April: England

Grapes in the Garden

I feel like the vibe in the English countryside now is "move over perennials, it's time to plant grapes." To know for sure I'll have to go there. I have a detailed picture in my head I'd like to write about gardening here, and have it go along with a trip through the English countryside. So first there are three landscape architects I'd like to discuss, that would be a nice introduction with quotes.

Russell Page, a man without his own garden that designed world famous public and private gardens around the globe in the twentieth century, was a native of England. I didn't read his entire book, only the first few chapters, called *The Education of a Gardener*. I'll let him set the scene of London and then give a mention to our main character, the grape vine:

> "A good grass lawn is not an impossibility in London, provided it is not much walked on, and it suits, I think, the mood of the town and gives an irreplaceable sense of space and ease… A vine, the grape vine or the large leaved *Vitis coignetiae*, will grow quickly to make overhead shade or garland a hard edge of a wall. Happily there are a lot of plants with bold foliage which will thrive in such gardens."[1]

It is quite interesting - Page's knowledge of plants is unparalleled. And a sense of space. And writing. But somewhere you can get lost by reading it, trying to keep a picture in your head of the landscape and the words themselves. At any rate we have *Vitis* in the first type of ornamental use, which is somewhat as simple as a difference between horticulture and viticulture, which we'll get back to later.

Traveling further into the countryside and further back in time we have Gertrude Jeckyl. Now I have to give you a sense of the fact that every time you see a pretty border of plants, especially in the British countryside, you are most likely looking at the influence of Gertrude Jeckyl from the early twentieth century. I haven't read any Gertrude Jeckyl yet, but I know she has famous works, such as *Wood and Garden* (1899). Here are some of her words on grapes:

> "But the best of all climbing or rambling plants, whether for wall or arbour or pergola, is undoubtedly the Grape-Vine. Even when trimly pruned and trained for fruit-bearing on an outer wall it is an admirable picture of leafage and fruit-cluster; but to have it in fullest beauty it must ramp at will, for it is only when the fast-growing branches are thrown out far and wide that it fairly displays its graceful vigour and the generous magnificence of its incomparable foliage."[2]

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[1] Page, Russell. *The Education of a Gardener*. First published 1962; New York Review Books Classics ed., NYRB Classics, 2007.

[2] Jekyll, Gertrude. *Wood and Garden: Notes and Thoughts, Practical and Critical, of a Working Amateur*. 1899. Project Gutenberg, 2006, www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/11941. Coincidentally even though I've only browsed this book online, it was a big influence in deciding how to narrate *Chasing the Harvest*, specifically by organizing the book into chapters for months of the year.

Maybe Russell Page took and expanded on what Gertrude Jeckyl was saying about grapes. I would not be surprised if there was a linkage in his influences. Ornamentally though grapes are quite useful. In my own experience they can be tricky to prune, which we'll talk about more in depth once this chapter finally gets to viticulture. I will hopefully be reflecting on this while pruning grapes in a vineyard at some point. We have to go back in time one more time though.

Capability Brown is the real change agent in landscape design. Having worked hard to complete a book called *The History of Landscape Design in 100 Gardens*, I did get a chance to learn of the astounding influence of this master gardener.[3] But to put things in better perspective I have selected a science author of the utmost caliper to summarize Brown's legacy. That capability Brown is in the book dedicated to explaining photosynthesis on a geological time scale tells you something about how his landscapes are intended. A Oliver Morton explains in *Eating the Sun*,

> …he was commissioned to landscape - the flattery may also have held a subjective truth. Brown saw all landscapes as good, and at the same time saw all landscapes as improvable; there was nothing finer than one which might soon be worked on, one which might soon have its potential - its capabilities, as he would put it - brought out.[4]

So it was that the English countryside was perfected several centuries ago, with small tweaks to introduce flower gardening and utilize man dominated spaces more, as one might characterize Russell Page's latter 20th century projects. Where do grapes fit in now?

