

Caring to cultivate on the long row of life:
An eclectic look at gardens, gardening, and the aging process

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Abstract

Gardening is one of the most popular home-based leisure activities in the U.S. and represents an important activity in the lives of older adults in a variety of residential settings. Yet, there has been a lack of any comprehensive and multidisciplinary examination of the nexus between gardening and the aging experience. In this paper, I focus on two domains between gardening and the aging process. One domain examines the effluence of gardening into various multidisciplinary nodes that sets the stage for the importance of gardens and gardening in the aging experience regardless of ability, settings, and historical context. The second domain highlights two specific issues: a) gardening as a significant activity to engage the cultivation of caring across the life course, and b) as a way to enhance the notion of stewardship in supporting environmental health in the context of home and community based settings. Gardening is more than an activity it also represents an intimate connection with life itself through nourishment, aesthetics, and existential meaning in the context of senescence.

KEY WORDS gardening, cultivation, care, aging, life course

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Introduction

Gardening is one of the most popular home-based leisure activities in the U.S. and represents a significant and salient activity in the lives of older adults (Ashe, Miller, Eng, & Noreau, 2009; Ashton-Shaeffer & Constant, 2005; Bhatti, 2006; Park, Shoemaker, & Haub, 2009). The National Gardening Association claimed that 80% of US households tended to plants, which represented an increase of 65% from the year 1996 (Francese, 2002). The 55 to 64 year old age group was the cohort that spent the most on horticultural products and services and this trend will most likely continue with aging baby-boomers (Francese, 2002; Gross & Lanea, 2007).

The functional allure of gardens and gardening in the later years is the result of multiple factors: historical, aesthetic, generational, psychological, and physiological. Yet, there is little empirical evidence to point to any direct measurable relationship to a natural affinity between aging and gardening as a desired activity and preferred use of time in later life. In our hypertechnical world many may find the notion of gardening as antiquated as the telegraph or little more than a self-sufficiency habit held over from the Great Depression era. It may even bring to mind the stereotypic and passive activities of “the golden years” and certainly not a topic to compete with the latest research on telomere degradation or a policy report centered on health care insurance reform.

And yet, there is much more to the nexus of gardening and aging than we what assume. In fact, the roots go deep and there are fruitful outcomes on closer examination of the intersection between the two. In the remainder of this paper, I will examine two domains of the nexus between gardening and the aging process. One domain will be to briefly highlight the many interesting multidisciplinary nodes in relation to the themes of

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gardens, aging artists, writers and filmmakers which will set the stage for the importance of gardens and gardening in the aging process regardless of ability, settings, and historical context. The goal here is to indicate how the theme of gardening permeates the aging experience in various expressions of human adaptation and creativity even in the face of challenge and loss. The second domain will address two issues: a) gardening as a mechanism to engage the cultivation of care in the social milieu of the aging individual, and b) as a way to enhance the notion of stewardship in supporting environmental health in the context of home and community based dwellings. But before I examine the interplay of those issues in greater detail, I will review the history and purpose of gardens, and then examine the role of gardening and the aging process by highlighting the cross-fertilization of these issues in a multidisciplinary fashion.

How Does Your Garden Grow? Definitions, History, and Purposes

For many people, the word “garden” can evoke varied emotions and leaps of cognitive associations. It can also signify many things that have little to do with cultivating vegetables and flowers. Some may immediately think of an entertainment/sports venue (e.g., Madison Square Garden); a biblical setting (e.g., The Garden of Eden) or some historical wonder of the world (e.g., The Hanging Gardens of Babylon); or pieces of literature such as *The Garden of Forking Paths* by Jorge Luis Borges or *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* by John Berendt or *The Garden of Last Days* by Andre Dubus III; or the film *The Constant Gardener* directed by Fernando Meirelles (based on the novel by John le Carre); or exotic paintings like *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch or *The Enchanted Garden* by J.W. Waterhouse (see Albers, 1991) or exotic settings such as found in *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Colonna,

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1999). For others, there may be an immediate leap to the Butchart Gardens in Greater Victoria on Vancouver Island, Canada or the Hawaii Tropical Botanical Garden or Zen rock garden of the Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto, Japan (see Harte, 1999; Pigeat, 2003; Schinz, 1985). Some may think of the Garden State (New Jersey) or if that is too far north then others may prefer Winter Garden, Florida. In the sociological domain, gardens have served as a focal point for assessing collectivist and bureaucratic cultures in conflict in the context of the “urban gardening movement” (Jamison, 1985), and more recently as a practice to engage in the illicit cultivation of someone else’s land known as “guerrilla gardening” (Reynolds, 2007). In the historical domain, there were the “Victory Gardens” in the 1940’s and with contemporary television, perhaps the PBS series, “The Victory Garden.” But for many people, a garden can simply be a plot of soil as close as your backyard and as modest as raised box with a few marigolds and tomato plants. Thus, as Ross (1998; 1999) has noted, trying to pinpoint an exact definition of gardens is daunting given the kaleidoscopic variations of gardens across many cultures and geographies.

Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper, one can be advanced for conceptual purposes. According to Pizzoni (1999), *gardens can be thought of as a place set aside for multiple uses such associated with horticulture and the cultivation of plants for food and medicinal herbs but it can also be seen as an expression of ornamental, religious and even political purposes* (see also Adams, 1991; Comito, 1978; Conan & Whangheng, 2008; Constantine, 1981; Grampp, 2008; Pollan, 1992; Punch, 1992; Taylor, 2006; Turner, 2005).

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Multidisciplinary Nodes in Relation to Gardens and the Aging Experience

A. Classical Literature

The portrayal of gardens as real sanctuary, as metaphor and as imagery to provide exotic backgrounds has been a part of the heritage of literature throughout history (see Miller, 1982; Simonds, 2008). For example, Marx (1985) has suggested an intriguing proposition that the bucolic setting, the pastoral world, and the role of gardener to be found in classical literature and poetry has been very much highly symbolic and associated *with the later stages of life*. That is, *to garden* is typically gerontological because the pastoral world was deemed to be separate from the “life of action” (*vita activa*) that was associated with young adulthood and middle stages of life which focused on the maintenance of life *out in the world*. What is provocative about Marx’s thesis is how there appears to be the subtle hint of the traditional “disengagement theory” at work here, but what is emphasized more strongly is that the role of the “old shepherd” is to serve as a reservoir of wisdom separate and away from away from the corruptions and tribulations of the court and the city. Marx (2005) believed that the portrayal of old age in the pastoral domain was the needed to balance against the excesses of pleasure and play of “youthful Epicurism” (e.g., folly) so that the sense of *responsibility and care* was instilled in the chain of generations as a desired virtue in order to deal with the hardships and challenges of life, which inevitably would appear across the life course. This pastoral connection may be traced back to *The Metamorphoses* of Ovid or Hesiod’s *Words and Days* or Cicero’s *On Old Age (Cato Maior de Senectute)*, but I submit that the proper starting point should be with Virgil’s *Georgics*. Virgil (70BCE -19 BCE) wrote the poem *Georgics* (the word *Georgics* refers to primarily to “farming”) during the 30s BCE and this would put Virgil at just over 40 years of age, and relatively speaking, at the peak of

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his senior status in the understanding of the life course at that time but perhaps not *senectus* yet (see Parkin, 2003). *Georgics* is a didactic and very much a template and design for interacting with the land and being attentive to what Ferry (2005) noted as Virgil's ability to engage the "ecstatic and tender celebrations of the very life in things," and more importantly how these "celebrations" interact with human existence (see also Haarhoff, 1958). In the *Georgics*, one can appreciate Virgil's attentiveness to the cycles of seasons, and the cycle of birth and death, and the inevitable unfolding of sickness and aging. Virgil's *Georgics* emphasize that through *care* of the land, we begin to care for each other, and from there follow the arts and cultural blossoming and the resulting the harvesting of another kind: poetry, art, music, sculptures, law, and ethics. In the fourth Georgic, Virgil writes of an old man who is at work on his small patch of land that was at one time not fertile enough to be plowed by oxen, but with his dedicated attention it has been transformed. The lines in this vignette are less didactic and more poetic in the sheer strength of the action and sensuality by use of vivid descriptions of the labor that is needed for all the seasons (see de Bruyn, 2004). Quint, (2006) has proposed in his review of the new translations of *Georgics* by Ferry (2005) and Lembke (2005) that,

...the old gardener thus carries some of the poem's political hopes as well as its ethical message. From a life of turmoil, he has settled into quiet usefulness and contentment, tamed by work and hardship, and even makes a thing of beauty in his flower garden, an analogue to the poem itself (p. 35).

An overarching theme throughout the *Georgics* is the didactic lesson of "as you sow, so shall you reap." The lesson is that progress towards happiness and well-being is highly dependent on the service that you have rendered onto the land and to kith and kin,

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to neighbors and to community. And it all begins in your backyard. And this theme will be examined in greater detail in the second domain of this paper as I review Voltaire's philosophy via *Candide*. Thus, gardening serves as the cornerstone of civilization – that is, *to care - constantly*. Harrison (2008) has succinctly woven these themes together by stating, “The true gardener is always ‘the constant gardener’” (p. 7).

