

Childhood's Garden: Memory and Meaning of Gardens

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Abstract

This article probes some of the conceptual meanings people attach to gardens, based on memories and meanings of childhood gardens. The role of gardens in child development and place attachment is briefly suggested. The results of interviews with gardeners in California and Norway are used to illustrate different meanings people attach to childhood gardens. Descriptions of favorite places in remembered childhood gardens are used to identify common qualities. Loss and grieving for childhood memories of gardens is discussed as an issue in adulthood. The article concludes with some of the design, planning and management issues facing the future gardens of childhood, including how to restore wildness in backyards.

Keywords: [children](#), [gardens](#), [gardening](#), [meaning](#), [memories](#), [naturalistic places](#), [ecological gardens](#), [planning and design for children's gardens](#)

Introduction

When I was eight years old, my mother gave me a little well-prepared garden plot to plant anything I wanted. She was always available for advice or watering when I got too busy with school. Since then there have been many gardens in my life. Some years ago I moved into what had been a charming old mansion converted into apartments. One window faced a weed patch alongside the building- a challenge for my 70 plus years. On investigating, I found several rose bushes bravely defying the weeds. Little dots of color indicating flowers reaching for space and sun. It had been a garden. One year later it was a lovely garden once more- an asset to the entire neighborhood. Now at 85 it is good to think of all the gardens in my life. A garden is forever.

-Mrs. Ann W. Gilbert, Letter to the Editor, *Santa Barbara News Press*, July 1987.

Gardens are places of special meaning and memories. For children, gardens are places to develop ideas and attitudes toward the natural and built world. Children carry with them into adolescence and adulthood strong memories and images of favorite childhood gardens. These memories directly shape adult images and attitudes of landscapes, both private and public.

In the mid 1980s, I began some exploratory research to examine adult's relationship with their gardens.¹ As a landscape architect interested in the meaning people attach to landscapes, I came to the garden as a useful place to explore questions of landscape significance and value. This research, in the form of lengthy, ethnographic interviews with gardeners, was directed at revealing the deeper meaning people attach to gardens.

What began as a few interviews grew to over 100 in-depth interviews with Californian and Norwegian gardeners.² After a few initial interviews, it occurred to me that having people only talk about their present garden was not enough to explain the larger role gardens play in people's lives. We expanded our interviews to explore past memories of gardens along with people's ideal images of gardens. It quickly became apparent that childhood memories of gardens played a linking role in both present and ideal garden relationships.

For this present article, I decided to revisit our earlier interviews to explore the special significance and meanings of places people described in childhood memories of gardens.³ These garden interviews, along with other studies of childhood memories of place, may provide a beginning point to suggest some of the qualities important to creating good gardens for children. The intent is to inform the design and planning of our present gardens- the future gardens of childhood.

The Place of Childhood: Childhood's Gardens

There is a substantial and rich literature on remembered childhood places (Cobb 1976; Chawla 1986; Sebba 1991). Much of this work has used interview, autobiography and mapping techniques to record and reveal favorite places

(Cooper-Marcus 1978; Helphand 1978; Hester 1985). Some of these studies explain the importance of gardens and nature in developing children's memory and environmental values (Chawla 1994).

Many studies have shown that favorite childhood places cover a range of settings—some built, many natural (Hart 1978; Sobel 1993; Wood 1993; Zerner 1977). Most of these places are gardens, including parents' or grandparents' gardens at home, vacation places or farms. The places children seek out are surprisingly similar between urban and rural children and for different ages.⁴ As landscape architect Patsy Owens (1988) has shown in her studies of teenagers, many of these qualities are also sought out and valued by teenagers.

There is also some evidence that these same qualities are disappearing from home gardens today. For example, many unstructured or wild areas have been systematically removed from suburban and urban places, including home gardens. As childhood has become more controlled and structured, so too have the places of childhood, including gardens, parks, playgrounds, and schoolyards.

Figure 1. The act of gardening often contributes to a deeper meaning attached to childhood gardens.



Some Childhood Garden Stories

Memories in the form of stories and autobiographies are useful to reveal children's experiences of gardens (Bartlett 1990). Having people recall their childhood memories highlights many of the qualities common to gardens.

