

FEATURE

The Aesthetics of Horticulture: Neatness as a Form of Care

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Abstract. Perceived care of the landscape is a primary determinant of landscape attractiveness. Care is typically recognized in the neatness of a landscape: evenness of turf or crop color, placement of ornamental plants, use of fences and borders, and freedom from weeds or litter. However, care may also be expressed in landscapes that do not look neat. For instance, sites where native or drought-tolerant grasses are used, where understory dominates the forest, where ditches or lawns are not mown, where wetland plants appear—all may demonstrate ecological care but not look neat. In the agricultural landscape, minimum tillage and Conservation Reserve parcels exhibit this same “messy” care. Despite the dominance of neatness as a form of the care aesthetic, “messy” landscapes look attractive if people know the ecological function of what they are seeing, or if the landscape context indicates that the messy look is intentional. In horticulture, at both the production and design levels, the aesthetic of care can be interpreted beyond neatness to include the ecological function of the landscape.

HORTICULTURE AND THE AESTHETIC OF CARE

The expression of care is a powerful motive for people managing the landscape—from the scale of cultivated fields stretching to the horizon to that of the most intimate city garden. People see beauty in well-kept landscapes, and tend their own fields, gardens, and yards to show that they care. Horticultural plants constitute a vocabulary of landscape care. When we own land, and I mean own in the broad sense of belonging, we often show our care by planting and maintaining horticultural plants.

People see the larger landscape through the instruments of their daily experience. The way people contact the landscape, farming, gardening, recreating, through scientific investigations, and, importantly, through pictures, greatly influences what they know and notice about all the landscapes they see. The aesthetic of care is the beauty we notice in everyday experience.

We learn how care looks by being familiar with landscapes and their purposes. The more familiar we are, the more discerning our perception. Not everyone sees care in the same landscape. The lover of the rose garden may not see care in the prairie.

The aesthetic of care depends on two parts: what we know and notice, and the material of the landscape. I will suggest that horticulture powerfully influences both parts. As we consider what landscape care means, we



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see that horticulture influences not only what people plant but what people notice and care about in the larger environment.

ASPECTS OF CARE

Domination

While care is defined as solicitude and protection (11), care also has a dark side, which Yi-fu Tuan has explored in his book *Dominance and Affection* (13). While care may be nurturance, it may also be dominance. Tuan says that, “The word *care* so exudes humaneness that we tend to forget its almost inevitable tainting by patronage and condescension in our imperfect world”. He identifies the garden as the “preeminent act of will” because the garden is a place we

make for ourselves, a dwelling place—not just an action that we walk away from, and because the garden must be maintained or it will revert to uncontrolled nature. In Tuan’s analysis, care is fundamentally a subordination of nature.

Intention: Involvement and accommodation

I prefer to broaden Tuan’s interpretation to that of care as intention. Land that is cared for is intended to be the way it is. It displays the intentions of its human caretaker(s). Caretakers are superiors, the cared for subordinate, as Tuan argues. But this may be an intrinsic condition rather than an enforced structure. Domination is only one aspect of care.

Care can also be interpreted as involvement with nature. While maintenance of a garden is an act of will, it is also an act of understanding. Pulling weeds is undoubtedly an act of dominance. Few of us who garden would deny that therapeutic effect. However, our brute behavior has some rationale in science; the weeds are competing for light and water with plants we find desirable. We are helping nature. How much better that the clean rows reflect our virtue when we are done.

In caring for a garden we are involved, not only by our understanding, but by the familiarity with place that maintenance creates. We go back to the garden time and again to take care of it, and we learn where the poorly drained or exposed spots are, where the thistles or crabgrass tend to collect. We remember the satisfaction of last season’s production and anticipate the beauty (not only the taste or nutritional value) of this season’s tomatoes on the vine.

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Finally, care can be interpreted as accommodating nature. Surely to accommodate does connote a dominant force, as Tuan suggests. We do not accommodate what truly threatens us. Some forms of care may simply make space for nature; not intervening in or being involved with natural processes, so much as giving them a bounded location, as in a nature preserve, a farmland parcel enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve, or a patch of native understory on a residential site.

