

SECOND NATURE

If you pick up Michael Pollan's *Second Nature*: a gardener's education (304pp, Dell Publishing, 1991) hoping to learn how he grew the perfect tomato or the perfect Peace rose, you'll be disappointed. *Second Nature* is a philosophical workout in a direct line with Thoreau's *Walden*, and often as playful and contentious. It's one man's view of what the relations between culture and nature should be, in these United States, here and now.

Leaving nature to regulate itself, as in wilderness areas, Pollan says, will no longer work. Humans have already long since put their stamp on wilderness – through fire, introducing alien species, development, pollution, etc. Then, too, which wilderness do we mean – pre-European, pre-Native American, or pre-glaciation? Each will differ profoundly from the others.

The fact is, there's nothing wild on the planet that hasn't been shaped or somehow affected by humans. So the culture-wilderness dichotomy still so dear to us – wetlands vs. condos! – will have to go. We must learn to live in nature without damaging her, and the best place for learning that is in gardens.

Renovating an old Connecticut farm, Pollan starts out as a true believer in the nature/culture opposition, and he's on nature's side: there will be no fences (they alienate) and no serious attempts to control weeds, groundhogs, or deer.

But he soon learns that the forest is normal and his garden a vacuum waiting to be filled. All nature works to erase his presence on the earth. So he comes to accept fences and pest control. He can imitate nature, and learn

from culture to observe, remember, profit from mistakes, share experiences and restrain himself.

He suggests we replace the wilderness ethic – humans vs. nature – with a garden ethic – humans in nature. The latter would give local, not universal answers, accept contingencies, be frankly anthropocentric, express a broad and enlightened self interest, and be realistic, not romantic about nature. The gardener has a legitimate quarrel with an indifferent nature, but one he'll never win outright. The question is, how to get what he wants while nature gets what she wants?

Gardens embody both reality and representation, past and present. They're gestures against both convention and wilderness. Ordering seeds from all over the world, Pollan becomes a vector of DNA transfer, with his polyglot garden joining far flung places and times.

We can only see the earth, Pollan argues, through our own needs and desires. He depicts lawns as unstoppable continental rivers, democratic to neighbors but totalitarian to nature, as rejective as asphalt. Lawns are our church, mowing our sacrament. Real gardens secede from the national lawn.

Composting, by giving back to the earth, makes gardening an act of redemption. Compost is “moral drama of a high order.” “If fertility has a perfume, this is it.”

Weeds, he says, are very much human adapted, growing where we do, and scarcely anywhere else, brought here by the Puritans as surely as desirable crops were. They're “ambulance chasers, carpet baggers, confidence men.” “Weeds are not the Other. Weeds are us.”

Trees are promises to posterity, firewood, gods, weeds, masts, barrel staves, syrup, property lines. They can be lungs, taking in CO₂ and breathing out oxygen, or canaries, warning us of poisoned air.

Ecology itself is a metaphor, deeply indebted to chance. So let us consciously involve ourselves: all wild landscapes, even a Yellowstone, need to be gardened now.

Finally, paths. In gardens we can learn about paths out of nature and into culture, and the single path Pollan mows through a wild field in front of his house, somehow makes all the difference. I'm here, he says, thanks to my Toro.