As I've just written a short essay weaving together important elements of landscape design, I'd need to pivot to grapes now, and I need to read that's already out, *Vines in a Cold Climate* (2023), explaining how grapes came on the scene in a major planting period in the 21st century. I'll have to see what my 2013 *Wine Atlas* says about that tomorrow. For now let's just say that jotted around the countryside there are many vineyards appearing.

Tying in Organic

This is an outline/draft. For the next section I'd like to write about the organic movement and a little about how woofing was invented. Organic agriculture is sometimes called agroecology. Here is a slightly deep dive into how it came to be. Surprisingly little has been written about WWOOFing and its history. A book I read many years ago now, called *Organic Manifesto*[5], does not have it in its index. But *Organic Manifesto* only alludes to the history, as author Maria Rodale is a third generation organic advocate, the history actually goes back a long way, Rodale is advocating for the future.

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[3] Chisholm, Linda A. *The History of Landscape Design in 100 Gardens*. Timber Press, 2018.
[4] Morton, Oliver. *Eating the Sun: How Plants Power the Planet*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. Pg. 319.
[5] Rodale, Maria. *Organic Manifesto: How Organic Farming Can Heal Our Planet, Feed the World, and Keep Us Safe*. Rodale Books, 2010.

Originally all agriculture was of course organic. While *Organic Manifesto* poses the question why it shouldn't be again, that debate is furthered in *Tomorrow's Table*[6], comparing organic with conventional agriculture. Suffice to say now there are two distinct types of farming in the world - the old way (with some new tricks) and the decidedly new way, with of course all options on the table.

To get to the point, the old way is essentially composting, and this process was almost lost at the advent of conventional agriculture, but stewards like Maria Rodale's grandfather were able to preserve the integrity of farming without chemicals and man-made inputs, as conventional agriculture can be described. It's actually not about composting per se, although that was a big idea early on, but that is symbolic of the holistic and regenerative approach that organic agriculture takes.

To get to the point I am going to have to do a deep dive into some literature. Or rather that was the point of a class assignment I had to do once - to read a book about the old ways of farming and in doing so somehow preserve that knowledge. In a course I had at Rutgers University this was a semester project. It's not a bad idea as an assignment. As I had read some of the books on the list of potentials though, oddly enough my professor suggested to me something and I went by his recommendation.

And that's what I grew up doing, was not reading F.H. King or Sir Albert Howard but Maria Rodale and books from Rodale Press, that publishes such nonfiction classics as *Square Foot Gardening*, *Mindfulness*, *Mycophilia*, and more than a few others. Actually I hope this book gets published on Rodale Press. So now I have to read those books and dissect them a little bit and explain composting.

But does organic agriculture need to go that route? Will I be using a composting toilet on my trip? They do use them all over the world, maybe not for food, but increasingly for food I'd imagine. This is a question to ponder, and if I do use a composting toilet to insert somewhere in the book. So far I have not used one, only read about them. And as far as animal composting I am not an expert, just in loose orbit with a friend that has that as part of his job working on an organic farm. I myself was a kitchen scrap worm composter for a while.

In my experience we composting weeds and kitchen scraps is not a big enough operation to warrant an essay. Dog and cat waste are obviously not good, but horses and livestock of course are somehow. That is after the proper conditions have been met. I need to read these old school ways of doing things with livestock or at least experience it firsthand to write about. Plants - easy. Animal manure, gotta have the pasteurization that happens in a compost pile. That's called the Indore Method, why it's capitalized is anyone's guess.

As if waking up from a dream, I need to be talking about pruning grapes. It's probably time to head onto the next subject. But the WWOOFing I didn't discuss is just that, the shadow economy of workers volunteering. Nothing special. What's cool is the part of history maybe, of being a woofer.

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[6] Ronald, Pamela C., and Raoul W. Adamchak. *Tomorrow's Table: Organic Farming, Genetics, and the Future of Food*. Updated ed., Oxford University Press, 2018.

Pruning notes to follow…