B. Modern Literature

The conjunction of gardening and literature is substantial and readers are encouraged to review the literary companion publication of Simonds (2008), Marranca's (2003) anthology, and Garmey's edited book (1999) for an introduction and extensive review in this domain. For a more contemporary non-fiction perspective, Arthur Hellyer's (1936) *Your Garden Week by Week*, Jamaica Kincaid's (1999) *My Garden (Book)*, Diane Ackerman's (2001) *Cultivating Delight: A Natural History of My Garden* (2001), Michael Pollan's (2003) *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*, Caroline Holme's *New Shoots, Old Tips*, Barbara Kingsolver's (2007) *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* and Robert Fenton's (2002) critical review in the *The New York Review of Books* are highly recommended. Following the pattern of the previous section, I will examine only a few exemplars, specifically as it connects with the aging experience.

Following the theme of a labor of love when it comes to the dedication to gardening, many people will think of one of the best-selling American non-fiction classics, which is *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau (1995; 2005). But while Thoreau had the ability to capture the art and beauty of being connected to the soil, his stay at Walden was relatively short, a two-year experiment into his late twenties, and then he

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left to pursue other travels. If one wanted to find a more “constant gardener,” across the entire life course and into the retirement years, perhaps we could better start with Thomas Jefferson, Governor of Virginia and Vice-president and President of the United States, who was also an avid gardener and we are fortunate to read of his observations and activities in gardening in a publication titled, *The Garden Book* (Betts, 1944), which he began in 1776 and continued it until the autumn of 1824, two years before his death at the age of 83. *The Garden Book* is a remarkable account of Jefferson’s meticulous note taking on his botanical interests and indicated a devotion to the “culture of the earth.” At the age of 68 years old, in a letter to a Charles Willson Peale written in 1811 (from Betts, 1944), Thomas Jefferson remarked that, “But though an old man, I am but a young gardener.” And the theme of gardening continues as both therapeutic activity and metaphor for life itself in the works of Hans Christian Andersen, the garden became an allegory for his lifework writing folk tales (“fairy tales”), which had more significance with the world of adulthood than for children. The folk tale, “The Gardener and the Gentry” was written toward the end of his career and two years before his death in 1872. The use of gardening as a metaphor and allegory continues in the works of noted writers such as Frances Hodgson Burnett’s (1949) *The Secret Garden*, Charles Baudelaire’s (2006) *Les Fleurs du mal* and T.S. Eliot’s (1991) imagery of the rose-garden in the *Four Quartets* carries a multi-layered meaning of spirituality and the loss of Paradise within the cycles of life and death (Wagner, 1954). The *Four Quartets* were written over a span of several years (1935-1942) and in the last quarter of Eliot’s life. In “Burnt Norton” the rose-garden conveys memories and mythology of time passing with human existence (mere moments) compared to the history of humanity, civilization, and all that has gone

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before. I find it correlative that Carl Jung was using a similar theme to address his understanding of his own life in his book *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1989). In 1957, at the age of eighty-one years of age, Jung began to work with Aniela Jaffe to complete this major work before he died in 1961. The enlightening passage is from the prologue and is both vegetative and seminal in its garden metaphor by picturing life individually and collectively as sustaining and regenerative over the ages (see also Sabini, 2002).

When we think of the unending growth and decay of life and civilizations, we cannot escape the impression of absolute nullity. Yet I have never lost a sense of something that lives and endures underneath the eternal flux. What we see is the blossom, which passes. The rhizome remains (p. 4).

C. Cinema/Film

Although Jung's use of the rhizome metaphor supports the philosophical impression of life as continuous and unending, despite the relentless seasons and centuries of time, gardens are also very much transitory and impermanent. And so while gardens can be perceived as being artistic (Albers, 1991), they may not necessarily represent the outcome that matches the Hippocratic dictum, "Life is short, art is long" (*Ars longa, vita brevis*) in the sense that a garden is cultivated and cared for in an effort to outlast its caretaker, while on the other hand, gardens exist to re-enchant the present (Harrison, 2008; Kunitz & Lentine, 2005). Yet, one long-lasting medium for the expression of art is through the vehicle of film. And it is here that we will examine the crossroads of the use of garden imagery (symbolic and realistic) in relation to the aging experience and focus on three exemplars: *Wild Strawberries*, *Grey Gardens*, and *Dreams*.

