

A TRIO FOR GARDENERS

I. Zoologist John Alcock, in *In a Desert Garden: Love and Death Among the Insects* (186 pp, WW Norton, 1997) describes how he transformed his Phoenix yard from Bermuda grass and exotic ornamentals to a tiny replica of Arizona desert, its naturalness modified only by a few generous citrus trees and a vegetable garden. Alcock loved his vegetables enough to make them exceptions to his yard's "native and local" criterion. He planted native flora not for naturalness' sake, or to reinforce his reputation as neighborhood eccentric, but to attract bugs – bugs to entertain him through the long, brutal summers. The bugs come, and he describes their sex lives, their survival strategies, their aggression, their journeys, their metamorphoses – earwigs and whiteflies, bees and Assassin bugs, grasshoppers and aphids – a bestiary of visitors to his private patch of desert, each with its story, its own puzzle. Male wild bees sleep clustered on brittlebush plants, night after night. Butterfly larvae imitate bird dung. Mayflies swarm, far from water. Milkweed bugs fly in from Mexico. Aphids (all females) reproduce parthenogenically every ten days, some of them sacrificing themselves for the species. He's aware of the great city roaring and flashing around him, of the real desert's disappearance under housing tracts – and he prefers his patch, with its bugs, and their fascinating stories. He wants us to know them, before we reach for the Raid. "Good company, one and all," he calls them.

II. William Bryant Logan, in *Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth* (202 pp, WW Norton, 1995) begins with a picture of a “forest” growing out of junk in the bed of an abandoned pickup – because “soil is not a pile of dirt. It is a transformer, a body that organizes raw materials into tissues that become the mother to all organic life.” Logan ranges from vast interstellar spaces and reaches of time, to the tiniest microorganisms. He surveys what relates, belongs to, or comes from Earth’s “skin” – its soils, rocks, pottery clays, corpses, painters’ oils, poisons, holes, inhabitants, antibiotics, poetries, dusts, workers, managers, destroyers, plants, chemistries, magnetic fields, winds, glaciers, volcanoes. We know little about dirt, except that it’s unearthly, “the detritus of ruined stars.” The book is filled with pithy sayings: “This is what the soil teaches: if you want to be remembered, give yourself away.” Or, “Soil is all of the Earth that is truly ours.” And Logan has attitude. “One motive for protecting the soil is the certainty that it is fragile.” Or, “I propose a new national symbol: not Smokey the Bear or an eagle but a colonist planting an apple tree over the old outhouse hole.” This slim book is to be read and re-read, perhaps to answer such questions as, “What is grosser? The entombment of a grub in a cocoon, or the swelling of a child in the mother’s womb?” Or to grapple with, “The soil, in its darkness, is under the special protection of the devil.”

III. Part adventure story, part reference library, David Stuart's *The Plants That Shaped Our Gardens* (208pp, Harvard U. Press, 2002) is for every gardener who's wondered about his plants' provenance. Stuart follows shifts in garden design, from early formal sterility, through riotous overindulgence, to return to the natural, and tells globe-trotting collectors' stories, whose skill and daring made each style possible – pirates, doctors, missionaries, soldiers, spies, all botanists, and at least one “botanomaniac.” “It is worth remembering, when looking at some charming and innocent saxifrage or androsace nestling in its scree, that it probably cost some blood-spattered collector dear.” For 500 years plants flew from the Orient, the Americas, the Indies, Africa, alpine meadows, at first to Europe and later to gardens worldwide. Plant collection helped the first woman circumnavigate the globe; the Empress Josephine had the first huge rose garden. Eighteen months after California's Dawn Redwood was discovered, saplings of these potentially huge trees were being planted all across England. Save and plant seed from your garden: you might create a wonder, Stuart says. “Each seedling is a part of the glory and abundance of the world.” Among the book's wonderful illustrations is a photo of Frank Meyer, after a day of collecting in Shansi, China, in 1908, the year my mother was born there to missionary parents. Now whenever I taste the juice of the generous Meyer lemon growing in my yard, I will feel connected to all those explorers who gave us the plants that shaped our gardens.