Much of the richness of our interview data and the garden literature comes from descriptions of remembered childhood gardens in people's own words. These five brief garden stories, some from our interviews (Francis and Hill 1989) and others

taken from published accounts by garden writers and authors, suggest some of the qualities of gardens in childhood that are remembered and described later in life.

My favorite childhood garden was my parents' garden on Hærøya, Porsgrunn (an island off the east coast of Norway). It was beautiful and had everything. It had a cluster of pine bushes and a long raspberry hedge. The kitchen garden had my favorite vegetables, wax beans, cucumber, and cauliflower. It had two compost bins- one for this year and one for last year. The garden had lots of fruit trees, apples, plums, cherries, and old pine trees ... My favorite spot in the garden was a cozy place under the old pine trees. It had a hammock there. It was not an all-private corner. Whoever got there first, got the hammock....

- Ruth, age 49, a Stavanger Norway garden

My childhood garden was in New York City. It was a lot 40 feet wide and 100 feet deep. We had strawberries and a grape vine. In the fall we raked leaves and burned them. My wife's childhood garden was larger- more like our garden here in Davis....

- Eliot, age 82, a Davis California garden

Our real garden was the one up on Præstegarde. Out near the street was a high wall of dressed boulders, with a narrow heavy gate that we always locked when we left the garden. You walked in to an air scented with odors- bittersweet from the box hedge, cool and clean smells from the phlox, and the cloying, sweaty fragrance of elder and ivy. This garden was no longer tended; the hedges, bushes, and trees hadn't been pruned in years, so they had sprouted up into the air and mingled their crowns together. And the only flowers were the old perennials and wild lilies that had been allowed to stay and take care of themselves. Forget-me-nots and daisies had spread over the lawn and it was so lovely to lie and read in that deep, flower filled grass, or just lie there and do nothing.

- Sigrid Undset, Nobel Prize winning Norwegian author of *Kristin Lavrandatter*, 1923

The old home, not very far from where I live now, had big spaces of garden and shrubbery and two ponds- one a large mill-pond and covering some acres; and three streams, so that I was always watching the ways of water. Where one quick-running stream, after stumbling down in a cascade, ran into a mill pond, was a grand place. We used to catch fish both with a rod and with a round dip-net, and sometimes had them fried for tea. This pond had a large island near the upper end, but no bridge.... The island was a sort of enchanted land. It had some great poplars growing on it, and a tangle of under-growth....

- Gertrude Jekyll, a British garden in the 1840s (Jekyll 1990, 10-13).

My favorite childhood place was the farm in Asplund (southwest Norway). There were animals there and plants. We cultivated vegetables. My strongest memories and feelings are tied to that place. The berry bushes and the red currants were big. I could crawl underneath them so they became like a cabin. I could find berries there that the grown-ups had not picked. I like the feeling of crawling in and looking at the berries that the others didn't know about. I did this with my sister every year. I also have strong memories of the barn and animals....

- Inge, age 50, a Stavanger Norway garden

Memories of Favorite Childhood Gardens

After talking with the gardeners about their present garden relationship, we asked a series of questions about their childhood memories of gardens. Specifically we asked people to describe their favorite childhood garden. We then asked them to draw a simple map of the garden and circle in red their favorite place in the garden. Content analysis of these questions and drawings reveal some of the most frequent remembered elements of childhood gardens.

By far the most frequently mentioned element for both Californian and Norwegian gardeners were vegetation and natural elements. This included trees, fruit trees, berry bushes and flowers. One gardener described a natural area, in her favorite childhood garden: "my childhood garden was the forest.... We made turf huts and we sat around a fire pit and told ghost stories." Many childhood memories of the garden include natural places and elements where people remembered playing as a child such as "under berry bushes," "under the big trees," "on the tree swing," and "in the tree house." Natural water bodies were also frequently mentioned as elements of favorite childhood gardens. These included "rivers," "lakes," "fjords," "ponds," "ditches" and "water puddles."