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Wild Strawberries is the 1957 film by Ingmar Bergman (1960) that depicts the story of the aged Dr. Isak Borg who is traveling in his car to receive an honorary degree. Erik Erikson (1978) has provided a comprehensive analysis, based on his own theoretical interpretation, of Bergman's film and it is here that Erikson sees the emergent virtue of *care* as a necessary strength for "the life cycle as well as the cycle of generations" (p. 7). For example, Erikson (1978) noted that the tensions found between Dr. Borg and Marianne (his daughter) and Borg's son Evald, reflect the core issues of generativity such that it is Borg who must confront his own reactivity and the resulting lack of care and interest in his own family and many others around him (see also Weiland, 1993). The turning point for Isak Borg, and obviously the primary inspiration for the title of film, is when Dr. Borg leaves the main highway (his journey of life) and drives down a side road to revisit an old summer home (a chance for reminiscence and remembrance out of the rigid pattern of living in rote predictability). Borg remembers a specific location that would serve as catalyst for a reawakening much like the Proustian madeleine, but in this case, it is a strawberry patch near the summer home (Archer, 1959). And it is here that we find a richly layered symbolism that involves the magical transformation of the landscape surrounding the home into blooming plants and trees, and lush greenery. Even though the film is in black and white, one can almost imagine that large yard as colorful as Monet's gardens at Giverny. The wild strawberries that grow along the side of the yard are the triggering mechanism to transports Borg back through time and allow him to revisit his own young adulthood in relation to Sara, his "first love." In this film, the bounty of the earth in the form of wild strawberries is richly symbolic of the decisions made and the missed opportunities at forming intimate relationships (with Sara) and the

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resulting isolation and aloofness that made him think of himself as a “living corpse.”

Erikson (1978) offers his analysis of the Arcadian scene,

...one senses that this whole earthy scene, beyond its precious gaiety and its symbolic reference to defloration, points to something primeval, some garden, long forfeited by Isak (p. 8).

At least from Erikson’s perspective, that small patch of botanical life, the wild strawberries, are at once symbolic of the epigenetic pathway and a crossroads through adulthood and into the commitments of mature caring within mid and later life.

With the title of *Grey Gardens* (1976) such a film would *appear* to be the perfect connecting point for examining aging issues (“grey”) and gardens. But the film is less about gardening in the later years (per se) and more about of what was once cared for in relationships with people, home, and landscape in the past - has instead fallen into a state of neglect due to the disconnect with cultivating what is alive in the present. *Grey Gardens* is the portrait of two aging women (mother and daughter) both frozen in time and place, in an East Hampton home that is *graying* along with them. *Grey Gardens* is actually the name of the decaying estate that belongs to Edith Bouvier Beale (“Big Edie”) age 79 and her daughter Edie (or “Little Edie”) in her fifties. In the early 1970s, their 28-room mansion was found to be health hazard and both were threatened with eviction. They are relatives of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis and it was she who intervened on their behalf so that could both stay in the mansion after a massive clean up. The film opens up with Little Edie telling the Maysles about what used to be in terms of the beautiful and exotic gardens that once was. But as the camera sweeps the landscape it is obvious all has “gone wild” with thick overgrowth, vines that threaten to cover the house,

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and thick trees that literally create a wall of seclusion around the home. Throughout the film, there are shots of the house surrounded by thickets of vegetation that make it appear deserted, forlorn and enveloped in an ivy-snarled ruin. In *Grey Gardens* there actually is a man who is introduced as the “gardener” at the beginning of the film, but it is clear that the intruding jungle of vegetation is overwhelming to him. As the mother and daughter engage in their own private world of isolation and disconnect, the botanical world encroaches. As they live in the past, the present landscape is removed from their care and attention. While they may have their memories of some glorious yesteryear, the future is left to random seclusion. Harrison (2008) succinctly stated the connection between the need for constant gardening in the face of our obligations to the here and now,

If we are not able to keep our garden, if we are not able to take care of our mortal world, heaven and salvation are vain (p. 11).

Akira Kurosawa, at the age of 80, directed and then released the film, *Dreams* in 1990 (his 28th film), which portrayed several dreams based on Kurosawa’s own over the course of his life. The first and last episodes of *Dreams* feature two processions that symbolize the opening and closing of the life cycle: a wedding and a funeral (Serper, 2001). The film also captures luminous sequences of botanical wonderment with fields of flowers (*Sunshine Through the Rain*), an orchard of peaches in full bloom (*The Peach Orchard*) and rural scenes of wheat fields (*Crows*) with Van Gogh (who also loved gardens; see Fell, 2001) at work painting his landscapes and antithetical segments that portrayed the ruins of ecological disasters and the break with nature. The last segment, “The Village of the Watermills” of the film is especially significant which captures a lush farm with blooming flowers, lush green grass, and crystal clear rivers that drive the

