

About the Garden Almanac of the Year 1795¹

Friedrich Schiller

Tübingen near Cotta

Since Hirschfeld's writings on landscape gardening have appeared, the passion for beautiful aesthetic gardens has become more and more widespread in Germany, even if this has hardly been to the benefit of good taste, given the lack of sound principles with everything left to free will. This almanac provides some excellent suggestions on how to rectify the misguided taste in this art – all of which are worth being examined more closely by the friend of the arts and the gardening aficionado.

It is not so unusual that one begins with the realization of something and ends by asking: "Is it even possible?" This also seems to be particularly true with the much-loved *aesthetic gardens*. The fruits of Northern taste (=aesthetic gardens) are of such an equivocal origin and have hitherto shown such an unsteady character that the true lover of the arts can be forgiven if he hardly deemed them worthy of his passing attention and abandoned them entirely to the fancy of dilettantes. Not knowing which class of the beaux arts it should belong to, landscape gardening aligned itself with architecture (*Baukunst*) for a long time, forcing live vegetation under the rigid yoke of mathematical forms by means of which the architect seeks to control a heavy lifeless mass. The tree was supposed to conceal its higher organic nature so that art could prove its force by virtue of its corporeal nature, it had to sacrifice its lovely autonomous existence for a symmetry robbed of spirit and its light, free-floating growth for an appearance of rigidity, a quality, which the eyes demand of stone walls. Landscape gardening was able to return from this strange wrong path in more recent times, only to lose itself on the opposite path. From the strict discipline of the architect it fled to the freedom of the poet, suddenly exchanging the most extreme bondage for the most anarchic license, now seeking to yield only to the law of imagination. Like fantasy left to itself usually changes its images

¹ Original title: *Über den Gartenkalender auf das Jahr 1795*.

in an arbitrary, adventurous and variegated way, the eye had to jump from one unexpected decoration to another and nature was now forced to exhibit, in a larger or smaller space, the entire diversity of its manifestations as if on a pattern card. Just as it was robbed of its freedom in French gardens, while being compensated by a certain harmony and architectural grandeur, in our so-called English gardens, it (nature) now descends to the level of a childish littleness, and because of an exaggerated endeavor to appear informal and varied, it has become estranged from all beautiful simplicity and rule. It is largely still in this state, not much favored by the soft character of our time, which flees from all formal certainty and finds it infinitely more comfortable to model the objects after its whims than to comply with them.

As it is so difficult to allocate aesthetic landscape gardening a place amongst the beautiful arts, we might easily suppose that this art does not belong to their number. We would, however, be wrong to let the unsuccessful attempts at landscape gardening be proof of the impossibility of elevating aesthetic gardening to the rank of an art. The two opposite forms in which it has appeared to date, contain something true and both stem from a legitimate need. As for what first applied to architectural taste, it cannot be denied that gardening belongs to the same category as architecture, even if it is detrimental to attempt to apply the conditions of the latter to it. Both arts lay origins to a physical need, which initially governed its forms until the sense of beauty, once developed, insisted on the freedom of these forms and taste, joined by intellect, made its demands. Seen from this perspective both arts are not completely free and the beauty of their forms will always remain determined and limited by their unrelenting physical purpose. It is also true that both imitate nature by means of nature – instead of an artificial medium – or they do not imitate at all, but rather create new objects. It is perhaps for this reason that one did not so strictly adhere to forms offered by reality and was not concerned that nature was treated as a means to the detriment of its specific character, provided the mind was satisfied by order and convergence and the eye by majesty or grace. One could feel all the more entitled to do this, since obviously in gardening as in architectural design, the physical purpose is often promoted by sacrificing the freedom of nature. The creators of architectural taste in gardening should be pardoned to a certain extent for allowing themselves to be seduced by the affinity which in many quarters exists between both of these arts, to confuse their various characters and, when faced with the choice of order or freedom to champion the former to the complete exclusion of the latter.

On the other hand, the poetic taste in gardening is based on a very specific fact, that of feeling. An attentive observer could not fail to notice that the pleasure with which the sight of rural scenes fills us is inseparable from the idea

that they are works of free nature and not of the artist. As soon as the taste in gardening intended this type of pleasure it had to be careful to remove all traces of an artificial origin from gardens. Freedom thus became its highest law, just as regularity had been for architecture. For the former nature had to prevail, while for the latter it was the hand of man. But the goal to which it aspired was much too grand for the means to which it was limited, and it failed because it overstepped its limits and led the art of gardening into painting. It forgot that the smaller scale, which stands in the good stead of the latter, could not be applied to art, which represents nature by means of itself and can only move the visitor if it is completely mistaken for nature. No wonder then that by struggling to attain manifoldness it lapsed into triviality and – since it lacked space and forces for the transitions through which nature prepares and justifies its changes – arbitrariness. The ideal to which it aspired does not contain a contradiction; however, it was inappropriate and capricious, because even the most fortunate success did not reward the enormous sacrifices.

If gardening is to finally abandon such extravagances and to rest, like its other sisters, between certain lasting confines, it must above all be clear about what it actually wants, a question about which, at least in Germany, one has not given enough thought to. Most likely, a middle course will have to be found between the rigidity of the taste of the French garden taste and the anarchic freedom of the so-called English one. We shall see that this art was not allowed to rise up to such high spheres as those of us who in their designs forget only the tools used to execute them would like to convince us and that it is hackneyed and absurd to want to enclose the world in a garden wall, but that is feasible and sensible to lay out a garden which meets all the demands of a good farmer, creating a characteristic whole (*ein charakteristisches Ganze*) appreciated by the eye as well as by the heart and the intellect.