The second most frequently mentioned elements were structures or buildings such as houses, cabins, barns or garages. In addition, smaller built elements such as "tool shed," "gazebo," "terrace," "stairs," and "fire pit" were remembered. Specific garden areas were the next most noted elements, including flower beds, courtyards, and lawn areas. Paths and roads, garden furniture, fences and gates, play structures ("playhouse," "hut," "sandbox," "tree swing"), and sports areas ("badminton court," "croquet") were often frequently recalled.

Shelter and privacy were often mentioned as elements of favorite childhood gardens. For example, one woman gardener talking about a forest near her childhood home in Seattle said: "I did not have a lot of grown-ups telling me what to do there. It was private." A Norwegian gardener remembered: "my favorite place was at the bottom of the garden. There we were invisible. This was where the big trees were."

Many gardeners recalled edible plants as being important parts of their childhood gardens. One Norwegian gardener stated: "the red currant bushes were big. We could crawl in underneath them. They became like a 'cabin.' I remember the feeling

of crawling in there and looking at the berries others didn't know about." Vegetable gardens were also frequently remembered- "Oh, it was our vegetable garden- a huge vegetable garden. It had a strawberry patch. This was in Illinois. My mother's strawberry patch was like half the size of my present garden." Another person said: "my favorite childhood garden was a vegetable garden in the field where we could do what we wanted."

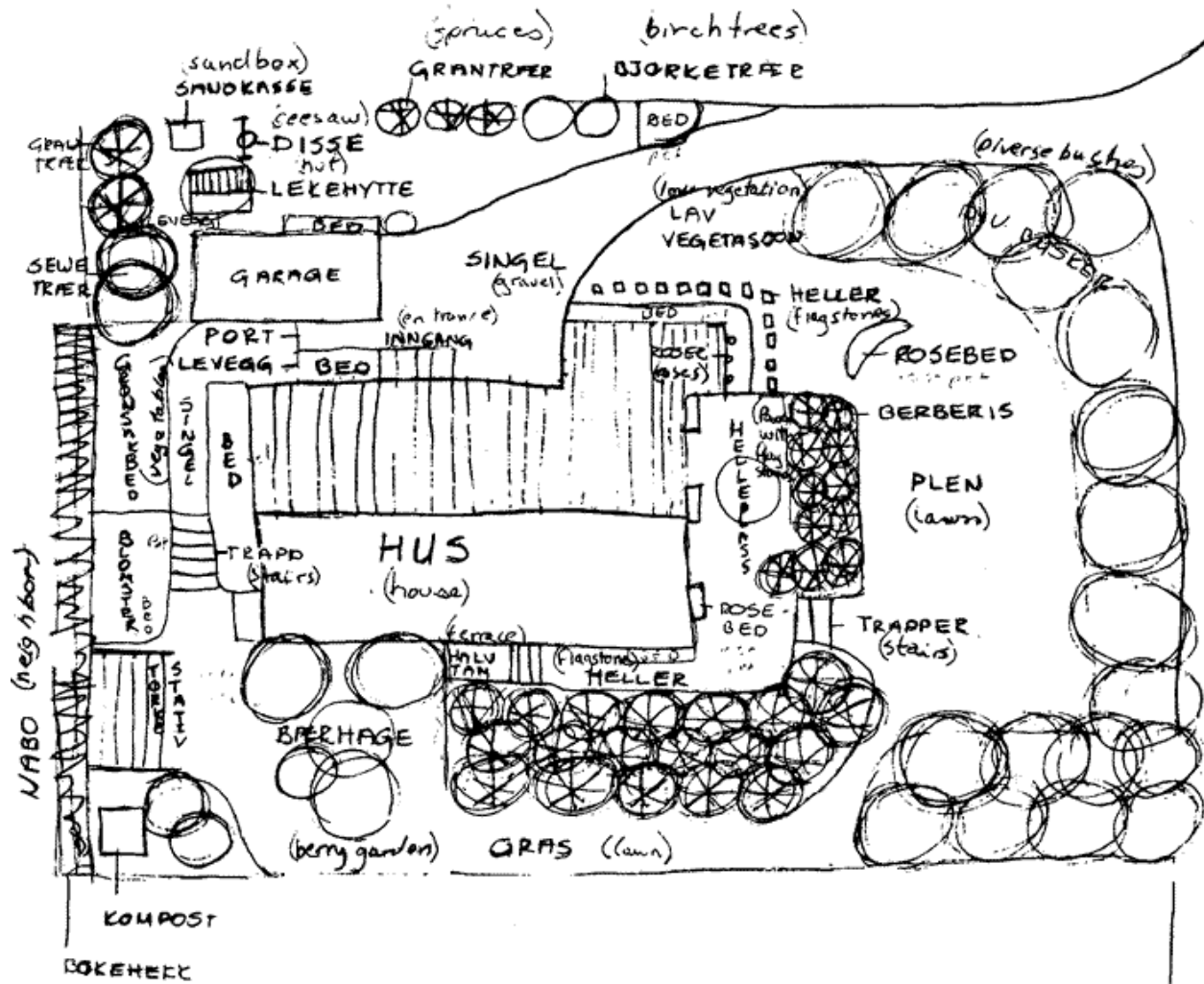
Other memories included descriptions of unstructured, fantasy play in special areas of the garden. For example, one Californian gardener said: "we used flowers as people. Pretty flowers were fancy people." A Norwegian gardener described her favorite garden as "a small garden in front of the house... with a 'gazebo' made out of plants that had grown together at the top, so it formed a dense roof with a round table and benches ... We played with all the leaves in the fall. We made big piles that we jumped in."