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watermills in a wheel-like fashion. It is a “paradisiacal place: a village where modern technology has not invaded people’s lives and they live in harmony with nature” (Redier, 2005; p. 265). The Kurosawa surrogate (the younger man), while walking through the village, encounters a 103-year old man, who is working on a smaller water wheel structure. The older man communicates the necessity of treating the land with respect and articulates the perils if it is mistreated. The symbolic depth of the old man imparting wisdom to the younger man is a critical link in the message of the segment which highlights that working in harmony with the land helps to create a natural cycle of living – and dying. The watermills turn with the river of water, which provides nourishment for the plants and the flowers, which in turn the villagers use to celebrate the wheel of life – and death. At the end of the film, we are left watching a slow moving river current with undulating clusters of long swirling stands of lush aquatic plants flowing, swaying with the flow of water that reflects multiple colors reflected from the surface – blues, greens, and the liquid silver of indirect sunlight. Much like an oil painting of Monet – *Water Lilies* – and his Japanese Bridge over his pond.

D. Painting

The interrelationship between painting and the use of garden as motif or actual object for inspiration represents an important, intense and intimate thread in the history of art. There is perhaps the most spectacular and enigmatic work of Hieronymus Bosch and his haunting imagery associated with the triptych, *Garden of Earthly Delights*. *The Garden of Earthly Delights* was painted around the years 1503 and 1504 when Bosch was about 50 years of age (Belting, 2002), although he lived well into the mid-sixties of life. *Garden of Earthly Delights* is the middle panel of the triptych and captures sinful

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pleasures in a garden-like setting where naked figures parade about and into pools of water which can bring to mind primeval fountains of youth. Compared to the panel “Paradise” which depicts a more balanced ecosystem of sorts, the middle panel is awash in people, and the garden appears to be magically self-sustaining with little human activity involved in maintenance or cultivating its rich resources for all. And indeed, there are no children to be found in this Arcadian landscape and everyone appears to be *ageless*. This is a presentation of a carefree world where the garden serves as a symbolic Utopia and humankind resides paradise untouched by the “Fall” (Belting, 2002). Of course, it is the other panel, *Hell*, which exacts the most hallucinatory experience and presentation of nightmarish figures. Perhaps, we can think of that desperate landscape – a waste land - as a reminder of where there are repercussions for engaging *care-less* activities that didn’t take into account the stewardship clause when residing in the Garden of Eden. We reap what we sow, but in this case the “Fall” may represent when all was spent in the present and little effort was taken to cultivate for the next season – or the next generation – thus leading to the hellish demise of humanity.

In direct contrast is the work of Claude Monet, who is considered as one of the founders of style of painting known as French Impressionism, lived a remarkable eighty-six years of life that spanned across two centuries (from 1840 to 1926). Monet proved to be extremely productive with creating some of his most famous paintings into his later years and along with other many other painters (e.g., Henri Matisse, Rembrandt, Georgia O’Keefe) he has been the subject of research examining later-life creative and artistic style and productivity into the second half of life (Cohen, 2001; Kauppinen & Mckee, 1988; Lindauer, 2003; Ravin and Kenyon, 1998; Rosand, 1987).

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Many people are certainly aware of the vast array of Monet's work and many can also readily identify the unique style and composition of his paintings, such that, for example, when examining *water lilies* with rich textures or admiring *irises* with saturated colors, we come to think that those flowering plants are virtually synonymous with his portfolio of art. But then again many people may *not* know that those paintings were created based on the living landscape of his own home and garden located in Giverny, France. Monet was both painter *and* gardener and he spent the last 43 years of his long life with his close-knit family by cultivating his passion for creating color with flowering plants on a one hectare (2.5 acre) garden site and then capturing the dynamic and fluid presence of those plants onto his canvas with brushwork and oils (Howell, 2003). But his garden would also be a healing and therapeutic oasis that helped help him cope and adjust to the loss of his second wife and his son Jean. In addition to his large-scale formal French terrestrial garden filled with lilacs, tulips, geraniums, hollyhocks, poppies, nasturtiums, clematis, sweet peas, and various shrubs and trees, Monet also created and developed an exotic water garden complete with an authentic Japanese Bridge covered in climbing roses and wisteria which spanned the pond that was filled with hyacinths and water lilies and at the edge were abundant irises and graceful willows. Monet was reported as saying, "My most important work of art is my garden" (Denvir, 1991). From 1908 and at the age of 68, Monet focused his artistic work almost entirely on depicting his garden, and was then commissioned by the state to create a remarkable large format series of paintings of water-lilies (*Grandes Decorations*) his tour de force, that formed an enveloping circle that was to reside in a specially constructed pavilion in the Musée de l'Orangerie, which was an extension to the Louvre (Denvir, 1991; Southgate, 2001).