When care is interpreted as intention, the three aspects of care that I have described here—domination, involvement, and accommodation—may be suggested by different material forms. But, each of these landscape forms may suggest care to the knowing viewer.

CARE IN LOCAL LANDSCAPE PERCEPTIONS

In my own investigations of people's perceptions of their local landscapes, care has been a surprisingly strong predictor of attractiveness. Surprising because consideration of care lies outside traditional notions of landscape beauty. The scenic or picturesque is more likely to come to mind. We all know how to recognize a scenic landscape. It usually has steep slopes, a stream or lake, a curvilinear pattern of wooded areas, and open meadows or fields. These are the landscapes we have seen on postcards, sofa paintings, and calendars for as long as we can remember, and these are the landscapes we seek when we are tourists. We have enshrined them in national parks and monuments because they are exotic, rare. Yet most of us do not live in landscapes that tourists would recognize as scenic. We find our local landscapes beautiful, and change and maintain them to display a different and equally compelling aesthetic, that of care.

When I began an investigation of perceptions of the coastal landscape of Grand Isle, La. (7, 8), I expected to learn that local people found natural-looking areas and uninterrupted views of the Gulf of Mexico most attractive. In fact, they were attractive, but the most important predictors of perceived attractiveness were factors related to care as neatness (trash and litter, derelict structures, well-maintained homes with mown lawns and "nice" yards, including shrubs and flowers).

Similarly, my investigation of Kane County, Ill. farmers' perceptions of agricultural landscapes (9) suggested that care as neatness was a dominant factor in landscape attractiveness. In this case, the farmers looked at slides depicting 10 Illinois landscapes throughout the seasons. While some of the landscapes had conventionally scenic qualities, the landscape consistently rated most attractive had none of those qualities. Instead, it was admired for its openness, straight rows, even green color, for being weed-free; it looked neat and productive (Fig. 1). These comments are typical.

"Sheer beauty to a farmer. Straight green rows of corn. A nice job of farming.



Fig. 1 Landscape rated most attractive by Illinois farmers. Spring. Exemplifies care as neatness: straight, even rows. Weed-free.



Fig. 2. The same landscape as shown in Fig. 1. Fall. Exemplifies care as stewardship: attractive minimum tillage.

This is the kind of land that's meant to be farmed."

"The evenness of the stand of corn is very attractive. The rows of corn are almost perfectly parallel."

However, viewing the same landscape in the fall (Fig. 2), the farmers admired care as stewardship. They noticed the excellent job of minimum tillage and, looking at the winter slide, they noted the effectiveness of the stubble in catching the snow.

At the same time, cultivated landscapes that were not neat met with mixed reactions even when they exhibited traditional scenic qualities. Speaking of a field along a stream (Fig. 3), the farmers made these comments:

"Smartweed can be a really pretty pink—but this costs money. When a farmer says pretty that means clean."

"I like the trees here. It has an artistic appeal, but for a farmer to plant it scares you."

"It's not well-kept or well-maintained."

Finally, my recent investigation of the local landscape perceptions of residents of rural Olmsted County, Minn. (10) further supported my hypothesis that care as neatness or stewardship is related to landscape attractiveness. At the same time, it reinforced that the conventionally scenic is also perceived by people in their local landscapes.

All of the landowners in eight randomly selected sections of two townships were surveyed. The townships were selected to include one township with considerable exurban residential development and one with virtually no exurban development. Sixty four



Fig. 3. Landscape rated less attractive. Spring. Conventional scenic qualities, but rows were not straight, planting uneven.

percent of the landowners ($n = 48$) agreed to be interviewed. Of those, 45% were farmers, 33% were not farmers and never had farmed, and 22% were part-time or retired farmers. In this project, survey participants were asked to describe and locate on a map landscapes that they found attractive or unattractive. Seven hundred six landscape views were described, and these views became our database.