This is what the brilliant author of these fragmentary contributions to developing the German garden taste in this calendar calls to our attention and of everything that has ever been written on this subject we do not know anything that could be so satisfactory for a salutary taste. To be sure, his ideas were only put down on paper as fragments; but this negligence in terms of form does not just extend to the content, which for the most part is testimony to a fine mind and a delicate sense of art. After having named and duly recognized the two main paths that gardening has followed thus far and its various purposes, he tries to link this art to its real boundaries and to a sensible purpose, which he rightly “posits as an elevation of the life pleasure (*joie de vivre*) that can be created by coming into contact with beautiful nature.” He very aptly distinguishes the garden landscape (the actual English garden) where nature in all its grandeur and freedom must appear and have seemingly assimilated all art,

from the garden where art as such is allowed to become visible. Without questioning the aesthetic advantage he contents himself to show the difficulties that are linked to its execution and can only be overcome by means of exceptional forces. He divides the actual garden into the large, the small and the medium-sized and briefly describes the confines within which its creative elaboration must be kept in each of these three types. He emphatically inveighs against the anglomania of so many German garden owners, against the bridges without water, against the hermitages on the country road, etc. and reveals the meagerness to which the obsession with imitation and misunderstood principles of variety and freedom from constraints can lead. But by restricting the confines of gardening he shows how to make them more effective and to aspire to a specific, interesting character by dispensing with what is unnecessary and absurd. Thus he does not at all think it is impossible to design symbolic gardens, or gardens evoking pathos, which like musical or poetic compositions, would be capable of eliciting and expressing a certain emotional state.

Apart from these aesthetic remarks, the author began to describe, in this almanac, the extensive garden at Hohenheim, and he has promised to continue this next year. Everyone who has either seen or just learned from hearsay about this rightly famous garden must find it pleasant to stroll through it in the company of such a fine art expert. He will probably be no less surprised than the reviewer to see in a composition that one was inclined to see as a product of arbitrariness an *idea* at work which does great honor to the person who created or described the garden. Most travellers who have had the fortune to visit the garden at Hohenheim saw, not without great surprise, the juxtaposition of Roman graves, temples, crumbling city walls and the gloomy remains of a prison with cheerful Swiss cottages and flowerbeds. They were unable to grasp a fantasy that took the liberty to link such disparate things to one harmonious whole. The idea that we are facing a rural colony that settled beneath the ruins of a Roman city suddenly eliminates this contradiction and brings a unity replete with aesthetic beauty to this Baroque composition. Rural simplicity and decayed urban magnificence – the two most extreme conditions of society – border on each other in a moving way, and the solemn feeling of evanescence is absorbed in a most wonderful manner by the feeling of triumphant life. This successful combination imbues the entire landscape with a deep elegiac atmosphere which keeps the sensitive observer hovering between rest and movement, reflection and enjoyment, and reverberates long after we have left the garden.

The author assumes that only he who has seen the garden in the height of summer can actually appreciate its entire worth. We would like to add that only he who approaches it on a certain path will be able to fully experience its beauty. And to completely enjoy it he must be led through the newly built

castle. In a certain sense, the way from Stuttgart to Hohenheim is an allegorical history of gardening, one that provides the attentive viewer with interesting comments. In the fruit fields, the vineyards and commercial gardens along which the country road winds, the viewer witnesses the first physical beginnings of gardening, stripped of all aesthetic trimmings.

Now, however, he is met by French gardening with proud gravity under the long and steep walls of poplars, which link the free landscape with Hohenheim, eliciting expectations with its artful design. This solemn impression mounts to an almost embarrassing tension, when one wanders through the chambers of the ducal castle, which is unrivalled in its magnificence and elegance and in certainly rare fashion combines taste with profligacy. Through the splendor which here presses on the eye from all sides, and through the elaborate architecture and the furniture of the rooms, the need for simplicity reaches its highest level, and the most solemn triumph is prepared for the rural landscape which now welcomes the traveller in the so-called English village. Meanwhile the monuments of sunken splendor, on whose sad walls the peasant's peaceful hut leans, have a very peculiar effect on the heart and in these crumbling ruins it is with hidden joy that we feel avenged of art, which had exerted its oppressive rule in this splendid building next to it. The nature that we find in this English garden is no longer the nature from which we had set out. It is nature enlivened with intelligence and exalted through art, which now satisfies not merely simple man, but also man spoiled by culture, stimulating the former to thought and leading the latter back to emotion.

Whatever objection one might have against such an interpretation of the Hohenheim gardens, the creator of these gardens is worthy of gratitude that he did nothing to deny their existence and one would also have to be highly immodest if one were not also equally inclined in aesthetic matters to equate the fact (=Tat) with will, just as in moral matters will is equated with the fact. Whenever the rendition of these Hohenheim gardens is completed it will be of no less interest to the enlightened reader to discover a symbolic character painting by its unique creator who was capable – not just in his gardens – of forcing waterworks from nature in a country where hardly a spring was to be found.

Every reader with a sense of taste, who has had a close look at the garden, will subscribe to the judgment of the writer on the Seifersdorfer valley garden near Dresden, and along with Rapp will be unable to refrain from declaring as affected a sentimentalism, which hangs on trees moral aphorisms written on separate small panels and as barbaric a taste, which throws together mosques and Greek temples in a wild mix.

Translated from the German by Camilla Nielsen