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Around the age of 74, Monet only painted summer subjects in his garden and during the winter months he worked in his studios retouching his works and finishing his canvases (Howell, 2003), but he was then diagnosed with a cataract in his right eye, and eventually would come to affect both eyes. Despite his visual impairments, Monet proclaimed in 1920, "I'm extremely busy with my garden; it's such a joy to me, and on fine days like those we've had recently I am in raptures at the wonders of nature." Monet continued to paint but his deteriorating eyesight caused him severe problems in distinguished colors for many of his final years (Howell, 2003). While there have been many theoretical arguments about whether the change in Monet's paintings of his garden was due to "late style" or specifically due to limitations in his vision, Marmor (2006) used medical knowledge and computer simulation to investigate the impact of visual disabilities on their perceptions. Marmor (2006) demonstrated how Monet (and the painter Degas) had their perceptions of their preferred scenes or subjects changed due to disease and then affected their style of painting (Bakalar, 2007; Dotinga, 2007; Werner, 2008). And for Monet, the loss of color perception due to his complications with cataracts was a major problem (see Ravin, 1968; Ravin & Kenyon, 1998; Werner, 1998). As Marmor (2006) pointed out, Monet used his beloved garden landscape to capture the nuances of color and light, "but his cataracts severely changes and challenged the marvelous qualities of color in his works" (p. 1769). Even though different eye pathologies cause different visual limitations, we now know how low vision can affect the ability affect both the physical and mental well-being of older adults and the ability to function in a variety of ADLS and IADLS (Berger & Porell, 2008; O'Donnell, 2005). Despite these challenges, Monet stayed connected with the enchantment of his garden space and his paintings, especially

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of the water lilies, were his sense of legacy to the world, that to care and cultivate the beautiful is embrace a larger cosmic sense of nature and that he was able to engage this belief while still facing physical limitations and obstacles.

We Must Cultivate our Gardens: Activities to Support Adaptation via Care and Stewardship

Gardening as an activity to improve the quality of life for older adults has generated a substantial number of publications that address the role of gardening as a viable form of physical activity for older adults that may facilitate healthy aging (Park, Shoemaker, & Haub, 2008, 2009; Park & Shoemaker, 2009), and *indoor* gardening and horticultural therapy within institutional populations (Brown, Allen, Dwozan, Mercer & Warren, 2004; Burgess, 1989; Collins & O'Callaghan, 2007; Grant & Wineman, 2007; Kreidler, 2002; Lovering, Cott, Wells, Taylor, & Wells, 2002; Ousset, Nourhashemi, Albarede, & Vellas, 1998; Parr, 2008; Reid, 2006; Riordan & Williams, 1988; Wells, 1997) which is also reflected in the paradigmatic shift of "The Eden Alternative" in managing long-term care facilities (Thomas & Johansson, 2003; Weinstein, 1998). For example, Lee & Kim, (2008), found that indoor gardening was found to be effective for improving several dimensions of sleep patterns, decreasing agitation, and improving cognition functioning of dementia patients. There are also significant publications on *outdoor* gardening activities for people who live in geriatric care settings (Ottosson & Grahn, 2005) and specifically for persons with dementia (Rodiek & Schwarz, 2008). However, both Kwak, Relf, and Rudolph (2004) and Larner (2005) have also suggested that many cognitive abilities may be required for successful gardening and horticultural activities and that if gardening is being considered as a component for intervention and

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therapy for dementia patients, an individual approach that is customized to abilities and deficits and the various symptoms may be required.

We also know that gardening can serve as a “bridge-building” activity for enhancing intergenerational cooperation in community settings (Blake & Cloutier-Fisher, 2009; Goff, 2004; McKee, 1995; Larson & Hockenberry, 2006; Predny & Relf, 2004), and that it can represent a form of legacy in older adults (Moller, 2005), and serve as a mechanism to engage in “successful aging” (Oh, 2005).

