HORTICULTURE AND HUMAN CULTURE

D. Paul Schafer

This summer, I watched a particular plant in our garden - a monkshood - to see if it would bloom. It had been a long, hot summer with very little rain, and this fascinating plant is situated in a stingy part of our garden surrounded by trees and shrubs. I knew that monkshoods tend to bloom later in the year, but wondered if our monkshood would bloom at all this year as a result of the poor growing conditions.

Then it happened. It bloomed, and bloomed magnificently. It was certainly the most beautiful plant in our garden this year, perhaps any year. With its delicate leaves, long slender stems, and exquisite purple-bluish flowers - which really do look like monkshoods when they are in full bloom - it stands proudly in any garden and towers over most other plants.

This immediately started me to think about some of the similarities between plants and people - horticulture and human culture - because plants, like people, bloom at different stages in their lives.

There are the “early-bloomers,” “mid-bloomers,” and “late-bloomers.” Crocuses, snowdrops, pansies and tulips, for example, are early-bloomers. They burst forth in all their glory at the first signs of spring, announcing that “spring has sprung” and “the grass has ris” as the old saying goes. Others come into their own a little later, but still in the spring. Irises, cumbines, foxgloves, narcissuses, hyacinths and lupins all fit this category. Then there are the mid-bloomers. They hit their stride in summer, such as lilies, sundrops, mums, marigolds, impatiens, daisies, phlox, sea lavender, and the like. They are followed by the late-bloomers. Asters, salvia, and autumn joy all fit this description because they bloom very late in the year. There are even some “non-bloomers” - plants that do not bloom at all because the growing conditions were not right - which is why I was watching the monkshood in our garden to see if it would bloom.

People are like this too. There are early-bloomers, mid-bloomers, late-bloomers, and - yes - even non-bloomers. Some people bloom extremely early. When they do, they are often called “child prodigies” because they manifest unusual talents and capabilities at a very early age. Then there are the mid-bloomers. Most people fit this description, since they tend to hit their stride later in life, usually in their thirties, forties and fifties. These people are followed by the late-bloomers. They bloom very late in life - often in their sixties, seventies and eighties - but often go on to produce things of significant value and real beauty. Finally, there are non-bloomers. These are people who do not bloom at
all because they received too little nurturing and attention during their lives and the growing conditions were not right.

This is not the only similarity between plants and people, horticulture and human culture. Plants come in all sorts of shapes, sizes, colours and types, just as people do. Some plants are annuals or biennials, blooming once or possibly twice and then - alas - dying out and never returning. Pansies, petunias, sunflowers, zinnias and snapdragons fit this description. Others are perennials, coming back year after year to bless us with their beauty and dependability. Bleeding hearts, carnations, delphiniums, lily of the valley, lupines, violets, phlox and peonies all do this. Moreover, some plants have beautiful flowers but terrible leaves - thistles for example - whereas others have terrible flowers but beautiful leaves. Some are tall; others are short. Some grow horizontally and spread out along the ground; others grow vertically and stretch up towards the heavens. Some are top heavy and need propping up; others develop strong stems and spines and do not require any outside assistance.

What is true for plants is also true for people. People come in all sorts of shapes, sizes, colours, and types as well. Some flower once - or possibly twice - but do not flower again. Others flower continuously. Some are beautiful on the inside but ugly on the outside; others are beautiful on the outside but ugly on the inside. Some are seven feet tall; others are four feet short. Some have highly developed minds but need propping up in other areas. Others are fully developed in all areas and require little outside assistance. Some are Africans and Europeans; others are Americans, Asians, Middle Easterners or Latin Americans. And this is the point. No two people - like no two plants - are the same. Each has his or her own specific qualities and characteristics - qualities and characteristics that make every person - like every plant - distinctive and unique.

These are not the only similarities between plants and people. Whereas some plants prefer the sun, others prefer the shade. Sweet williams, petunias, impatiens, portulacacis, verbenas and periwinkles, for example, all thrive in the sun. In fact, the hotter it gets, the more they like it. Others, such as mimuluses and foxgloves, prefer the shade. They do badly in the sun, especially full sun. People are like this too. Some prefer the sun, performing most effectively when they are in the limelight and hot situations. Others prefer the shade, performing most effectively when they are out of the limelight and the heat.

To this should be added the “show-offs” and the “wall-flowers.” Some people are show-offs, constantly muscling other people out of the way in order to hog all the recognition and attention for themselves. Others are wall-flowers - or “shrinking violets” as they are sometimes called - because they are constantly
holding back and staying out of the limelight. Nevertheless, they confirm John Milton’s classic statement that “they also serve who only stand and wait.”