View data were analyzed to determine what descriptors participants used to characterize attractive and unattractive landscapes. The 124 descriptors used were grouped into thematic variables (Table 1). While research participants most frequently used terms related to scenic quality to describe what made a landscape attractive or unattractive, they used terms related to neatness (clean, neat, no junk, things put away, new, mown, no weeds, white, messy, weedy) only slightly less frequently. Among farmers interviewed, neatness was the most frequently used descriptor; among non-farmers it was third, behind scenic descriptors and naturalness descriptors. Within the overall survey sample, apparent naturalness descriptors were used with the third greatest frequency. Direct articulations of care (well-cared-for, well-kept, maintained) were fourth. Descriptors relating to conservation practices and care of sites immediately adjacent to buildings, or yard care, were also important.

The use of horticultural plants as an indicator of care was most directly implied when research participants described farmsteads or rural residences. The most frequently used descriptors ($n \geq 7$) for attractive farmsteads were: agricultural buildings, animals, clean, flowers and shrubs, houses, good layout, mowed, neat, no junk, no weeds, trees, and the farmstead stands out in the landscape. Unattractive farmsteads were described as cluttered, not well-kept, and weedy. The most frequently used descriptors ($n \geq 7$) for attractive rural residences were: flowers and shrubs, homes, houses, lawn ornaments and architectural details, mowed, neat, trees,

white, and well-kept. Unattractive rural residences were described as being "junk" and not well-kept.

In summary, while scenic conventions were important to perceptions of landscape aesthetic quality, neatness was equally important to the survey participants, as a general term, and, more particularly, as applied to sites of homes and business. At the same time, other forms of care, apparent naturalness and conservation, were also perceived as attractive.

Neatness, apparent naturalness, and conservation can all be interpreted as forms of care. However, apparent naturalness and conservation may be noticed by fewer people and in a more limited range of settings. An ecologist or native plant enthusiast will see naturalness in landscape features that escape the attention of others. A farmer will notice subtleties of soil and water conservation techniques that an urban gardener may not appreciate. Neatness, on the other hand, is a more nearly universal language of care. We expect that others will notice weeds in the garden, brown patches on the lawn, and most of us manage accordingly.

NEATNESS AS A FORM OF CARE

These quotes from transcripts of the Olmsted County interviews encapsulate neatness as a form of care:

"(What makes a farmstead attractive is) a well-kept yard. I don't think the set-

ting makes any difference. It's pleasing to the eye. Much more so than something neglected. It means people have put a lot of work into their place."

"Well-kept means keeping weeds down, grass cut, attractive fences, flowers, gardens that show people care and want to raise their own food."

"(The most attractive landscape in the county has) nothing out of place. The garden is spotless. The lawn is spotless. A perfect set of buildings. It tells me that he cares."

Conversely, one interview participant articulated the values of many others when she described an unattractive farmstead, weedy and "junk", this way:

"People like that don't care about their neighbors."

When care is shown as neatness, it is readily apparent to others. No one will mistake a mown lawn, clipped shrubs, and colorful flowers for neglect. A landscape that is neat leaves no doubt that someone is taking care of it. And, as the comments of the survey participants suggest, the care that we read from a neat landscape is not only for the landscape itself but also for those who will see it, for neighbors and a larger community. A neat landscape extends itself to others to be viewed and enjoyed. It suggests that the owners care about the feelings and standards of the people who see it. Furthermore, it suggests that the owners take pride in themselves. Neatness is an intensely human expression of the aesthetic of care.

At the same time, of the three forms of care I have identified, neatness comes closest to expressing dominance, a disregard for the intrinsic character of the "cared-for". Tuan suggests that the keeping of pets exemplifies this aspect of care, affection that ultimately hinges on the pleasure of the human caretaker. He cites the breeding of goldfish with bulging, unprotected eyes and dogs with front legs shorter than back to produce an endearing rolling gait as examples of such disregard for biological functioning of pet species. He also identifies the garden as the epitome of this kind of condescending control. However, when people talk about keeping their landscapes neat, they hardly seem to have such a malevolent purpose. Rather, they see themselves as participants with nature, at best, and good citizens, at least.

Table 1. Rank of thematic descriptors.

