NATIVE PLANTS for the Garden

by John Whittlesey

Natural landscapes are a rich source of esthetically pleasing scenes. Scenes, that while specific to their time evolved environment, also offer lessons that can be brought into home gardens. As a garden designer/landscaper I can’t help myself from observing and appreciating what strikes me as good design when I am out hiking. I’m prone to declaring whether alone or with a hiking companion ‘mmm that is good design’ when I notice some particularly fine arrangement of plants, rocks or trail.

I often pay attention to the gentle, natural curves of paths and trails. On Table Mountain for instance, I will stand back and appreciate the cow trails that meander through the cobble strewn grasslands. Rarely are they straight for long. Even if a bend to the right or left is not made mandatory by a change in terrain or a large rock, the cows, after a time, tend to saunter to one side or another. The same with deer trails - they are never straight. Gentle curving pathways lead the traveler ahead slowly, yet with purpose.

Also what makes a trail or path a pleasure to walk is the placement of plants. In the South Warner Wilderness, the Summit trail, after the initial hike through an area of sparsely vegetated lava scree, enters an area with sagebrush, mountain mahogany, buckwheats and other rugged perennials and low shrubs. The trail levels out to a slight uphill grade meandering gently between the mature Cercocarpus, some of the large shrubs acting as sentinels with the trail slipping between them. Others may be clustered in groups off to one side. A balance and rhythm generated by their spacing draws the hiker along.

There are varying amounts of open space between these rugged, picturesque shrubs. The low mass of understory plants, dominated by silver foliaged sagebrush, the soft yellow of the buckwheat flowers over mounding plants and the bold-leaved mules’ ears (Wyethia) are what carries the eye along the trail. Repetitive plantings are restful to the eye. Yet intimate surprises reveal themselves to observant hikers enlivening the hike. It might be a particularly showy paintbrush lit orange by the morning light and framed by burnished grey of long ago dead wood of the Cercocarpus, or a group of the creamy white Calochortus leichtlinii growing up through the puffy yellow clusters of buckwheat flowers, or a swale of Allium acuminatum glowing magenta pink against the silver of the sagebrush. These pretty details bring energy to the design while the repetition of the dominant plants brings calm.
through the *Seasons*

And of course noteworthy groupings of plants make me stand back and admire the simplicity and beauty of the assemblage, whether of foliage or flowers. Again on the Summit trail, the stark moonscape at the entrance to the wilderness area is broken up by islands of plants thriving in pockets of soil. These little gardens, usually sheltered by a gnarled juniper or ancient Cercocarpus, contained what seemed a perfect collection of plants chosen for contrast and color. These might include the florescent paintbrush growing in the shade closest to the trunk behind the silver Artemisia with a few mounding, yellow flowered buckwheat contrasting with the large strappy leaves of the mules' ear (Wyethia) and accented with the electric blue of a Penstemon species. A variety of annual and perennials grow on the borders - Erigeron, Lomatia, Cryptantha, Ericameria and more. Variety, contrast, foliage, colorful flowers, all tied together by their harmonious affinity after evolving together for thousands of years. A garden designer could not have improved on the plantings.

Using rocks in gardens requires some thought. Not all rock placements in gardens or in natural landscapes are always pleasing to the eye. When I come across a group of rocks, or plants among rocks that strikes me, I’ll often stand back and study the arrangement looking for why I find it pleasing. What is it about their size, their relationship in scale to other rocks and plants and the surrounding landscape. Often one rock providing a backdrop for a single plant can become dramatic scene. Contrast creates energy.

Or it might be a larger ‘rock garden’ that seems just right, such as one I saw recently along the PCT in Trinity county. Juxtaposed between an array of car sized boulders was a spillway of flat rocks interplanted with a blend of mat forming alpines. Sedums with their short stalks of reddish brown spent flowers, low mats of buckwheat with flowers a transition of yellow to bronze and dwarf hummocks of grasses filled the cracks and softened the edges of the rough rocks. The contrast of the plants and rocks, the contrast of the larger boulders with the open area of smaller rocks was a good lesson in scale, in creating restful, intimate spaces within a larger space.

So many scenes, so many examples of good design, so many scenes that capture our imagination can be found on our hikes. While the plants and the rocks cannot be transported magically into our home landscapes, the ideas and lessons can be brought home with us.