

Cottage garden neglect

Helene Pizzi

Part of the charm of a cottage garden is the relaxed friendliness of the planting scheme, or perhaps it is because of an obviously unplanned design. Often plants will suddenly appear, thanks to the birds or the wind, and sometimes in just the right spot. Charm is increased because many plants will have been gifts, many grown from cuttings, and others that have spread by themselves, and each has a story, and the garden should be one of joy and relaxation. I am for upkeep, of course, but also am a fan of *NEGLECT!*

My gardens are thousands of miles apart; one in Rome, with a Mediterranean climate so gentle in the winters that I have always (for over 50 years) had roses on the table for Christmas. The other garden is in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where the continental climate is at its violent contrasting best. Summers can be scorching, even over 100°F, and winters often are polar, with freezing temperatures and abundant snow. When, with the wind chill it feels like -30°F, I look out at my poor unprotected trees, shrubs and roses and wonder how they can survive (but they do!).

I love these contrasts. Each garden has a cottage garden feel, in other words they have evolved in a relaxed way, and have generously produced flowers, berries, fruits, and vegetables - notwithstanding that they both could be considered neglected. As I go back and forth about 3 times a year, each garden has long periods of freedom.

The Milwaukee garden gets no water, except for what Mother Nature provides. At times my hostas look sad and almost wilted, but amazingly pick up immediately after a summer shower, looking lovely in the garden's dappled shade. In Rome my hostas have all met a very sad ending. I have planted them over and over, but have never been able to protect them from being devoured by snails and slugs, and have finally given up. My gardens are poison free.

A very neglected Eglantine rose (*Rosa rubiginosa* - the Sweet Briar), with fragrant pink flowers and aromatic foliage, was planted in a terrible spot near my kitchen porch door in Milwaukee. It has thrived despite total neglect, shaded by an old oak tree, sharing nourishment with evergreen shrubs, and, what is worse, a very

windy microclimate. All year around west winds whip through. A 'Pink Grootendorst' rose grows nearby and is almost a bonsai, poor thing. The Eglantine has become 8ft in height and width and has become a haven, both summer and winter, for a collection of little birds that dart from its thorny protective branches to the bird feeder. A peregrine falcon (and its family) lives in the trees nearby and preys on the beautiful assortment of little birds. The safe-haven rose gets nourished with coffee grounds, tea bags, banana peels and such that I dare to toss around it in the winter when the snow covers my sins. Other than that it gets no care.

My Rome garden is packed with far too many plants. I am sure many of you understand that problem. What is worse is that I always feel a need for more. Seeds too are a temptation for me. I always feel the 'need' for packets of flowers and vegetables, and have enough seeds to plant gardens in an entire village. Years ago, with seeds from The CGS seed exchange, I raised a large hellebore that grew (neglected) where I had seeded it and proceeded to show off its beauty for more than a decade even though sometimes it was almost hidden by naughty weeds.

I have two red currant bushes in Milwaukee that have been growing there for 70 years, a record I would guess. These elderly 'friends' still give me enough fruit to make jelly every year. My fruit trees in Rome, never sprayed, rarely pruned, produce so many apricots, plums, avocados, pomegranates, lemons, oranges, and kumquats that I have baskets full to give away.

Weeds are much more invasive and aggressive in my Rome garden, and every time I return I shudder. Some purposely planted interesting plants, like arums, acanthus, ivy, and bamboo, have decided to take over, and need attacking almost all year around. A Turk's cap lily that once grew wild along the streams and in fields near my Milwaukee home, appeared in a flower bed; this 'weed' was a joy. It gets larger each year and lives in the spot it chose.

I like to think that each neglected garden is perfect. Each is my *hortulus aptos*...a little garden suited to its purpose. My idea of perfection is a relaxed, partially neglected garden where friends, dogs, children can feel at home and enjoy the colours, textures, fragrances, and where laughter abounds.

Helene gardens in Rome and Milwaukee.