

# Visiting with Great Aunt Gertrude

Copyright © Beth Young Garden Design. All rights reserved.

## By BETH YOUNG

I have been visiting with Gertrude Jekyll. This morning, she told me which annuals and perennials I should plant in my garden for next year. She awes and inspires me with her easygoing familiarity with endless types of plants. And, as with any good friendships, it has its moments of mischief and whimsy, such as when she shows me how to make a snapdragon seed-pod into an old lady, bonnet and all, who "weeps little black tears," or how to tickle the barberry flower so that the pollen jumps to the stamen "like a live thing."

If you are a gardening enthusiast, you have probably figured out that (a) I'm nuts, or (b) I've been reading a book by Gertrude Jekyll, the influential and prolific garden writer turn-of-the-(last)-century England. Sorry to disappoint, but it's (b), and the book is *Children and Gardens*, originally published in 1908.

In 1982, the Estate of Gertrude Jekyll re-published this book in a small, glossy and durable hardbound volume which is perfect for bringing to the beach or out to the garden.

This book was written as an introduction to the world of plants and gardens for the children of turn-of-the-century rural England. It inadvertently has become a treasure-trove of nearly-forgotten pastimes and pleasantries of the English countryside such as how to make a primrose-ball, or the early-morning scent of newly scythed grass (always done in the morning when the grass "stands up better to the edge of the blade").

With the tone of a patient grandmother gently guiding a child through the ways of nature--and the world--Jekyll teaches us how to tie the best knot, how to make a new path

a perfect right angle to an existing path, and the botanical organization of plants.

I like to read this book in my garden, or out in nature, or just near an open window with the sound of chirping birds nearby, because I like to imagine that I am wandering through my flowers, and "Great Aunt Gertrude" is telling me all of these wonderful secrets with her gentle English voice, cracking with age but overflowing with knowledge.

In old age, as with early childhood, the urgent needs and vanities of life fall away, and time slows down, so that we may enjoy the beauties and complexities of life, up-close and slowly. This book is full of advice from a woman at the end of life to children at the beginning, and we in the middle are offered a rare glimpse of what is really important. Little nuggets of wisdom are tucked into good general advice, such as: "You can learn about garden flowers from the wild flowers you find in your daily walks...because, if you are observant, which is one of the ways of being happy, you will want to know all you can about the wild flowers you see; and you will soon find out how many of them are near relations to garden flowers."

The tone is sweet, the jokes gentle, and we are all so lucky to have the opportunity to spend some time with, and learn from, Great Aunt Gertrude.

---

*Beth Young is principal of Beth Young Garden Design, a residential landscape design firm in Corvallis. Member, APLD.*