There are show-offs and wall-flowers in plants too. Plants that derive from bulbs are often show-offs. They produce magnificent flowers when they are cared for properly, such as gladiolas, dahlias, tulips, lilies, callases and irises. They are favourites in any garden because they usually perform extremely well and always look their best. Others are wall-flowers, constantly shrinking from view and attention. Many ground plants are like this, such as ivy, saint johnswort, periwinkle, spurge, and the like. They provide excellent contrasts - and often a great deal of relief - from the show-offs.

Every gardener knows all about the unique qualities and characteristics of plants and gives this matter special attention in the design, development, and layout of gardens. If gardens are to delight the eye, soothe the soul, and tickle the imagination - and if they are to thrive throughout the entire growing season and not just some limited part of it - it is imperative to know a great deal about the strengths, weaknesses, and idiosyncrasies of plants. What would a garden be without its show-offs and wall-flowers, annuals, biennials and perennials, plants that flourish in the sun and plants that flourish in the shade, and plants that bloom at different stages in the growing season?

Shakespeare knew all about this. In fact, plants, herbs, flowers and weeds figure prominently in many of his plays. For example, in Midsummer Night’s Dream, Oberon begins his famous speech with the words: I know a bank where the wild thyme blows/ Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows/ Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine/ With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine. With such an intimate knowledge of horticulture, Shakespeare may have been an excellent gardener as well as an outstanding playwright.

The more I reflected on the similarities between plants and people, horticulture and human culture, the more I became intrigued with the intimate connection between the two. This is not surprising in view of the fact that both plants and people are living organisms, and as such, obey the laws governing all living things, such as consumption, digestion and elimination, birth, adolescence, maturity, old age, and death, and gender differentiation and mixing. Moreover, the term “culture” derives from the Latin verb “colere” meaning to “till,” “cultivate,” or “nurture.” This means that there has been a powerful bond between plants and people dating back to classical times. It is a bond that has been largely lost in the modern era due to the separation of human beings from nature.
Nevertheless, it explains why there is a whole series of words in our vocabulary - words like agriculture, silvaculture, permaculture, viticulture, and the like - which confirm the fact that there is an intimate connection between plants and people, horticulture and human culture.

The more I reflected on this connection, the more I became fascinated with the strong bond that exists between the two. I was particularly intrigued by what can be learned from “the growth and development of plants” that is relevant to “the growth and development of people.” This matter seemed far-fetched to me at first, but the more I reflected on it, the more I became convinced that there are important lessons to be learned from the growth and development of plants that are relevant to the growth and development of people.

As every gardener knows, it is imperative to “plant plants properly in the soil” and “root them effectively” if they are to grow and mature successfully. I discovered this when I was still in my teens. Thinking I might like to be a gardener or a florist when I grew up, I got a job working part time in a flower shop in Toronto. I had visions of working in the front of the store learning all about the characteristics and peculiarities of plants and flowers and their ability to sooth people and beautify human and natural surroundings. The owner had different ideas! He put me to work in the back of the store digging earth and planting bulbs. It was very demanding work, since earth, soil and fertilizers are very heavy. But it taught me a great deal about the necessity of planting plants properly in the soil and rooting them effectively if you want them to grow and mature successfully later in life.

Just is it is essential to plant plants properly in the soil and root them effectively, so it is essential to have superb soil if plants are to grow and develop successfully. If the soil is rich in nitrogen, phosphorous, potassium and other nutrients - and if it holds moisture well and plants are properly positioned in it - plants will likely spring forth in all their magnificence and flower effectively later in life. However, if the soil is deficient in nutrients, and if it does not hold moisture well and plants are not properly positioned in it, plants are likely to grow poorly and even shrivel up and die. It is a well-known fact in gardening that “if you look after the roots, everything else will take care of itself.”

People are like this too. If they are able to profit from excellent nutrients and proper rooting during the first few years of life, it is quite likely that they will grow up to be mature and responsible adults. While this has been known for a long time, it was reinforced recently by Fraser Mustard and Margaret McCain when they conducted their pioneering study on early childhood development and education. In their seminal report - The Early Years Study - they showed how essential it is to “root children properly” during their first two or three years of
life, since this has a fundamental bearing on everything that follows thereafter. If children are able to profit from loving parents, devoted families, numerous possibilities for creative stimulation and discovery, reliable playmates, stable neighbourhoods, healthy environments, and especially the opportunity to use their individual and collective talents and imaginations during the formative years of their lives, they are likely to grow up to be fulfilled, creative, and responsible adults. However, if they are not able to profit from these necessities, they are likely to experience numerous difficulties and hardships in life. As the old saying goes “as the twig is bent, so grows the tree.”

Are there other valuable lessons to be learned from the growth and development of plants that are relevant to the growth and development of people? Indeed there are. One of the most important is how essential it is to give people enough space to grow and develop.