Thematic descriptor	Mean of 706 landscapes described	Rank overall	Farmers only rank	Non-farmer only rank
Scenic	307	1	2	1
Neatness	301	2	1	3
Naturalness	173	3	4	2
Care	152	4	3	6
Conservation	138	5	5/6	5
Yard care	137	6	5/6	4

The power of horticultural plants as emblems of care puts horticulture in the center of this dilemma between good intentions and disregard for biological function. I would suggest that, as horticulturists develop and market the plant materials by which people seek to show their care, they can influence whether neatness is a display of dominance or understanding.

ETHICS AND NEATNESS: LABELING LANDSCAPES

Do neat landscapes lie when they communicate care, respect for neighbors, pride in self? No. But, they may lie in what they imply about the landscape's ecological function or in what they omit about the history and character of a place.

Neatness may be sinister when it obscures a larger social or ecological truth. Recall news photos of the tidy residential neighborhood bordering the Love Canal. Consider cows grazing in lush green German countryside under the cloud of Chernobyl. Consider citrus groves, golf courses, and suburban lawns in the desert climate of the American Southwest. Or the massive weed-free fields of the Cornbelt where rural people are drawing herbicides from their wells. Each of these examples suggests an ignorance or disregard for the underlying ecology of landscape. They suggest care as intention but without involvement, without understanding.

Where neatness is not sinister, it may be superficial where deeper understanding would better serve social purposes. For example, much of the suburban landscape in Minnesota, where I live, could support ground-nesting birds and small mammals, if the forest understory were maintained or new understory were created. In the prairie biome in the southwestern part of the state, prairie plants could reveal the nature of local climate and soils. Neither forest understory nor prairie necessarily looks neat, but the neat suburban landscapes that characterize my home state largely fail to speak about the ecology or history of the region. The neat landscape is so widely appreciated in part because it has no place and requires no deeper understanding.

Neatness is a powerful landscape label. It can say care without meaning care. Because we assume that people who keep their landscape neat care for the landscape and care about their neighbors, we can be fooled by neatness.

There is nothing sinister about the intentions of the community gardener in Boston I quote below. But, in showing his pride in self and care for the community, he (like most of us) reached for the familiar plant materials he knew or would find at the nearest garden center (i.e., flowers or trees or roses or something). While we can imagine that his garden communicated care, it could have communicated care with more fundamental understanding of place if he had chosen plant materials that were related to the history or ecology of the region.

"There were lots of old mattresses and beer cans and things on it, and little

trees, wild trees on it. I went to the city and asked them if I could clear it up, because I had a house right in front of it. I bought that house in front of it. And I wanted it to be clean. I want anywhere I am to be clean and have flowers or trees or roses or something. They told me I could go ahead with it, but they didn't have any money to give me to help clean it. I told them, "it's quite all right. I just want to know that I can keep it clean." [V. Pomare, Roxbury, Mass. (14).]

Care will not necessarily look neat when the intention is to be involved with the landscape, to understand the ecological forces at work there, or to become familiar with a place. If this community garden had been constructed with Oriental or Hispanic gardening traditions, the staking and intercropping techniques would not have looked neat to many eyes (14). But, to those who understand their efficient use of sunlight, moisture, and human energy, they could display a high level of care.

When the intention is to accommodate nature, many people may not perceive care. Where water is being conserved, lawns may be brown in the dry times of the year, even in areas with ample rainfall for green turf. Fruits and vegetables grown with limited pesticides may be imperfect. A prairie restoration project may look like an abandoned lot to people who do not know prairie plants.

HORTICULTURAL PLANTS AS LANDSCAPE LABELS

Horticultural plants are used to create neat landscapes. Neatness can suggest involvement with landscape as well as its domination. But where other forms of care are appropriate, where conservation or naturalness more accurately convey the ecological function of the landscape, horticultural plants can broaden the audience for those alternate forms of care. Horticultural plants can label conservation and natural landscapes as well-cared for, and they can expand the repertoire of plants that indicate care when native or ecologically fit plants are placed in neat settings.

