

# Ecological Design

GARDEN REVOLUTION: HOW OUR LANDSCAPES CAN BE A SOURCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

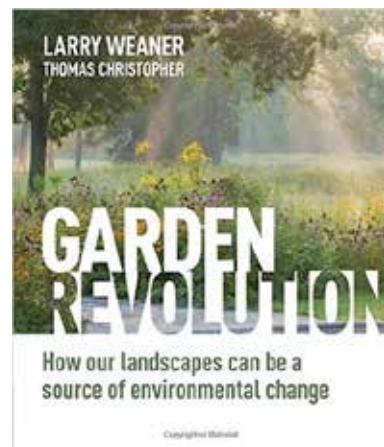
BY LARRY WEANER AND THOMAS CHRISTOPHER

REVIEW BY JUDY NAUSEEF, FAPLD

**G**arden Revolution, by Larry Weaner and Thomas Christopher, is more than a discussion of the state of traditional garden design and the need to understand the ecological context of our sites before imposing an aesthetic on them. It is a handbook for “studying how plants and wildlife associate in a natural state and basing our gardening on that.” The authors explain their philosophy well and

share an amazing amount of knowledge accumulated by both throughout years of planning, implementing, and observing landscapes.

In the introduction Weaner writes, “My experiences have taught me that this change of behavior brings not only better results—a healthier, more dynamic landscape—but also one that demands far fewer inputs.” (The prologue, written by Christopher, explains his contribution and the reason why the book is written in Weaner’s voice.) Weaner



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er writes that the primary reason for creating the book is that he “believes we can create landscapes that are easier to manage, more ecologically beneficial, and reflective of the beautiful plant compositions of our respective regions only if we expand our studies beyond the confines of traditional garden design.

“I learned that a traditional garden is like a beautiful car with no engine,” Weaner continues. “The body is sleek and the stereo sounds great, but the owner will always ➡➡

This Pennsylvania estate provided Larry Weaner an opportunity to work on a truly large scale. The plan included more than 3 acres of native gardens and 30 acres of seeded meadow. The pool was designed as a path leading from the gardens to the wild landscape.

PHOTO CREDIT: ROB CARDILLO



“ Weaner prefers to use native plants to connect with the local ecosystem. ”



need to push it up the hills with bags of fertilizer, weeding forks, and watering wands.” If you think about it, applying fertilizers and pesticides and irrigating to create an unnatural environment to coax plants to grow makes little sense. He writes that the site is your partner. This is something we should always have been observing. We should not have to learn this now. We definitely need a garden revolution, and the authors show that there are many ways to get started.

While designing, Weaner prefers to use native plants to connect with the local ecosystem and provide habitat for wildlife, but does not rule out the use of non-invasive exotics, saying a successful plant not only survives but proliferates within a habitat or ecosystem. If we are familiar with the plants we use, we can plan for this and avoid ending up with a monoculture. Weaner relays how, while designing, he enriches and diversifies the on-site plant communities, taking the natural growth as his guide. Within this design philosophy, planning for succession is a necessity and opportunity.

I love the thought that, during succession, indigenous species will appear. However, I know that on the disturbed soils I most frequently plant there is no seed bank of rightful past inhabitants. In my experience, there are sites that begin in such degraded conditions that there are not enough naturally occurring resources to evolve into well-balanced, improv-

**This may be a small meadow, but it's still too big to hand weed like a garden. Consequently, habitats and ecological processes must be considered when designing, planting, and managing it.**

ing ecosystems without the designer's continued influence. These sites are often lots with homes surrounded by turfgrass and few pollinators in sight. It takes quite a bit of ingenuity to apply ecological design to ➡

PHOTO CREDIT: ROB CARDILLO





“Gardens aren't meant to remain the same ... they should evolve over time.”

these types of projects, but Weaner provides a solution to this problem. “One answer is to introduce the element of time by using a design approach based on ecological processes to introduce and manage plant combinations that evolve and change, as plant communities do in nature.”

The chapter titled “The Garden Ecologist’s Primer” is the most helpful in explaining a program for the creation of an ecologically functional system, showing how we can have beautiful spaces and healthy gardens with new combinations that will evolve over time. The rewards to gardening in a more ecologically informed style are decreased maintenance, benefits to the local ecosystem and habitat, and a landscape that continues to surprise us with changing beauty.

**Creating this landscape was like initiating a dance with the site. Weaner made a move—cutting existing growth in one place but not another—and the site responded, predictably but also with thrilling serendipity.**

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KAREN BUSSOLINI

Vignettes about past experiences and specific projects, break up the long stretches of practical knowledge, which helps the reader to absorb the massive amount of information contained in the book. Most of the projects shown in the book are larger properties, with very different parameters than those in which many of us design. In reality, it is the accumulation of many small projects (backyards, ditches) across the country that will make a difference. It is up to us to interpret the information for our (usually) smaller sites. The many photographs give the book a coffee-table feel, which actually is a good thing, as it is hard to read in a single sitting. I would suggest that

you read a chapter and then practice applying to your designs what you have learned before going back to learn more, just as Weaner has done throughout his years of creating the landscapes highlighted in the book.

The revolutionary path of Weaner’s work is something we should all consider when designing our gardens. I particularly like the point that gardens are not meant to remain the same as they appear on the day they are planted, but should evolve over time. We need to take an honest look at what we are contemplating or have already completed and ask if we have limited the promise of the site and plants by attempting to preserve a garden as originally conceived. Can we let the landscape evolve into the healthy ecosystem it is meant to be?



**Waves of contrasting textures and hues define this wild garden.**

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ROB CARDILLO

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