One of the biggest mistakes that can be made in gardening is to plant plants too close together. When this happens, their normal growth and development is cut off because there is insufficient room to spread out and they must compete with other plants for water, sunlight, and other ingredients. I discovered this a number of years ago when I planted some marigolds in our garden. I planted them too close together and they did very poorly, largely because they were squeezing each other out. So I dug them up, transplanted them farther apart, and they bloomed magnificently because they had enough space to grow and develop.

This spatial problem is often encountered when new subdivisions are created and new homes are built. There is usually a tendency to plant saplings, trees, and shrubs too close together. This is either because people are anxious to fill up the empty spaces on their properties, or because they have a difficult time visualizing how large these saplings, trees and shrubs will become when they reach full adulthood. In either case, by the time the saplings, trees and shrubs reach maturity, they are usually blocking each other out and struggling to survive because they can’t get enough water, sunlight, and other nutrients.

What is true for saplings, trees and shrubs is equally true for people. People need sufficient room to grow and develop. They should never be packed too tightly together, since this restricts their mobility and growth. They need to be able to spread their wings, so to speak, and develop their intellectual abilities and practical talents to the utmost. This is why one of the biggest mistakes that can be made in educational institutions is to put too many students in a classroom, since there is insufficient room for personal growth and development and teachers are unable to address the needs, interests, and problems of every student. Clearly all people need enough space to grow and develop if their abilities and talents are to be cultivated effectively and they are to soar to greater and greater heights.
This same need for space is evident in town planning and urban design. When people are packed too tightly together - as is often the case in high-rise apartments, condominiums, neighbourhoods, communities and cities - the result can be frustration, violence, crime and theft because human densities are too high. Indeed, one of the greatest challenges of town planning and urban design is to provide sufficient space for people to grow and develop while simultaneously preserving the sense of community, identity, solidarity and belonging that comes from bringing people together and enabling them to share the same space together.

This is not to say that people’s need for space is the same for all people, since this varies greatly from person to person and culture to culture. In some cultures, particularly cultures with large populations compared to land resources, people are used to living in close physical proximity and feel uncomfortable or disoriented when this is not occurring. In other cultures, especially cultures with small populations compared to land resources, the reverse is often true. People in these cultures get used to having a great deal of space and feel threatened if they are packed too tightly together. Nevertheless, all people react negatively rather than positively when their space is invaded and they are jammed so tightly together that they feel oppressed.

Just as it is necessary to ensure that plants have enough space to grow and develop and are properly positioned in the soil, so it is necessary to ensure that they have all the ingredients that are required to sustain and enrich life. This all boils down to three basic ingredients in the end: water; sunlight; and fertilizers. Gardeners will argue *ad infinitum* - and *ad nauseum* - over which of these three ingredients is most essential.

In the final analysis, they are all essential. Without sufficient water, sunlight and fertilizers, the growth and development of plants is severely restricted, especially if these ingredients are deficient in certain properties or are absent for extended periods of time. All the ingredients must be there - *and they must be there in the right proportions and the right qualities* - if healthy growth and development is to be ensured. Too much water and too little sunlight can cause plants to become soggy and wet, if not waterlogged and super-saturated. Conversely, too little water and too much sunlight can cause plants to shrivel up, dry out, and possibly even wither and die. Plants that do not get enough fertilizers - natural, human-made, but preferably both - will not grow properly and will fail to become “all that they are capable of being.”

People are like this too. They need the right ingredients and they need them in the right proportions and properties if they are to develop healthy bodies and minds and achieve full maturity and growth. In this case, the ingredients are family life, excellent upbringing, education, nurturing, attention, and access to
numerous opportunities. The emphasis should be on good values, good education,good manners, good morals, positive outlooks, and promising possibilities at each stage in the developmental process.

While these are the most important lessons to be learned from the growth and development of plants that are relevant to the growth and development of people, they are not the only lessons. Another lesson is how essential it is to attend to the fine art of “pruning” - or cutting back in some areas to facilitate growth and development in other areas. Horticulturists employ this art all the time to get the best out of plants and encourage them to grow in the right directions and the right areas.

Have you ever noticed how badly plants do when old or dead leaves, stems, and flowers are not removed? Old or dead leaves, stems, and flowers interfere with natural growth because they sap energy, moisture, and nutrients that are intended for other areas without giving anything back in return. Once they are removed through pruning, plants usually pick up and do extremely well. And this is not all. Plants can easily get top-heavy, or grow too much in one area compared to other areas. When this happens, pruning is imperative to encourage healthy growth and development in the right areas, directions and proportions.

