

# GARDEN PORN

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They arrive daily. They taunt me over the coffee table and in the bedroom. They tease me, they seduce me to do things that no sane man should do. They drain my bank account. I stay up late at night, caressing them in the darkness of winter. They invite my wife to join us for pleasures otherwise denied in the cold months of the year.

Get your minds out of the gutter: I mean garden catalogs and magazines. Unlike my gardening books, tidily arranged by subject on our shelves, periodicals seem to show up just to pile up. Get on a mailing list, subscribe to a gardening magazine, buy anything for the garden by Internet and they begin their relentless journey toward the mail-slot. That can lead to frustration, or it can shape one's spiritual growth as a gardener.

Even the finest publications about organic practices and earth-wise tools present photos of huge projects and gardens that are so perfect that they seem visions of the Otherworld, not of our frowsy, humidity-haunted, weedy, everyday gardens. "How *did* that clever gardener reuse a DC-3 fuselage for a greenhouse and make it look so *right*?" I might ask, or "Why can't I too make perfect paths out of broken dinner plates, oyster shells, and Legos?" Rest assured that many of these tricks are simply the clever

application of digital photography and a good eye. Were most of us to try, disaster, or at least fashion-crime, would be the result.

It's the nature of pornography to titillate our senses, usually at the lowest possible level of arousal. For garden publications, however, the stimuli are not sexual but aesthetic. Consider the perfect garden plans, photographs, and expensive "miracle products" touted to achieve them. It will be well nigh impossible for the novice to copy the result without a landscape architect, a backhoe, and a big budget. Instead, moderation and consideration of local conditions can help us grow our own better qualities even as our gardens grow. We can be depressed about how our gardens will never match those pictured, or we can use a gradual approach to emulate best practices of professionals. From one recent magazine article about garden-borders, for instance, I learned how to untame the ninety-degree angles of my herb garden. Herbs don't like straight lines, unless they are the verticality of chive-stalks; herbs grow in mounds, with runners, and by obstinately reseeding wherever they please. To work with that reality rather than against it has long been my philosophy, yet my entire herb garden is as rectilinear as a picture frame, clashing with a clang against the curving stone borders of the shade and vegetable gardens around it. For a long time, I felt that the "square within curves" looked great. Now, as the plants go dormant, it looks dowdy and amateur. There must, I thought with a pile of magazines before me, be an inexpensive and ecologically sound way to respect the earth I tend while adding some "winter appeal" to the herb garden.

By studying my "garden porn" carefully, I saw how to get closer to the Platonic ideal of a wild-looking, yet tamed herb garden. Instead of spending too much money and fighting the space I cultivate, I am now making one or two small changes to soften the

corners of my garden, as well as hatching a bigger plan to replace old treated timbers with stones salvaged from the site of a family member's newly built home. My garden's treated timbers will not go to the landfill to leach arsenic, as old CCA wood does. Instead, I'll get every bit of use possible from them to keep cords of firewood off the ground at the family's farm.

These types of projects are perfect for our mild winters, when the ground remains workable yet the plants need minimal care. I doubt that the effects will generate a beautiful photo for *Fine Gardening* magazine, but who knows? Once I figure out how to remove the wings and half-bury my DC-3, I might make the big time.

Blessings to you and your garden as you mull over books and magazines, lay your plans, and itch to have dirt under your fingernails again.