Most of the people we interviewed expressed strong attachment to their parents' or grandparents' garden. For example one person stated: "Mom and Dad's (garden) was great. I used to cry leaving there." Favorite childhood gardens did not always respect property lines or boundaries. For example, one Californian gardener remembered it as "a neighbor's home. Her lawn, the entire yard, was filled with mixed-colored violets." Still others had vacant lots as their favorite childhood garden. "We didn't actually have a garden next door to our house. It was an empty lot with a big eucalyptus tree. We used to have refrigerator crates up there and make forts.... I remember my mom yelling, 'Leonard, get down!'"

Figure 2. Water, such as this drainage area in California, is often an important memory of childhood gardens.



Figure 3. This drawing of a favorite Norwegian childhood garden includes a "little hut" as a favorite place.



Favorite Places in Childhood Gardens

All the people we interviewed reported vivid memories of a specific favorite place in their childhood garden. Many remembered specific plants and recalled important events in their lives that had occurred in the garden. In describing their favorite place, most gardeners mentioned areas that were protected, sheltered, or hidden. A Californian gardener described her favorite place in her childhood garden: "under the big trees down in the garden. I played with dolls, sheltered from looking in from the outside. It was private."

More than half of the favorite spaces mentioned were either in or under trees or bushes. These spaces often became settings for creative play and offered opportunities to fantasize. One woman remembered a place "in a big oak tree, high up. There I lived. I had a living room, kitchen, etc. Cut off branches were used as

tables. Many friends lived in different places in the same tree. I was very sad when they chopped down the tree when I was 11 or 12 years old."

Childhood Memories into Present and Ideal Gardens

We learned that past memories of favorite childhood gardens spill over into present and ideal images of gardens. Many people reported to us that they learned and gained inspiration for their present and ideal gardens from their childhood memories of gardens. For example, one Norwegian gardener commented: "my favorite place was my grandparent's small farm. I got interested in garden work there. I learned a lot from that place." In describing a favorite place in a garden near their grandmother's house, one Norwegian commented: "there was a concrete bench that we used to go and sit down on. A place to contemplate things ... that might be something I could put into his garden ... a place to sit and think." Another gardener said that her ideal garden would recreate the "mystique of my childhood garden." These comments suggest that as adults we are always trying to recreate some of the qualities and images from our early experiences of gardens.

For adults, plant material and vegetation remain as the most important preferred elements in people's "ideal garden." This is followed by built elements and structures, specific garden areas and areas of privacy or shelter. Clearly there is a shift in adulthood to more controlled and manicured gardens but we found a strong preference for natural or wild elements as well. This may explain in part the current interest in making ecological or natural gardens.