There is a great deal to be learned about pruning from bonsai, or growing miniature trees, shrubs, and plants in pots. Apparently, bonsai first occurred in China more than a thousand years ago when it was known as pun-sai, or growing single specimen trees in containers. These specimens had sparse foliage and gnarled trunks and branches that tended to resemble birds, dragons and other animals, thereby explaining why many shrubs and trees are pruned in animal forms in Chinese and other gardens throughout the world today. Many myths and legends sprung up around Chinese bonsai, which helps account for the fact that the grotesque and animal-like forms and craggy and evocative shapes of bonsai plants are highly prized today.

Interestingly, bonsai was first introduced into Japan from China during the Kamakura period from 1185 to 1333. It has been closely associated with Japan and Japanese gardening ever since. For the Japanese, bonsai represents the fusion and harmony between people, nature, and the soul. While the Japanese usually use native species in their bonsai - especially pines, azaleas and maples - many other species are now used for bonsai in Japan and other parts of the world. Regardless of what species is used, however, the objective is always the same: to twist and turn trunks and branches and cultivate leaves and flowers to achieve the ideal effect. When this is realized, the result is usually objects of great beauty, fascination, sophistication, and conversation. There is something about meticulously-pruned trees and shrubs in dwarfed or miniature form that delights
the eye and entices the imagination, particularly when they are over a hundred years old and have been passed on from generation to generation.

Plants are not the only things that profit from pruning. People also profit from pruning. There are many times in people’s lives when obstacles and encumbrances interfere with natural growth because they sap too much energy and restrict development. Many health problems are like this. They are debilitating because they siphon off energy and nutrients that are intended for other areas. Pruning is then required to cut back or remove these obstacles and encumbrances. When this happens, recovery usually takes place rather quickly and health is quickly restored.

A bad relationship can be like this. As painful as it is, it is usually necessary to cut back or remove an obstacle in a relationship in order to make way for “healthy growth” and “new developments” in the future. Moreover, there are times in people’s lives when some things grow too quickly and others grow too slowly. When this happens, pruning is required to trim back the former and activate the latter, as this helps to produce people that are more fully-developed and well-adjusted.

Thus far, we have been considering what can be learned from the growth and development of plants that is relevant to the growth and development of people. In much the same way, there is much to be learned from the growth and development of gardens that is relevant to the growth and development of cultures. The two are very similar when you think about it.

For one thing, gardens and cultures are both created by people. They are concerned with the way people imprint their thoughts, ideas, images, ideals and visions on a very specific piece of the natural environment and world’s geography. Whereas gardens involve the application of tools and techniques to the wonders of nature, cultures involve the application of tools and techniques to the wonders of human collectivities and society as a whole.

In the development of gardens, it is always wise to have an overall plan in mind, even if it must be altered many times during the actual execution. In the development of cultures, it is also advisable to have an overall plan in mind, even if it must be changed many times during the process. Moreover, just as care must be taken in the development of gardens to ensure that tools and techniques are applied with a masterful and skillful hand, so care must be taken in the development of cultures to ensure that tools and techniques are applied with
sensitivity, imagination, and daring - the kind of sensitivity, imagination, and daring that lifts the design and development of cultures from a science to an art.

Nor is this all. Gardens and cultures both exist to satisfy a variety of human needs and yield a great deal of satisfaction and delight. In the case of gardens, it is the need for rest, relaxation, recuperation, renewal, and communication with nature, which is why gardens have been prized so much throughout history and are closely associated with thoughts and images of paradise and the sublime. “We plant the tree so we can enjoy the shade” is how the ancient Chinese proverb expressed it, and how Handel expressed it in his exquisite aria *Ombre mai fù* from the opera *Xerxes*. In cultures, it is the need for social, economic, educational, political, artistic, spiritual and environmental well-being. Nevertheless, the objective is the same: the fulfillment of a variety of human needs and the creation of a great deal of satisfaction and delight.

Of course, this can be achieved in many different ways. In the case of gardens, it depends on the desires, preferences and visions of the gardener, as well as horticultural practices and policies in vogue in different parts of the world.

Some gardeners prefer to embellish gardens a great deal, believing it is necessary to situate every plant, flower, leaf, branch, tree, shrub, and stone in its proper place in order to achieve some preconceived idea or desired effect. Many Japanese gardens are designed and developed in this way, such as the world-famous Kenrokuen, Kanazawa and Okayama-Ken gardens. These gardens are not overly large, but every element is attended to with painstaking detail and every effort is made to achieve “just the right effect.”

Other gardeners prefer to embellish gardens as little as possible, believing this is necessary to achieve a more natural and spontaneous effect. Many English gardens are planned and laid out in this way. While an enormous amount of time, energy and effort goes into their design and development, they possess a profuse and random quality that is difficult to describe but easy to appreciate. They give the viewer the impression that nature is being experienced first hand rather than through some form of human intervention, although nothing could be farther from the truth. This helps to account for the popularity of gardens and gardening in England, as well as such well-known gardens as Wisley in Surrey, Rosemount in Devon, Hyde Hall in Essex, Harlow Carr in North Yorkshire, the world-famous Chelsea Flower Show, and the activities of the Royal Horticultural Society.

