

In *Second Nature: a Gardener's Education*, Michael Pollan led me enjoyably down his garden path. Mostly he shared forgettable fluff about horticultural victories and defeats, but there were a few kernels amidst the genial chaff.

Pollan described the reward of gardening beyond baskets brimming and beautiful bouquets. Gardeners will relate to Pollan's Zen of gardening.

Gardening requires discipline and returns a mythic insight. Socrates saw ideas as either conceptual or mythic. A conceptual idea is black and white. Mythical ideas explore shades of grey. They are abstract and defy simple definition. Socrates taught mythic concepts using parables. Rather than defining what is good, Socrates would tell a story or myth and then ask his students to discuss what they learned. Students who hadn't heard the story, couldn't understand the ideas. The same applies to gardening.

If you've never tilled the warm earth, pulled weeds, watched helplessly as insects devoured your hard work, then it's unlikely you'll appreciate Pollan's labour.

As Pollan describes it, "the garden in question is actually two, one more or less imaginary, the other insistently real. The first is the garden of books and memories, that dreamed-of outdoors utopia, gnat-free and ever in bloom, where nature answers to our wishes and we imagine feeling perfectly at home. The second garden is an actual place, five acres of rocky, intractable hillside in the town of Cornwall, Connecticut that I (Pollan) have been struggling to cultivate for the past seven years."

His book begins with a few seemingly random thoughts and blossoms into a coherent narrative. Ostensibly, the narrative describes Pollan's evolving relationship with his garden but it becomes an allegory for America's evolving relationship with nature.

This parallel builds. Pollan explores historic American attitudes towards nature. He contrasts the virtue of Puritan utility with the sin of beauty. Puritans, Jeffersonians or acolytes of Emerson and Thoreau saw wilderness differently. Is it dark, dangerous and unexplored; lowly but seeking the higher order of human intervention; a limitless source of materials; a place of refuge and beauty or the domain of others with value beyond that ascribed to it by humans?

Pollan recounts personal childhood stories as myths. His grandfather's garden, his father's refusal to cut the front lawn, his own early attempts at gardening.

Pollan reflects upon attitudes towards weeds. He says, "as resourceful and aggressive as weeds may be, they cannot survive without us." Weeds, mostly European accidental introductions, would perish without disturbed sites created by us. Pollan asks under what circumstances could a pre-European wilderness exist in America again?

Pollan considers how trees are viewed as "the habitation of gods, a commodity, part and parcel of transcendent nature, a component of the forest ecosystem or potential rights-holders." He notes that scientists are warning that trees are in trouble and that their health is bound with our own.

Pollan challenges what he calls the wilderness ethic, the idea that humans and nature are irreconcilably opposed and that the victory of one entails loss for the other. Pollan proposes a different ethic for dealing with nature. His inspiration for this ethic arises organically from his garden and in work started by Aldo Leopold called ecological restoration.

Ecological restoration is a method of actively restoring damaged sites and concurrently creating a positive role for humans in nature as gardener and healer. Pollan explores this middle ground as mutually beneficial and pragmatic.

He concludes that the manner in which we view nature needs reshaping and that working in a garden may light the way.