Implications- The Garden as Idea, Place and Action

Our interviews suggest that garden meaning is a complex ecology of idea, place and action.⁵ The garden is first and foremost an idea and that children develop early and carry with them as memories of events and images of places throughout life. The garden is also a physical place- a composite of plants, dirt, water, living things, and three dimensional space. The garden is also an activity for children- a process of experience involving digging, planting, hiding, building, touching, smelling, and seeing. We found that when children become involved as gardeners or farmers rather than as passive observers of gardens, a deeper significance and meaning is established. Gardens that operate on all levels simultaneously- as idea, place and activity- can become sacred places.

Figure 4. Some contemporary gardens in Norway are taking on a manicured character unlike the remembered wildness of childhood gardens.



The Changing Role of Gardens in Childhood

The culture of childhood today has significant implications for the home garden. The lives of children have become more controlled and structured, with much less time spent outside the home without the direct supervision of adults (Louv 1990). For example, one of the top ten selling computer games for children is "The Backyard," a computer simulation of playing outside. These trends have led me to characterize childhood today as "The Childhood of Imprisonment."⁶

As childhood has become more restricted, opportunities for interaction with nature and natural experience are even more critical. With the public environment often tightly controlled for children, home gardens take on an even more important role

in childhood. The garden for now is an excellent place to restore some of these qualities of childhood. The garden can be one of the most accessible and resourceful places where children can have unstructured interaction with nature and come to participate in the wonders of natural process.

Figure 5. Other modern Norwegian gardens have been able to integrate natural qualities of the surrounding landscape.



Naturalistic Gardens

Not all gardens are created equal for children. Our research and others on children's experience of place (Hart 1978; Hester 1985; Bartlett 1990) has shown that rough, naturalistic places are sought out (and remembered later) more frequently than manicured places. The landscape historian John Stilgoe, writing about the landscape of childhood for New England boys in 1987, describes the rough landscape of the village and surrounding countryside as the preferred garden for children such as himself growing up in the 1950s. He writes: "The Bog, the Bit, Mrs. Norris' Woods, the Swamp, Fuller's Dam, the Landing all linger as landmarks of childhood." Stilgoe suggests that the power of these places reside in them being "semi-used or abandoned spaces" that offer a sense of freedom and wildness.⁷

Grieving for a Lost Garden

Over the past 20 years, I have annually asked my students of landscape architecture, urban design, and environmental psychology to draw maps of their favorite childhood places. Over the years I have observed an alarming disappearance of naturalistic places and experiences in favor of more controlled and structured places. We also found this also to be true in our interviews with people on the meanings they attach to their home gardens. Comparison of people's drawings of both childhood and present gardens shows an erosion of some of the most important parts of favorite childhood gardens in modern gardens. Our

interviews with several generations of gardeners indicate that some of the elements found in people's childhood gardens, especially those elements of mystique and mystery, are missing in modern gardens as these have become more manicured, and neighborhood and public space less accessible for children. Qualities described, such as "the big oak tree," "the creek under the apple trees," "the overgrown garden belonging to a hermit," and "the forest where we made turf huts and sat around a fire pit and told ghost stories" are often missing from the contemporary gardens we visited.

For many adults, the decline of natural qualities such as wildness results in a form of grieving for a lost garden and a disconnection from nature. For children this may mean a missed experience of place that may affect their environmental and spatial values as they become older. Perhaps the resurgence of interest in natural gardening will help to reverse this trend. For example, some adults are attempting to transform their gardens into ecological habitats by letting nature and natural process be the designer (Stein 1993). The sacred American lawn is being rethought to invite nature and natural process back into the front yard (Borman et al. 1993). Changing the ecological character of the garden can provide excellent opportunities for restoring children's place in the garden.

The Design of Childhood's Garden

Past work suggests some common ingredients are needed in childhood gardens. Some are essential, and could be included in all gardens. Every garden could have some water, a large tree, edible plants such as vegetables and fruit trees, a small clover patch or meadow, and habitat that attracts other living things such as birds and insects. Other important elements can include a hammock, a play house, a willow tree, places to dig, and hiding places. Table 1 outlines some of the qualities and elements important for children in gardens.

As we and others have learned, vegetation plays a critical role in children's experience of gardens (Harvey 1989; Sobel 1990). As Robin Moore (1993) has shown in his excellent planting design book for children, careful attention to plant selection can help create a vegetative environment that is rich and memorable for children. Animals and pets also have an important place in gardens for children (Melson et al. 1991).

