

The Tao of Gardening with Neighbors in Mind

by John Marsh

People have their eyes on my neighborhood: the city, real estate developers, the gentry, and the Coconut Grove contingent. As a consequence, I have a sidewalk I didn't want and an easement planted with cardboard palms. The neighbor across the street asked if he could – how could I say no? And then, one morning, I woke to find that devas had edged my new sidewalk, along with the old.

Before long, my next-door neighbor put up a chain link fence, crowned it with bougainvillea, and began complaining about my yard. The lantana between our houses was rampant. It made her yard-man itch. She tried to contain it with a fence that was the perfect trellis for Virginia creeper, which for several seasons had covered the side of my house but which she thought looked trashy. And

my brush pile might harbor rats, which in truth I like to see on occasion as they provide entertainment for the dogs.

Years passed. One beautiful Saturday afternoon, I found myself yelling at the next-door neighbor (owner of the chain link fence). We had been quarreling for some time about my yard. I didn't want to touch my trees because I had seen pileated woodpeckers feasting and flickers nesting. But the tree spirits were restless, and crashing green limbs had twice taken out my neighbor's telephone line. Meanwhile, her dogs dug under our fence to visit our dogs. The dogs had better sense than we did.

In the city, a gardening enthusiast is likely to have a bizarre desire for a dooryard cottage garden or a Versailles with cement cupids. The Coconut Grove proponents in my neighborhood have created jungle enclaves of exotic and ridiculous lushness. I often pass the home of an old woman who fastens ribbons, tinsel, and plastic flowers

to her real plants. Imagine gold bows and red poinsettias on a chenille plant – God love her. One fool favors a wild and woolly flock of drought-loving wildflowers, including annual blanket flower which flowers and spreads profusely. The original seeds came from the cemetery where my great-grandfather and great-grandmother are buried. Now the blanket flower is sprouting in the gutter down the block and I wonder if it is a Mexican exotic that



Native and exotic people and plants: the author, John Marsh (seated on the ground, in the center), surrounded by his neighbors.

arrived after 1512, and I worry that it may somehow kill off something truly native by genetic pollution or something that only a scientist can understand.

But even I know that the lantana which has so long irritated my neighbor has got to go. Those seeds – the birds – the spread. Besides, when I finally dig it up, I will have more time to massacre sabal palms growing too close to the house or blocking a view.

The only other weeds that concern me are the vicious native sandspurs which I eradicate everywhere encountered, especially at the beach. But I wonder if sandspurs in bare feet are somehow neces-

sary to Gaia, like the Spanish needles that used to get on my neighbor's poodle, before being destroyed with shovel and mulch (the Spanish needles, not the poodle).

It took me far too long, but I finally learned that the city environment is compromise based on cooperation and consensus. Is the block part of a leafy avenue? Are easements mostly mowed or mulched? What do neighbors want? The easiest answer is also the most fundamental. What city dwellers want is community – people in harmony.

Some nature lovers, and we know who we are, need to be reminded that people are like plants. They must be tended and appreciated. In my neighborhood, some, like myself, are natives. Nearby

Some nature lovers need to be reminded that people are like plants – they must be tended and appreciated.

live rare hybrid Cuban crackers and cracker Cubans, many of whom are city leaders. Others are from “up north.” These, in particular, I must stop thinking of as weeds.

Who are the weeds in my neighborhood? Not the charming and persecuted Coconut Grovers, or the hard-working and hospitable blue-collar families, or the neighborhood association members who have all those meetings, or the power trippers we need to make things happen. But when the mayor's minions are ordered to cite every code violation they can find, including my fern bed, a week of paranoia may follow. And what if your neighbors classify as vermin not only rats and roaches, but also garter snakes, hunting spiders, and raccoons? Am I the weed?

The solution is simple, if not easy. Get acquainted with your neighbors. Share knowledge. And share feelings. For to be completely creative is to be brave, which is to be open. Talk about pipe dreams, even at a meeting. And be ready to act. For example, I told the neighbor who objected to pokeweed that I would dig it up if the birds recycled the berries on his car. This seemed to satisfy.

When other people become the focus of gardening, mighty rewards ensue. My neighbors behind preserve for me a glimpse of the river, because we talk and we visit. All the neighbors know each other better now, through observation, speculation, and conversation.

Love thy neighbor.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: John Marsh has been a member of the Suncoast Chapter of FNPS since 1989. John is a writer and editor with over 30 years of professional communications experience on projects ranging from advertising to educational films. He was a principal contributor to the Suncoast Chapter's well-known and wonderful book: *THE RIGHT PLANTS FOR DRY PLACES*. Visit John at <http://home.earthlink.net/~marshco>