Like gardens, cultures are designed and developed in many different ways. Some, particularly western and northern cultures, are planned and developed with a great deal of attention to detail. Planners and decision-makers are not satisfied until every issue has been addressed and every need has been dealt with. Others,
such as many eastern and southern cultures, are left much more to their own devices. Planners and decision-makers in this case are more inclined to let things look after themselves without a great deal of human intervention or interference.

Regardless of what type of culture or garden is preferred, the litmus test is the same. Does the culture or garden work? Have people’s needs and wants been addressed successfully? Have dynamic and organic wholes been created that achieve balance and harmony among the parts?

Over the course of a lifetime, I have had the good fortune to visit many famous gardens throughout the world to see how gardeners have attempted to deal with this problem in detail. I am thinking, for example, of Kew Gardens in England, the Tivoli Gardens in Denmark, the Versailles and Tuileries Gardens in France, the Villa d’Este Gardens in Italy, the Royal Botanical and Butchart Gardens in Canada, the Japanese Gardens in San Francisco, the Generalife Gardens in Spain, and numerous other gardens throughout the world. I have also researched and read about many other world famous gardens, such as the ancient gardens of Suzhou in China that date back to 600 BC, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon that were watered by the Euphrates, built on rooftop with columned terraces, and considered one of the seven ancient wonders of the world, the Chinampas or “floating gardens” of the Aztecs in Mexico, Claude Monet’s fascinating garden at Giverny, France, the internationally-known tulip garden at Keukenhof in the Netherlands, and many other famous gardens throughout the world. The challenge has always been the same: to create a dynamic and organic whole that achieves harmony, balance, and synergy among the parts.

Comparisons are often made between western and eastern gardens to show how gardeners have addressed this challenge in these two different parts of the world. For instance, Japanese gardens are usually designed and developed as “single units” or “unitary wholes.” The focus is on creating a single unit or unitary whole that shines the spotlight squarely on nature in general and nature’s diverse elements in particular. Since the viewpoint of the observer is critical, Japanese gardens are usually seen from a single viewpoint, or, at the most, two or possibly three viewpoints if one happens to be walking along a path. Moreover, water is extremely important in Japanese gardens, but only in its natural form. It can be used in a stream, a pond, or a waterfall, but never in a fountain because fountains are not found in nature and are “unnatural.” In addition, Japanese gardeners often use common plants and shrubs to achieve a desired effect. This is done to prevent the parts from dominating the whole and overpowering it.

This contrasts sharply with most western gardens. Whereas nature and its diverse elements are celebrated in Japanese gardens, human dominance over nature is celebrated in the large majority of western gardens. This is manifested in
various ways. For example, western gardens are usually planned and developed as a series of wholes or units rather than as a single whole or unit. This makes it possible to break western gardens into different sections - wholes within the whole so to speak - where each section possesses a specific theme and the sections are separated by some device such as a hedge or shrubs. These gardens can then be seen from a multiplicity of viewpoints - rather than a single viewpoint - because the visitor is free to walk from one section to another.

And this is not all. Whereas Japanese gardeners prefer to use common plants and shrubs to achieve a desired effect, western gardeners often prefer to use exotic flowers and plants - many of which are extremely beautiful and colourful - to achieve a desired effect. Furthermore, “etching” is popular in many western gardens, something that is taboo in Japanese gardens. This is especially true with respect to pools of water. Pools of water seldom appear in their natural state in western gardens, much as they do in Japanese gardens. They are usually etched with borders of shrubs or stones to accentuate distinctive features and focus the viewer’s attention on specific details the gardener wants highlighted in some way.

Despite these differences, the fact remains that the basic challenge in all gardens is to create a whole that realizes balance, harmony and synergy among the parts. This is equally true for cultures. However, in the case of cultures, the parts are social, artistic, scientific, technological, educational, economic, environmental and spiritual activities rather than plants, shrubs, trees, flowers, rocks, stones, ponds, fountains, and the like. The distinguished Dutch cultural historian and scholar, Johan Huizinga, had this challenge uppermost in mind when he said, “the realities of economic life, of power, of technology, of everything conducive to man’s material well-being, must be balanced by strongly developed spiritual, intellectual, moral and aesthetic values.” Without this, there is the perpetual danger that some parts will dominate other parts and impact negatively rather than positively on the whole, much as excessive commercial, technological, military and marketplace practices are doing today.