There are research findings to indicate gardening as an activity to enhance the physical and emotional well-being for older adults who reside in home and community-based dwellings. For example, Infantino (2001) found that the gardening experience had sustained older women in their cognitive and spiritual development. Heliker, Chadwick, and O’Connell (2000) found that horticultural projects (consisting of 12 weeks of interactive gardening classes) were instrumental in increasing a sense of psychological well being in racial and culturally diverse groups. They also found that gardening helped to instill of deeper sense of legacy and spirituality and a deeper relationship with the earth and nature in the older participants. Quandt, Arcury, Bell, McDonald & Vitolins, (2001) explored the nutritional role of “food sharing” among a diverse set of older rural adults and also highlighted the “social meaning” in such activities as well. Similarly, Milligan, Gatrell, and Bingley (2004) found that older adults benefited from gardening in communal garden allotments as it helped to overcome social isolation and contributed to the development of social networks. Although lawn care has been the most prevalent form of gardening nationwide, this dimension has been going through its own transformation and redefinition as many more people are looking to redefine the “lawn”

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into a more environmental friendly and regionally appropriate recreational and social site for families, including the expansion of gardens (Grampp, 2008). Brown & Jameton (2000) have indicated that there are numerous benefits for the increase and support of gardening: food security and nutritional health (home grown produce has the potential to offset the cost of purchasing food; positive effects on physical health (as exercise), and overall community improvement (to enhance social capital; it can serve as a community organizing tool to combat poverty and provide a collective response to blighted city neighborhoods) and as a way of raising consciousness about environmental stewardship. Brown and Jameton (2000) also suggest various community-based policy recommendations to encourage urban garden activities because, "Urban gardening raises our public awareness of the need to safeguard our environment, and especially our urban soils, from future pollution, erosion, and neglect" (p. 33). More specifically to older adults, Ashton and Schaeffer (2005) discovered many motivational factors for gardening in their investigation. For example, they found significant differences among older adults by marital status, education and health status in terms of motivational categories. The two most important categories were: physical fitness and creativity. However, we should also be aware that while gardens can create a sense of "the home is the hub of health" for older adults, Fänge and Ivanoff (2009) also discovered mixed results with gardening in men and women aged 80-89 in Sweden. Fänge and Ivanoff (2009) indicated that while gardens provided opportunities to go outdoors and offered a meditative space for older adults, having a garden to take care of could be a "considerable practical burden and was something that bothered the very old peoples' minds" (p. 342). In contrast, Pettigrew and Roberts (2008) have proposed in their study that that gardening had served as an effective

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way for older adults to ameliorate the experience of loneliness and feelings of emotional isolation.

Perhaps it is best to summarize the findings of the importance of gardening in the lives of older adults by highlighting the work of Bhatti (2006) who found that the presence of and the interaction with gardens can have a major significance in the (re)creation of “home” in later life. In addition to the benefits of physical activity (Park, Shoemaker, & Haub, 2007; Park, Shoemaker, & Haub, 2009), there is the added dimension of what the garden symbolizes psychologically as a meaningful reason for existence, or as one older adult expressed it, “when I’m in the garden I can create my own paradise.”

In George Valliant’s (2002) monumental study of aging and well-being, *Aging Well*, he ended with a chapter titled, “Positive Aging: A Reprise,” and in that section there was the creative metaphor that captured the nuances of growing older as akin to gardening – or more precisely – the lessons learned in *being* a gardener could serve as a positive role model for finding fulfillment in later life.

Among the many positive attributes, Valliant proposed that gardening is an activity that encourages a therapeutic *slowness* (see also Goldman, 2005; Goldman & Mahler, 2000) and brings with it the additional benefit of creating opportunities for introspection and reflection (that you should you stop and smell the roses) and that it encourages and facilitates the overarching Eriksonian concept of *care*: a hallmark and defining positive attribute of the aging process. We are reminded of Shakespeare’s lament, “sweet flowers are slow and weeds make haste” which all but exudes the wisdom of living a long and cultivating the rewards of a life well-lived – *and cared for*. Valliant

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also proclaimed that gardeners are very much in the spirit of generativity and symbolically working (that is, being concerned and having responsibility for) the soil is embedded with the meaning of rebirth and re-generation, stewardship and the essence of cultivating for the next cycle of life. And with this kind of care, there is the potential for the legacy of *caritas*, a *vita activa*, and a vocation of care transmitted through the generations. Thus, as Valliant succinctly states it, “There is a kind of immortality about gardens, at least until next spring – and the spring after that” (p. 309).

Not only does Valliant make reference to Cicero and the ancient Roman tradition of viticulture as an honorable activity for aging, he revisits the famous line from Voltaire’s *Candide*, where after many journeys, hardships and mishaps, and a great deal of theorizing, Candide instructs Pangloss, “We should cultivate our gardens.” That pithy philosophical statement was crafted by Candide and inspired from an earlier encounter with an old man who was sitting outside his house “minding his own business” and taking in the day and enjoying the “fruits of his labor.” This encounter sounds very familiar to a similar story of the old man previously mentioned in Virgil’s *Georgics*. In Voltaire’s novel, the old man knew little of worldly affairs and events, but graciously offered Candide, Pangloss and Martin a sumptuous meal of exotic fruits and nuts that were grown on his farm. Candide assumed the old man must have some vast and magnificent estate, but the old man said, “I have only twenty acres and I cultivate them with my children; and my work keeps at bay three great evils: boredom, vice and need.” It took awhile, but Candide had suddenly become a fast learner. *Gardening?* Yes, of course. Candide thought it to be a far better existence than compared to anything else they had encountered as history unfolded not too kindly in all of their travels and

