fairly satisfactory the soil can be made for the special beds, leaving other parts with the natural soil. In making soil for woodland plants it is absolutely necessary to get rich leaf-mold or commercial humus and sand. These should be mixed in varying proportions for different species and put in the beds which should have been excavated at least eighteen inches and lined with ashes or other drainage material. In such beds, with an annual layer of leaves, preferably oak, allowed to decompose into the soil, most of our woodland plants can be grown.

There are, then, these three things that will determine the design or feasibility of the wild garden, shade, slope and soil conditions and the first is much the most important. If the shade is there then it is not difficult to begin work, keeping always in mind that the woods are chiefly a setting for the garden, not something into which all sorts of things can be introduced. Anything that destroys the forest calm, the quiet nook, the stillness and essential seclusion, these things are to be shunned not only on esthetic grounds, but mostly because all such mishaps mean destruction of conditions, almost impalpable yet very real, that are the breath of life to our woodland plants. Undisturbed soil conditions, shelter from burning sunlight and drying winds, these are found in woodland gardens that have been tampered with very sparingly and rather skillfully and only sufficiently to make space for the plants we wish to grow. Buildings or structures of any sort can be used in the design only very sparingly. Log cabins or rustic seats may sometimes be effective but on the whole it would seem better to leave the woods as completely unspoiled as possible.

Materials for the Wild Garden

Plants for the woodland garden are legion. There are good arguments for using only native American species, they "fit" the landscape better and have not that exotic look that intrudes in some collections. Practically all the species mentioned below are native to the northeastern United States and all can be grown from Virginia to the Mississippi and northward into southern Canada.

The culture of woodland plants presents difficulties to those who do not know their natural habitats and wild range. Certain of them are naturally mountain species, others common only along the costal plain. Some are partial to certain types of soil, others are apparently almost indifferent. In the discussion of various species below only those most satisfactory and most easily grown have been included, but there are many more that seem to have special fondness for conditions that will elude all but the enthusiast. If one may be permitted to ascribe feeling to certain of them it almost seems as if they resented the attention of experts and theorists. One of the most successful cultivators of woodland plants in this country is a man who practically lives in his garden, feels with it, plays in it and is blissfully ignorant as to mycorrhiza and soil acidity and all the modern talk of soil organisms!

As to propagation, most of the species had better be collected or purchased. All those mentioned below are perennials and their methods of propagation are little known in many cases. Some have seeds that lie for eighteen months or two years before sprouting, others apparently sprout quite readily. Very few can be grown from cuttings, practically none should be propagated by division of the roots as one of the conditions of successful woodland gardening is to let the plants alone. If they are happy they will spread naturally which is just what is wanted, if not, only the most skillful culture will get them established. Indeed it may almost be set down as a rule that no plant that cannot be established in one year should have a place in the woodland garden. For that reason there are no

orchids in the following list, as they are the most difficult of all woodland plants to grow.

List of woodland plants to be grown in deep shade, the soil not cultivated, and plants allowed to spread as they will

TRAILING ARBUTUS (*Epigaea repens*). Hard to grow. Better keep frozen transplanted clumps covered with leaves for the first year. Most fragrant of native plants.

BLOODROOT (*Sanguinaria canadensis*). Prefers deep shade but can be grown in fairly open places. Flowers very early in the spring.

MANDRAKE (*Podophyllum peltatum*). Prolific grower and will stand considerable sunlight. Handsome large leaves are showy.

MITREWORT (*Mitella diphylla*). At home on moist shady banks. Useful only in masses, its spike-like flower-clusters very slender. .

FALSE LILY OF THE VALLEY (*Smilacina bifolia*). Better be used in large masses of 100 or more plants. Covers the ground in a few years.

RUE ANEMONE (*Thalictrum anemonoides*). Must be in place thoroughly sheltered from the wind. Flowers white. Plant delicate.

WAKE ROBIN (*Trillium grandiflorum*, *erectum* and *sessile*). All can be grown in places not too deep in the woods. Soil should be deep and rich. The showiest is the white *T. grandiflorum*.

TOOTHWORT (*Dentaria diphylla*), Prefers moist places in deep woods. Flowers white, usually plentiful.

FOAM FLOWER (*Tiarella cordifolia*). Its profusion of feathery white flowers make it one of the most effective of the woodland species. Often grows in profusion on springy banks.