One of the first people to write about cultures in the all-encompassing sense was the philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803). In his landmark publication - Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind - he said the most important factor in cultures is not the individual, but the group. It is groups of people who create cultures as they go about the process of meeting their individual and collective needs. Since the factors that affect the creation and development of cultures vary enormously from one culture to another and one part of the world to another, Herder concluded that every culture has a soul, spirit, or essence. It was but a short step from this for Herder to conclude that the world is very much like a garden with all sorts of plants - cultures - comprising it and providing variety, vitality, and colour in it. Since each culture has its own particular design, pattern,
and distinctive features, the challenge according to Herder was for every culture to develop its own character - or “circle of happiness” as he called it - to the fullest extent.

Of course, character manifests itself in cultures in different ways. In some cases, it manifests itself in cuisine, which is the case with Chinese, French, Turkish, Japanese, Moroccan, and Italian culture. In other cases, it manifests itself in architecture, which is conspicuous in Indian, Iranian and Thai culture. In still other cases, it manifests itself in music, which is apparent in German and Austrian culture. And in still other cases, it manifests itself in the crafts, which is the case in numerous African, Asian and Latin American cultures. In each of these cases, and others too numerous to cite here, character manifests itself in cultures through a variety of activities and devices and the way these activities and devices are combined to form wholes - overall ways of life - that reveal the specific properties, qualities and characteristics of the cultures that give rise to them.

We are much richer today as a result of this. There exists throughout the world a vast cornucopia of cultures that are meant to be enjoyed, experienced, explored, appreciated and utilized, just as gardens are. Think, for example, of the many different cultures that exist - and have existed - in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, North and South America, and the Caribbean. Many of these cultures are thousands of years old and consist of different layers piled one on top of another, each with its own specific character and characteristics. Take Chinese culture, for example. It is composed of countless cultures or dynasties, such as the Qin, Han, Sui, Tang, Song, Ming and Qing cultures or dynasties, each with its own unique character, characteristics, and distinguishing features.

Over the centuries, the various cultures of the world have produced a vast panorama of accomplishments: fabled architectural edifices like the Taj Mahal and the Forbidden City; outstanding cities like Venice with its enchanting canals, Isfahan and Istanbul with their exquisite mosques, Kyoto with its ancient temples, and Buenos Aires, Marrakech, Savannah and Quito with their evocative streets and sumptuous squares; all the world’s greatest music, painting, and literature; outstanding philosophical, religious and spiritual writings; and incomparable achievements in science, technology, education, economics, communications, language, and social affairs. These accomplishments - like the cultures that have given rise to them - are meant to be shared, savoured and celebrated by all the world’s people, countries, and civilizations.

In the past, it was common to think of cultures in closed, uniform, and homogeneous terms. The emphasis was placed on people who looked the same and shared the same values, traditions, customs, beliefs, symbols, and ways of life. Attention was focused on uniformity rather than diversity, similarities rather than
differences. The horticultural equivalent to this would be a garden composed of only one type of plant or flower, such as a rose garden, a tulip garden, or a garden full of daffodils. These gardens can be very beautiful, and the people who have seen them - in England, the Netherlands, Belgium, Canada, and other parts of the world - attest to their great beauty and how lovely they are when they are in full bloom. But they often leave a great deal to be desired, since they bloom only once in the year and have little or no variety or variation.

In recent years, there has been a tendency to think of cultures in open, diverse and heterogeneous terms rather than closed, uniform and homogeneous terms. There are a number of reasons for this. As people interact, intermingle, intermarry, and move more frequently from one part of the world to another due to globalization and rapidly-changing economic, social, political and demographic conditions, populations are becoming much more diversified and variegated in character. And just as it is possible to find many different types of plants, shrubs and flowers in most gardens today and not always the same plants, shrubs and flowers, it is also possible to find many different kinds of people living in cultures today and not always the same people. In fact, people living in cultures today can be incredibly diverse, with many different languages, backgrounds, worldviews, values, traditions and beliefs because they come from different parts of the world. But the objective is the same: to create dynamic and organic wholes that achieve balance, harmony, and synergy among the parts. Just as we are constantly striving to do this with gardens, so we must constantly strive to do it with cultures.

Here again, there are valuable lessons to be learned from horticulture that are relevant to human culture. For it is impossible to create balance, harmony, and synergy in cultures without cultivating many of the techniques and skills that are well known in gardening and horticulture.

Take “transplantation” for example. If gardens are to be successful and look their best, it is often necessary to move plants from one location to another in order to situate them in the best possible place. When this happens, it is advisable to take some of the soil from the old location to plant with the plants in the new location. This is because plants transplant most effectively when they are surrounded by familiar things, since this helps to cushion the shocks that come from transplantation. While plants must ultimately “make it on their own” and “find their own niche” in their new surroundings, having something from the old location to assist them in the new location is extremely important because it eases the stresses, strains, and tensions that derive from transplantation.

