

## **The Soulful Garden: Deepening the Roots of Place**

By Christopher Forrest McDowell, Ph.D.  
& Tricia Clark-McDowell

A sense of place is a deeply dignifying component of life — for human, animal, and plant alike. Increasingly, however, humans are becoming more and more nomadic, with tens of millions literally orphaned each day from their roots of place. The causes are many: changes in work, family break-up, illness, crime, war, economic poverty, drought and natural disasters, or destruction of local natural habitat. The situation for the natural environment is no better, as rich, diverse, and often sacred geography is plundered for human resources. Years ago we coined a word — *earthanasia* — to describe the relentless killing off of this planet's vital natural resources, and to remind us that ultimately, both the death of nature and cultural history create a sense of placelessness.

For over twenty years our work has been exclusively to assist people in reconnecting with the sanctuary of place. Our work is both philosophical and practical, helping people with a way of viewing life and living it with gratitude. Repeatedly we have witnessed how people's relationship to their garden, yard, home, even a room has been significantly changed and empowered by elevating their perception of such everyday places to one of reverence and respect. This calls for both an inner, soulful devotion, and an outer intent to steward such places as if they were sacred and worthy of our heartfelt efforts.

The word steward itself means “keeper of the place,” and this should be enough to guide our efforts. But perhaps more than anything else, the places we keep should reflect a sustained devotion to peace. If we can create peace-filled gardens, yards, homes, rooms, among other such places, we all will have created little islands of grace throughout the world — places that are physically and psychologically safe for all beings. Such places, as sanctuaries or refuges for the world-weary, wounded, or contemplative spirit, can help restore and center our daily lives, allowing peace to root and regenerate within our soul.

### **A Place for the Soul**

We suffer by ignoring our sense of spirit. We risk shallowness when we engage in superficial levels of pleasure, desire, consumerism, and media-bites of knowledge everyday. Our life deepens when we listen to the higher (or deeper) needs of the soul, and this almost always means a connection to a special place. For example, the first sign of peace and hope returning to Sarajevo at the end of the recent war in Bosnia, was women going outside and planting their gardens — a powerful demonstration of rootedness to a plot of earth in one's front yard.

A place for the soul acknowledges the need and search for Wonder, Healing, and Celebration in our lives. A sustained sense of wonder in a place evokes these qualities: childlikeness, nonjudgment, innocence, the beginner's mind, present-moment, spontaneity, curiosity, and gratitude. The soul's need for physical, mental and spiritual healing is found in places that are soothing, enfolding, calming, energizing, regenerating. A peaceful setting, for example, encourages a shifting of identity, convalescence, hope, faith, or even surrender into the wound or shadow side. Celebration becomes soulful and therapeutic because it brings about an opening of the heart, the finding of reasons to be happy, intimacy with nature, the ability to respond to simple beauty, appreciation of small victories, the opportunity to validate or affirm one's love for something, expanding prosperity, and an ability to flow within both light and dark moods.

When a place, such as one's garden or home, becomes charged with the steward's reverent intent, it most likely will meet the soul's need for wonder, healing, and celebration. Such places become sacred enclosures (*temenos*) and embrace the spirit of the place (*animus mundi*). They withstand hardship and defeat, and deepen with energy over time. The beauty is that each of us can create a bond

to a place both personally and uniquely, thereby weaving a vast tapestry of benign consciousness across the earth.

## **The Soulful Garden**

As places go, the garden perhaps has the most archetypal value to the soul's connection to the physical realm. Almost every culture has a creation myth that interfaces humans with the natural realm. But the garden also depicts the most basic human desire to use and manipulate nature, for better or worse. The Garden Industry today is the single largest and most economically stable recreation industry in society. But for the most part it is militaristic in intent and devoid of soul. Unfortunately, many of us have been taught that there are enemies and pests afoot in our garden needing great control, lest our basic need for human dominance and survival be questioned. Yet, a garden is more than a place for humans or to practice earthanasia. It is a place for co-creation and partnership between numerous species (humans being just one) and natural forces, a collective of interrelated wills and spirits passing together through the seasons.

A garden is a powerful starting point for practicing compassionate earthkeeping. It is an opportunity to get in touch with what we call The Spirit of the Place. A sense of spirit is evoked when we envision the potential of our garden to satisfy our soul's need for wonder, healing, and celebration. Our vision suggests a sustained devotion to the garden, and our demonstration of gratitude for the opportunity to garden. With our repeated partnership, the garden becomes infused with a unique life force, a personality or persona. As a sanctuary, it emits its characteristic qualities to visitors, who themselves get in touch with their own soul's need for wonder, healing, and celebration.

A garden also attunes us to what we call The Geography of Place. Here we become aware of the practical side of our stewardship connection to place: attuning to the special qualities, smells, topography, lighting, mood, magic, animals, and history of the landscape. As we deepen in our soulful connection to place, we should desire to know its history and our role in furthering the legacy of the soil and natural habitat. Each season we garden, we can choose to add to our garden's history of peace instead of control or conflict. We can learn how to read time other than by a clock, and how to be resourceful without always consuming. We can learn more about our physical capabilities, moods, and attitudes. We will face self-esteem issues and our successes and failures. All this because of our commitment to a small plot of geography.