DWARF CORNELL (*Cornus canadensis*). Best not to plant near the coast. Flowers look like miniature dogwood. Some moisture essential.



STEPS TO THE ROCK GARDEN
NEW ROCHELLE
MRS. J. D. WOODWARD



FALSE LILY-OF-THE-VALLEY
SMILACINA BIFOLIA

DALIBARDA (*Dalibarda repens*). Blooms after most spring flowering plants are past. Nearly prostrate and at home in most secluded parts of the woods.

DUTCHMAN'S BREECHES (*Dicentra cucullaria*). Keep from winds and too much sun. Likes cool moist shady places. Flowers very delicate and soon withering.

DOG'S-TOOTH VIOLET (*Erythronium americanum*). One of the most beautiful yellow flowers among native perennials. Plant in large masses. Slow to spread.

VIOLET (*Viola rotundifolia*, *pubescens*, *canadensis*, and other species). Many sorts of violets can be grown in rich woods. Naturalized in masses at the base of trees they are most effective.

BELLWORT (*Uvularia grandiflora*). The best of all the wild bellworts. Requires considerable moisture, and cool shade.

CLINTONIA (*Clintonia borealis*). Will stand some open sunshine, but at home in deepest woods. The purplish-blue berries are effective.

TWISTED STALK (*Streptopus roseus*). Rich deep woods are needed for this, and it does well on shady banks.

GAY WINGS (*Polygala paucifolia*). The purple-fringed flowers of this plant, which grows in dense mats, are most beautiful. Needs deep soil and no disturbance.

COLUMBINE (*Aquilegia canadensis*). Grows best where there are rocky shaded ledges. Spreads easily and rapidly.

WILD GINGER (*Asarum canadensis*). Flowers not showy, but the rich green leaves make it one of the best ground covers in shady places. Will cover large areas in a few years.

These few species are among the best for the American woodland garden, but there are hundreds more,* many of which must be collected from the wild. Of course our native ferns and such old favorites as the rock saxifrage and hepatica will

* In an article by the writer in the May, 1915, issue of the *Garden Magazine* there is a long list of Wild Garden plants, and in the *Journal* of the Royal Horticultural Society for April 1915 there is a good account of such gardening in England by James Hudson. Some of the plants mentioned there, however, are not hardy in northeastern United States. 4

surely find a place. In some woodland gardens the forest kinds of goldenrod and aster can be used, but they are apt to become weedy.

Many of the plants for woodland gardens listed by Mr. Hudson, as suitable for England are also useful here. For those who do not object to a foreign note in their wild garden, his list is here quoted, leaving out those species not hardy in America.

Plants for Woodland.—Snowdrops, *Anemone blanda*, *A. ranunculoides*, and varieties of *A. nemorosa*—such as *Robinsoniana*, *Scilla nutans* and *S. n. alba*; Primroses (yellow and white, *not* coloured), *Campanula latifolia* and *C. l. alba*, *Chionodoxa sardensis*, Dog's tooth Violets, white Wood Violets, *Helleborus foetidus*, Wood Sorrel (white and pink), and Ferns in abundance (the wild British are by far the best, and the curious crested and other forms should be used most sparingly, not more than 1 in 25), such as *Lastrea dilatata*, *L. Filix mas*, *Athyrium Filix foemina*, *Polystichum aculeatum*, *angulare*, and *munitum*, *Scolopendrium vulgare*, *Polypodium vulgare*, *Dryopteris*, and *Phegopteris* (both the latter in rather damp spots), *Osmunda* in wet places.

While it is true there should be no cultivation of the soil in woodland gardens, they cannot be neglected. Weeds will come up in such places and seedlings from trees and shrubs must be kept down or else they will choke out all but the hardiest of our woodland plants. In some gardens where there is a steep slope it will be advisable to water freely. If this is not done the results will not be satisfactory, and the constant aim must be to have the plants do better than they do in nature where they have to meet competition of various kinds.

Perhaps one of the best reasons for having a woodland garden has been left to the last, because to those who love the woods and the flowers in them, it is most important. Woodland gardens properly made and stocked make plant sanctuaries of the most enduring sort, for in them can be preserved many of our most beautiful wild flowers, which from their very beauty are most apt to be exterminated by the thoughtless.

BROOKLYN BOTANIC GARDEN.



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