What is true for plants is equally true for people. If people are to be transplanted successfully from one culture to another or one part of the world to another, two things are essential.
First, people must bring some things with them from their old culture to assist them in their new culture, or they must find these things shortly after they arrive. This is why immigrants often bring objects, artifacts, customs, traditions, and ways of life with them from their old culture to help them make the transition to their new culture, or they immediately search these things out soon after they arrive in their new culture. Without this, the challenge of transplantation - emigration, immigration, settlement, and the like - can be extremely stressful and painful, if not traumatic and distressing.

Second, and closely related to the first, people must be prepared properly for transplantation in their new culture. Speaking culturally, this means providing immigrants and newcomers with the orientation, training, education, assistance, and job opportunities they need to ensure that they are integrated effectively into their new culture. Unfortunately, this is an area where many cultures come up short. Far too often, too little time, energy, effort, and money are put into helping immigrants and newcomers settle in their new culture and adjust to their new cultural surroundings. This is imperative now that cultures are becoming increasingly diversified and pluralistic in character, with many different people, cultures, traditions, beliefs, and ways of life interacting under one roof.

Transplantation is not the only skill or technique that is used in horticulture that is relevant to human cultures. I am thinking once again of “pruning,” but this time in the collective sense rather than the individual sense. Just as pruning must be constantly attended to if plants and people are to grow properly and mature effectively in the individual sense, so pruning must be constantly attended to if gardens and cultures are to grow and mature successfully in the collective sense.

Since plants grow in many different directions and areas if they are not looked after properly, pruning is an essential part of good gardening. Without this, gardens will quickly become overgrown and fail to achieve the purposes for which they are intended. There is nothing quite so distressing as a garden that is overgrown and doesn’t look its best. While some plants must be curtailed or cut back, others must be activated and encouraged.

Like gardens, cultures must also be constantly pruned to ensure that some activities do not overpower other activities and squeeze them out. Here again, the distinguished cultural historian and scholar, Johan Huizinga, has something relevant to say:

A culture which no longer can integrate the diverse pursuits of men into a whole, which cannot restrain men through a guiding set of norms, has lost its center and has lost its style. It is
threatened by the exuberant overgrowth of its separate components. It then needs a pruning knife, a human decision to focus once again on the essentials of culture and cut back on the luxuriant but dispensable.2

What are the essentials and what are the luxuriants? This is the sixty-four thousand-dollar question for cultures! While this varies greatly from one culture to another depending on worldviews, values, values systems, customs, traditions and beliefs in vogue in different parts of the world, the essentials are peace, order, security, stability, unity, equality, diversity, creativity, excellence, and the like. And the luxuriants? They are obviously excessive military, commercial, technological, racial and religious practices. Adherence to these latter concerns, particularly if they are carried to extremes, can cause considerable hardships for cultures, people, countries, and the natural environment everywhere in the world.

And this brings us, via a rather circuitous route, to the most difficult skill or technique in horticulture that is relevant to human culture. I am speaking, of course, of “weeding.” It is a skill or technique that requires the utmost care and attention if gardens and cultures are to function effectively.

Like transplantation and pruning, weeding is a very essential part of gardening. Since weeds make no distinction between what is a garden and what is not a garden, weeds are as likely to appear in gardens as anywhere else. And this creates innumerable problems for gardeners, since gardens must be constantly purged of their weeds if they are to function effectively and look their best.

The problem here is that it is not always possible to know what is a weed and what is not a weed. How many times has a gardener pulled out a plant assuming it was a weed, only to discover later that it was not a weed?

In the end, what is a weed and what is not a weed would seem to boil down to how beautiful or ugly a plant is, how quickly or slowly it grows, and how much damage it does to other plants and the garden as a whole. Many weeds grow very quickly, require little moisture, sunlight and other nutrients, and overpower other plants and interfere with their natural growth. When this happens, they must be pulled out and discarded if gardens are to perform effectively.

To this should be added a second problem related to weeds and weeding. Some weeds look so incredibly beautiful that they can fool even the most skilled gardener, and certainly novice gardeners like myself. When this happens, it may not be realized that they are weeds until it is too late. Take purple loosestrife for example. It is often called “the beautiful killer,” “the marsh monster,” and “the exotic invader” because it looks extremely beautiful, grows very rapidly, and
quickly overpowers other plants when it gets established. It appears most often in swampy areas and wetlands, blooms from late June to early September, produces up to three million seeds a year, can reproduce from seeds, stems or roots, and is exceedingly difficult to eradicate once it has taken hold.