A garden, by the very quality of its separateness from larger or wilder nature, and because it is enclosed, almost always gets us in touch with what we call The Aesthetics of Place. We may ask ourselves, "Is this the type of place where I want to spend my time or afternoons?" When we seek sanctuary in our garden as a desirable refuge within the world, we are dealing with a higher motive for gardening than mere output or beauty. The magnetism of a place to be visited, worked, or played in is a measure of its attractiveness to the soul. The Soulful Garden answers these three questions: Does it have aesthetic appeal? Does it touch my soul? As a natural habitat, does it embrace the needs of a diversity of wildlife and vegetation?

As longtime gardeners committed to seeing our garden as a sanctuary for the soul and nature, we have created at least seven design elements that empower our stewardship (as detailed in our book, *The Sanctuary Garden*, Fireside Books, 1998). These include: creating an enfolding entrance, celebrating water, utilizing the psychological effects of color and lighting, providing sitting features, honoring natural features such as wood, rocks, and wind, enchanting with secular and/or sacred garden art and altars, and providing habitat for wildlife.

These design elements have universal and uniquely bioregional appeal. They also serve as the foundation on which to create soulful gardens that evoke wonder, healing, and celebration. Such

gardens can be said to be both physical and psychological. Let us briefly share how a few people are doing this with their gardens.

## **A Peace Garden**

As we have suggested, perhaps the most desirable yet elusive of all human needs is that of peace. But to feel peace within, we often need to feel a sense of peace without. This may well translate into the creation and nurturing of a deep sense of place or sacred space. Even while creating such a space involves a very personal and inward exploration of the avenues and expressions of peace as we feel it in our own life, subsequently we are asked to allow that vision to take a physical form within our home or garden. Our sincere intentions will lead the way.

A peace garden clearly is not about production or perfection — both have been overrated in gardens today. Rather, it speaks to the conscious act and attitudinal shift of both letting go and slowing down, difficult though that may be at times. While we may struggle for years in our efforts to unravel, strand by strand, the complex web of programmed thinking and rigid cultural standards that block our attainment of inner peace, simply sitting for a time in a beautiful place can quickly refresh our soul. This offers one important clue as to what we're aiming for: a place that encourages us to be very still.

So what does a peace garden look like? The answer, of course, lies in the heart of its creator. Yet there are certain key features that we may want to consider, touchstones if you will. A comfortable, private, and quiet place to sit away from distractions and out of view of others; gentle water sounds, if desired, to screen out noise and soothe the weary soul; lovely flowers in a soft, pastel palette to quiet the busy mind; sweet fragrances; an inspiring piece of garden art. One's deepest intuition comes into play here as the vision unfolds.

The concept of peace to Laura and Jon, for example, has meant creating a sanctuary for wildlife and a variety of adopted domestic animals, as well as for humans. Thus they felt the need for leaving much of their forty acres undisturbed, allowing blackberries, brush, and wild woods to remain with only an unobtrusive path here and there for passing through. Closer to their house, easily viewed from their back windows and deck, they have created a wonderful peace garden. Blue flowers, silver foliage, and graceful ornamental grasses have a serene and quieting effect, with occasional areas of white and yellow to lift the spirits. Homemade trellises give stature to the garden and supply popular perches for birds, while wooden "guardians" add whimsy and an air of protection. Here the visitor is magnetically drawn, free to sit undisturbed or to have a good talk with a dear one, surrounded by the gentle healing energies of both wild and thoughtfully cultivated nature. One can find joy in such a place knowing that the animals are being well cared for in this graceful setting that simply gets better with time. And more recently, since Laura learned that she has lung cancer, the Peace garden has become her place of choice to seek courage and solace within.

Jacky's peace garden was developed off the patio of her urban backyard in Wisconsin with two purposes in mind: welcoming wildlife and sitting quietly in contemplation of the beauty of nature. Under the gracious canopy of large oaks and maples, where squirrels play, she has created a pond and waterfall lined with shade-loving plants. The many hours she spent hauling rocks, digging, and planting there have been rewarded many times over by her enjoyment of sitting in appreciation of the breezes in the trees, the soothing water sounds, and the lovely birds that bathe in the pond.

In the sunnier areas, lilacs thrive and brightly flowering herbs and perennials such as echinacea, iris, candytuft, and golden coneflower surround various bird houses and feeders on poles. Most recently, Jacky has added a small stream that meanders through the lush grass into the pond. It's a simple, serene setting that continues to evolve gracefully without getting out of hand in its ambitiousness. There must always remain time for writing, contemplation, and the observation of life unfolding moment by moment, day into night.