Labeling conservation and natural landscapes

Flowering plants are recognized as emblems of care. In Germany, in agricultural landscapes that were cultivated from road to road, restoration of hedgerows and strips of traditional perennials is underway to protect the long-term ecological health of the region. However, Germans who have learned to admire the productivity of the road-to-road cultivation pattern have had difficulty accepting the look of rows of trees and borders of nondescript grasses. When flowering plants were introduced in the hedgerows and strips, local people began to appreciate the beauty of the new agricultural landscape (3). People passing by the newly planted parcels set aside as part of the Conservation Reserve in the American countryside might be similarly im-

pressed by the beauty of places that could otherwise be seen as weedy and unkept.

On another scale, Carpenter (4) recounts suburban Austin, Texas homeowners' battle with wild deer who eat shrubs and flowers. While some of her neighbors have walled out the hungry deer with 1.8-m walls, Carpenter's compromise is potted plants on a fenced deck. The view from the house shows horticultural care, and the "deer park" beyond the fence is labeled as intentional.

Bringing new plants into neat landscapes

A second way of demonstrating alternative forms of care is to bring native or ecologically fit plants into neat landscapes. Beatty (2) discusses this strategy as appropriate horticulture, in contrast with ornamental horticulture. "Ornamental" he says, "unfortunately. . . has become synonymous with superficial and frivolous decoration". He suggests that one emphasis for appropriate horticulture is an ecological approach.

Where new development is occurring, bringing new plants into neat landscapes may mean studying the ecology of a site, using the plant materials that are on the site as cues to future planting (12). Proliferation of on-site species, coordinated with maintenance of site soil and drainage conditions, may be one aspect of the horticultural scheme on such a site.

But bringing new plants into old landscapes, the well-cared-for yards and business sites that the Minnesota survey participants spoke about, requires a strategy that recognizes the power of neatness. The well-publicized cases of the Stewarts of Potomac, Md. (1) illustrates this power. When the Stewarts decided to let their lawn revert to meadow, they were sharply criticized by their neighbors and cited for violation of county ordinances. Prairie or meadow lawns in this country have been most successful not where an entire lawn has been devoted to native plants, but where some turf has been retained as a part of the design scheme (6). The small patches of neat mown turf are a familiar label of care. The turf clarifies the intentions of the owner and shows that the prairie or meadow is only another, if qualitatively different, indicator of care.

Public perceptions of care may change through more direct concern for environmental conditions as well, creating new markets for horticultural plants. In my hometown in this drought-ridden summer, brown grass has become a sign of care as conservation of water. The governor remarked that he felt pleased to see the brown lawns on his walks through the Twin Cities. In the summer of 1988, the emerald lawn has become a sign of selfish consumption. As California suffers through its second drought in the past decade, consumers have come to see that water limitations may not be an aberration. Xeriscape is becoming a sought after approach to residential planting design.

Crisis is not the only means for bringing new horticultural plants into the vocabulary of care. In Nevada, the Sierra Pacific Power Co. has included a water conservation dem-

onstration garden in their new corporate headquarters (5). Nurseries specializing in native plants have educated their clients to the beauty of plant communities and their ecological requirements and effects. Could we have nursery catalogs that describe not only hardiness zones but also indigenous plant communities to help consumers select plants that are appropriate to their region?

CONCLUSION

Neat, straight, weed-free rows of corn and lovingly tended rosegardens will always be appropriate forms of care in some places. People will always find satisfaction in the arrangement and care of plants in their gardens, in keeping the weeds out, the grass green, and flowers blooming. Neatness is a potent form of human communication—so potent that it may sometimes arrogantly dominate natural forces and native landscapes.

The aesthetic of care suggests alternatives to neatness as a form of care. Naturalness and conservation may also express care to the knowing eye. The challenge that I can lay out for horticulturists today is to guide the knowing eye—by more extensive use of horticultural plants to label conservation and naturalness as forms of care, by the use of native and ecologically fit plants in neat landscapes that look well cared for, and by marketing plants in a way that educates the client to the ecological characteristics of a region.

People tending their gardens care for the landscape in the most immediate and direct way. Expanding the repertoire of horticultural plants and their use in the landscape may be one means of extending that caring vision of the gardener to a planet in need of care.

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