It is often able to fool very experienced gardeners because it appears in a garden variety as well as in wild form. When it appears in a garden variety, it is usually known as loosestrife cultivars, and comes in Morden Pink, Morden Glean, and Dropmode Purple. It is said it is sterile in this form, although gardeners and horticulturists are deeply divided on this point. Many gardeners like to use it in their gardens because it has exquisite purple-reddish flowers, blooms profusely, and adds a great deal of colour and vitality to gardens. However, horticulturists claim it is never benign and can do a great deal of damage by choking off other plants and driving them out of gardens at a phenomenal rate. It is much like crab grass in this respect.

As difficult as weeds and weeding are for gardens, they are much more difficult for cultures. But cultures also have their “weeds” and “weeding problems,” even if they are called by different names. They are exactly the same problems encountered in gardens, but are much more difficult to address. How do you know what is a weed and what is not a weed in a culture? And more importantly, what do you do about it?

Are radicals, deviants, agitators and misfits undesirable elements in cultures? They certainly possess the potential to do a great deal of damage if they are not properly dealt with, particularly when they overpower other people and interfere with their natural growth. But radicals, deviants, agitators, and misfits are not always undesirable elements in cultures, even if they may appear to be on the surface or at a particular point in time. Indeed, precisely the opposite may be the case, and often is. Think of Copernicus, Luther, Galileo, Marx, Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Mother Teresa for example. They were all radicals, deviants, agitators, and misfits in one form or another who created an enormous amount of turmoil, unrest and confusion in the cultures in which they lived and worked, not unlike weeds in a garden. But in this case, the turmoil, unrest and confusion ultimately proved to be beneficial and constructive rather than harmful and destructive because it led to phenomenal improvements in these cultures, as well as in the human condition and the world situation as a whole.

Take Copernicus for example. He caused considerable turmoil, unrest and confusion in Europe by challenging established beliefs and convictions concerning the nature of the universe. But he also laid the foundations for modern astronomy by contending that the earth revolves around the sun rather than the reverse in his heliocentric theory, which is commonly accepted today. Martin Luther rejected
orthodox thinking about religion, inspired the Reformation, and was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church. But he also opened the doors to profound changes in religious practices and policies in Europe and paved the way for Protestantism and fundamental changes in Catholicism. Galileo was brought before the Inquisition in Rome in 1633 and forced to renounce his beliefs and writings on a variety of subjects. But he also played a seminal role in the development of gravitational theory and the invention of the telescope. Karl Marx vigorously attacked capitalism and capitalists, but also produced countless improvements in people’s lives through his provocative theories of socialism, communism, and the rights of working-class people and the labouring class.

And what was true in earlier periods of history was equally true in the twentieth century. Gandhi caused an incredible amount of turmoil in India by contesting British rule there. But he also played a seminal role in bringing home rule to India. Dr. Martin Luther King caused a great deal of friction in the United States by championing the rights of blacks in America. But he also did more than any other leader to create a real measure of equality between whites and blacks in the United States, despite the fact that he was assassinated for his efforts. Nelson Mandela served twenty years in jail for his provocative views on segregation and the treatment of blacks and minorities in South Africa. But his efforts eventually led to a new type of society in that part of the world. And Mother Teresa caused a considerable amount of anxiety by chastising people and countries in all parts of the world for ignoring the poor and underprivileged peoples of the world. But she also improved the welfare and well-being of countless people throughout the world through her relentless activism and unwillingness to take “no” for an answer.

As these examples confirm, people with divergent beliefs and convictions are not always undesirable elements in cultures. In fact, they can be highly desirable elements if their beliefs and convictions lead to positive and constructive rather than negative and destructive results. While a considerable amount of care must be taken to deal aggressively and forcefully with undesirable elements in cultures - as the recent encounters with religious fundamentalism, terrorist attacks, violence, and wars throughout the world readily confirm - an equal amount of care must be taken to differentiate between what are desirable and undesirable elements in cultures.

We have been reflecting on some of the similarities that exist between plants and people, horticulture and human culture, and especially what can be learned from the growth and development of plants and gardens that is relevant to the growth and development of people and cultures. Although we have only scratched the surface of this vast and fascinating subject, it is clear that much more time, energy and attention should be devoted to it in the future. Not only is there a
great deal to be learned from horticulture that is relevant to human culture - particularly with respect to the nature and character of human life and how cultures should be organized and developed - but also this could provide the missing link that is needed between human beings and the natural environment to come to grips with the environmental crisis and prevent ecological disaster. With more and more people getting involved in gardening all the time, the prospects for forging a much closer association between human beings and nature - horticulture and human culture - are extremely favourable. For horticulture and human culture are not really all that different when you stop and think about it.


2. Ibid. pp. 219-220.

D. Paul Schafer is Director of the World Culture Project. He can be reached at 19 Sir Gawaine Place, Markham, Ontario, L3P 3A1. Tel: 905-471-1342. Email: dpaulschafer@sympatico.ca.