## **The Healing Garden**

The Healing Garden addresses the constant need to regenerate the bodymindspirit and to re-establish personal wellness. Be it physical illness or recovery, a sense of psychological woundedness or trauma, or even a depression of the spirit, envisioning our garden as a potential healing haven is as powerful for the soul as is our need for peace. Often, as the gardener is being healed, the land is being healed as well.

Pat had never been interested in gardening until, in her early sixties, her husband divorced her and moved away. Devastated, yet unwilling to give up, she turned to nature to rebuild her sense of trust and hope. Long walks on the beach yielded countless treasures of driftwood, rocks, and shells. These became the inspiration and framework for ever-expanding flower beds, a delicate shade garden, and a raised bed for vegetables lined with shells (with a driftwood pea trellis). Finally, a small sitting area was created that could accommodate Pat and the new friends that now began to come into her life as Pat's joy and enthusiasm returned. Her modest, coastal garden healed her as perhaps nothing else could have, not by offering her an expensive therapist or the latest self-help book to read, but by allowing her soul room to mourn her loss and reframe a life of beauty and self-confidence, simplicity and purpose.

There are those who feel a deep sense of woundedness from the destruction of the forests and watersheds throughout this country and the world. They may begin by planting and stewarding one or more trees, in their own yard or elsewhere, and/or creating a water feature in their backyard that attracts wildlife. Even a one tree garden shading a well used bench can be highly therapeutic. Similarly, those healing from abusive relationships or stressful work environments may find release and renewal through a preoccupation with flowers, plants, soil, or even types of garden themes.

The Jhoti Marga Sanctuary was created through our Cortesia Sanctuary Project to provide the safe space that Mia and her husband felt lacking in their fast paced life in Washington D.C, where they all but worked themselves to death. On a mere one tenth of an acre, on the crest of a hill in a small Southern Oregon community, they created a meditation garden by reclaiming a large abandoned rock garden behind the house. They treasure the hours of peace and quiet they have enjoyed there, the perfect antidote to "the ugliness that has been created in our social structure and the illness and intense negativity of our recent urban lifestyle".

Mia and Don hold group meditations now in their renovated 1911 style home and continue to develop the remainder of their property to complement the large old trees and the purpose of the home itself. "All the members of our group find this to be a place of joy, love, and peace," say Mia reflectively. "I often spend the entire day in silence, whether in contemplation or working the soil in the garden, and this wonderful place always feeds my soul."

## **The Exuberant Garden**

There is another type of garden whose theme is often repeated. We like to call it the Exuberant Garden. Of all the types of gardens we have seen in our travels, the exuberant garden, always delightful to encounter, is perhaps the most common. And not surprisingly, perhaps, the personal life stories of the creators of these gardens are more often than not full of pain and suffering, even tragedy. But always, there is the need to find the joy in life in spite of all its challenges, and so the resilient human spirit rises to the challenge.

Jann had long suffered from chronic fatigue syndrome and a host of related conditions. As there were many days when she could barely get out of bed, working a normal job became more and more challenging. When, in desperation, Jann suddenly left the Bay area for a small town in the Northwest, buying a run-down little house with a gravel front yard and no back yard, something deep within her began to awaken. The clean air and the quiet began to revive her spirit and her weary body roused itself somehow to transform this pipsqueak yard into a place more fitting to her new sense of goodness. The

gravel was painstakingly replaced with rich soil and a bevy of the brightest flowers you could ever hope to see was lovingly planted into every nook and cranny. The flowers spilled over the quaint picket fence and around stumps and planters and out into the street. Passersby were captivated.

Eventually Jann painted her house lavender and put up purple and white striped awnings to match her ever-expanding flowers. And suddenly the rest of the neighborhood began to wake up too. If she could do it, why couldn't they? Seeds, dahlia bulbs and other perennials were divided and shared freely. Piles of compost were made or brought in for any to use. Watering responsibilities were passed back and forth as vacations came and went. Clearly, Jann transformed her neighborhood and the people in it. At the same time, her exuberant spirit was freed from its cage of depression. When her symptoms begin to return from time to time, she rests up, but never so long that she forgets what really is the source of her energy and zest for life.

There are other types of soulful gardens too, which space does not permit us to cover, all beautifully reflective of the creativity and aspiration inherent in the human spirit. Over and over, we have been deeply touched by the power of such places, however humble or small, to heal and enliven their keepers, restoring their innocence, trust, and their deeper sense of purpose. For those, and there are many, to whom the concept of home or a sense of place is vague or non-existent, we can only wish for them a bit of earth somewhere into which they can sink their hands and their wounded heart. Through the timeless act of tilling and planting, weeding and watering, the roots of place are reborn, the soil and the soul entwine and become fertile, and the heart finds a glorious reason to celebrate once again the miracle of life.

Copyright © 2007 by Christopher Forrest McDowell, Ph.D.

Excerpts from forthcoming book: *Islands of Grace: Creating Sanctuary in Daily Life*. By Dr. Christopher Forrest McDowell and Tricia Clark-McDowell