There is also growing empirical evidence documenting the importance of plants and vegetation in creating restorative experience of people of all ages (Relf 1992; Francis et al. 1994). Researchers such as Rachel and Stephen Kaplan (1990) and Roger Ulrich (1993) have documented the physiological benefits of views and interaction with vegetation. For children, plants are the building blocks of play and experience.

Table 1. Some suggested elements to include in gardens for children.

<p>Physical elements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water (such a pond, birdbath, vernal pool or fountain) • A large tree (such as a weeping willow) or grove of trees. • Vegetation that provides shelter, hiding places and can be used for building materials. • Edible plants such as fruit trees, berries, vegetables • A small clover patch or meadow • Nearby nature that incorporates habitat for birds, butterflies and insects • A fort • A hammock • A play house • A compost bin or recycling area • A work table for projects and displays
<p>Activity areas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiding places • Reflective places • Planting areas with favorite plants • Building places
<p>Management/garden care practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rough, untrimmed spots • Planting that invites use and building • A loose parts area with materials, soil and so on

While many books on children's gardens and gardening trivialize children's place in the garden, several designers and writers have provided some useful beginning points for the design of gardens for children (American Horticultural Society 1994; Eberbach 1992; Sobel 1993). Memories people attach to their childhood gardens suggest the need to protect and restore these qualities in the planning and design of gardens for their own children and grandchildren. Parents and teachers, along with landscape architects, garden designers, and horticulturists all have important roles to play in making childhood gardens.

Figure 6. Children's building and fantasy play are frequently remembered parts of childhood gardens.



Managing the Evolving Garden

A discussion of the design implications of childhood gardens would be incomplete without pointing out the critical importance of management- the sheer act of gardening- in creating gardens that are good for children. A useful concept for garden management may be the idea of the evolving garden, the fact that good gardens are almost always unfinished. This requires the ability to know when to stop gardening or as Sarah Stein (1993) has called it "ungardening." The evolving garden idea argues against the master-planned, designer variety in favor of the more personal one where all members of the family- including children- are actively engaged in the making and caring for of gardens. Through gardening, children can have more than token involvement in managing the environment (Hart 1992).

It may also be useful to have an expanded concept of the garden that goes beyond the walls of home gardens to include gardens in schools, on vacant lots, along waterfronts, in plazas and scattered across neighborhoods (Francis 1989). As children and adults populate and become more comfortable with the garden, our public landscape- neighborhoods, parks, natural areas, and public spaces- can then become gardens, transformed into accessible and healthy childhood places. As

increasing ecological concern and expanding cultural expression further invade the garden, they will become richer and healthier places for everyone, young and old.

Endnotes

1. This research was supported by grants from the University of California Agricultural Experiment Station and a fellowship from the Royal Norwegian Council for Scientific and Industrial Research. Research assistants in California included Margarita Hill, Frieder Luz, Renate Luz, Randi DeLuchi, Patricia Quintero and in Norway, Amund Johnne, Anne Helgestad, Ingrid Buck and Werner Harstad, Ann-Kjersti Johnsen, and Solveig Sjovik.
2. People interviewed were not particularly garden enthusiasts but more common, everyday gardeners. The conceptual results to this research are discussed in Francis 1990. For a more quantitative and comparative treatment of this data see Francis and Hill 1989.
3. For this article, I do not distinguish between the cultural differences we found between Californian and Norwegian gardeners. While there were some significant differences- such as attitudes toward sun, front and back parts of the garden, and use of edible plantings- we found major similarities between the two groups regarding the meanings they attach to gardens. These cultural similarities and differences are discussed in more detail in Francis and Hill 1989.
4. A useful review of the differences between urban and rural childhood is provided in two very important books, published exactly a decade apart, by Colin Ward (Ward 1978; Ward 1988).
5. This theoretical perspective is developed more fully in the introduction to *The Meaning of Gardens* (Francis and Hester 1990).
6. I am currently developing this theme in a book entitled *The Childhood of Imprisonment: Restoring the Place of Childhood* (forthcoming).
7. Children's attraction to nature and wild places is described well in Nabhan and Trimble 1994.

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