

Plants don't have prejudices, gardening is for all

Do your plants signal what kind of person you are?

Gardening more than provides people with food, fiber, medicine, shelter and beauty; woven throughout the most basic acts of finding and growing plants is an undercurrent of communities, both subtle and overt, with their own cultures and world views.

Yet if you step outside the highly-personal confines of your own garden you might discover that, in spite of societal constraints, other gardeners are looking for nonjudgmental ways to share with you.

Four of the most basic garden approaches and their often-overlapping communities are folks who grow for subsistence, scientific-interest horticulturists, preening fashionistas, and amateurs who garden simply for the love of it.

What they have in common are plants, which are nonjudgmental. They don't care about education, income, who your mama 'n them are, what you believe, who you love, or whether or not you vote. Freed from artificial human constructs, they simply want a good place to grow that meets their minimum needs. It's we

who make them more or less socially acceptable.

Which brings me to my main point, that for too long gardeners have held up some plants as okay while sneering that others are grown only by "certain people." You know what I mean: Country people. Old ladies. Various ethnicities. Anything that can be used to peg people by the style of their garden or the plants they grow.

What got me started on this was a deep discussion with Jenks Farmer, a dear friend in South Carolina who is working on a new book about "outsider" gardeners. He's long struggled to reconcile his horticultural training with his country gardening upbringing and find ways to bring marginalized gardeners and those who toil physically in the gardens of others, usually without recognition, into the mainstream. The ones who go home and garden just for themselves in ways they like, without regard for what others think.

I call them determined independent gardeners, or just DIGrs, They're not rebellious, they're escaping - trying to provide for themselves physically, mentally, emo-



FELDER RUSHING



Po'folk plants have social connections.

tionally and even spiritually.

I remember clearly how irked my horticulturist great-grandmother became when a local garden center owner sniffed about her wildflowers and native azaleas, which weren't fashionable with

folks clamoring for new varieties of petunias and azaleas. And yet she herself criticized her country bumpkin daughter-in-law - my grandmother - who proudly displayed a concrete chicken in a front-yard circle of striped

monkey grass.

Sadly, neither wanted to grow common folk plants such as cannas, orange day-lilies, white iris, milk-and-wine crinum, purple cane, elephant ears, or castor bean, because they were other folks' plants.

These plants, of course, are typically easy to grow, simple to propagate and share, and usually showy in an everyday gaudy sense - the glass bottle trees of the plant world, what I call poor man's Chihuly art glass.

It wasn't exactly racist, because it applied to everyone. It was more attempting to degrade the horticultural value of commonly-shared plants and objects that lacked a sense of cultural finesse. They were guilty of a class thing, of assigning status to plants and accessories.

Funny, though, how gardeners of all stripes are lightening up on this now. Those once-derided old cemetery-tough plants are now being displayed in the finest botanical gardens. And gardeners embracing them are finding unexpected social connections in the process, discovering that, inside, all plants have green sap.

To borrow a phrase from Jenks, they are looking for a chance to "push back against the azalea wall." Sharing plants without prejudice is a good way to open the dialog, start the discussions.

Felder Rushing is a Mississippi author, columnist, and host of the "Gestalt Gardener" on MPB Think Radio. Email gardening questions to rushingfelder@yahoo.com.



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