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experiences. And so be it. We should cultivate our gardens, but what is it exactly about gardens and gardening that would supply meaningful significance to the life course, and particularly to the aging process? What is the connection between gardening and care and well-being? There is much to discuss with this intersection, but one link to appreciate is the connection back to Valliant's synthesis of his research findings that point to gardening as more than activity, rather it takes on the gravity of an a philosophy of life, a *Weltanschauung*, a *raison d'être* – and much more. Valliant indicated that instead of the all-elusive high expectations of *happiness* to be sought for in later life, the concept that might instead be a better fit given the realism of the aging process in terms of challenges and promise is a *joy in life*. The experience of a joyful attention to life (and a life) that is cultivated in gardening is very much akin to a meditative practice (Johnson, 2008) and helps to create a new kind of “homecoming” that allows one to become native to a place where a deeper connection to seasons of growth – and decline (Berry, 1972; Jackson, 1994). To many, the garden exemplifies a new agrarian standard (Berry, 2003) that integrates the many realms of the “Great Garden” that is a seamless gateway between many realms of nature including trees, streams, pastures and it helps to instill a redirecting of mindful care (see Logsdon, 1994).

Before you might think that the topic of gardening is exclusively an opportunity for those who are geographically located in rural areas or along the exurban fringes, and thus beyond the reach for urban and inner city dwellers, consider the following example. In the low-income residential neighborhood geographically located in the Bronx (New York) known as Tremont, there exists a community garden that recently celebrated its 37th anniversary. And it is here that the residents of Tremont find a sense of belonging

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even while surrounded in a world of concrete. Tina Kelley wrote a story for the New York Times (August 30, 2008) on the Tremont Community garden and said that the, “gardens are oases, where a collective spirit and a sense of community grow from the topsoil.” The President of the community garden is Elizabeth Butler (age 77) and she said that the garden is like a refuge, “If I couldn’t come here, it would be rough...I can’t stay in the house.” Another garden member, a retired nurse, said the garden is site for celebrating birthdays and as a place for memorial services as well. “They were like deeply part of the garden, like a soul thing,” while another community member said of the garden, “It’s my joie de vivre. I like the way it looks. I enjoy the view. I sit here by myself.”

Joie de vivre. Joy in life.

And then there is *Candide: Il faut cultiver notre jardin*. Yes, we should cultivate our gardens. But listen to how Harrison (2008) has interpreted *notre jardin* from Voltaire’s story,

Notre jardin is never a garden of merely private concerns into which one escapes from the real; it is that plot of soil on the earth, within the self, or amid the social collective, where the cultural, ethical, and civic virtues that save reality from its own worst impulses are cultivated. Those virtues are always *ours* (p. x).

It may be difficult to imagine this much ado about a patch of soil, some seeds, watering, and having a “strong back and a weak mind” with all the weeding and mulching (see Stout, 1974). But Voltaire was onto something. And that “something” has resonated with many older adults throughout history and is today still both a viable and contemplative activity that is both elemental and transcendental. That “something,” is

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related to the core virtue of the mature and responsible adult in mid and later life: *the ethical basis of care* (Hoare, 2002; Kotre, 1996). The caring for the garden (local) is then extended into the caring of something beyond the home and community and outward into social and cultural levels (global) (Montague, 2010). This is exactly the link that Collins (2007) discovered in her study of community dwelling older adults who were transformed into “keepers of the earth” through the activities of a “gardening life” and as a result, environmental stewardship was facilitated. To be generative - to cultivate - to care - is both utilitarian and sacred and finds its joyful expression in the reverential duty in the garden. In my opinion, the ultimate expression of why the act of cultivating is so compelling in the later years of life is connected with Stanley Kunitz who spent a lifetime (over a hundred years) reflecting on the importance of gardens through his poetry. In the book, *The Wild Braid* (Kunitz & Lentine, 2005), the nexus of cultivation, caring, and the life course is poignantly discovered,

I think of gardening as an extension of one’s own being, something as deeply personal and intimate as writing a poem. The difference is that the garden is alive and it is created to endure just the way a human being comes into the world and lives, suffers, enjoys, and is mortal. The lifespan of a flowering plant can be so short, so abbreviated by the changing of the seasons, it seems a compressed parable of human existence (p. 14).

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