

MOOD GARDENS: A SUMMARY OF 8 DESIGN TYPES

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Our feelings about our life, and how it's going at any given point in time, seem to depend a lot on our current mood. We may be able to describe the mood we're in as happy, sad, upset, angry, optimistic, or whatever, but can we actually control its fleeting nature? Where does it come from, and where does it go? And what was its purpose?

Some of us have many mood changes during the course of a day or week. These feelings may seem overwhelming at times. Others of us may pay little or no attention, considering even good moods, such as a romantic or playful mood, to be silly or frivolous. We are also taught to rise above our moods and feelings so that we can fulfill our duties and obligations more efficiently.

In this book, we would like to take a different approach. We would like to suggest that, within each of us, the ebb and flow of life's myriad emotions contains a teaching that should not be overlooked. A mood, however dark or outrageous or subtle, can be viewed as a message from the soul that needs attending to. A soft voice or even a whisper still deserves to be heeded, does it not? It isn't that we let these various expressions become dictators in our life. We must simply learn to intuitively honor the different aspects of our psyche by giving them each a safe place and time to emerge (and not necessarily just in therapy).

Many of us play favorites with our moods, supporting some and repressing others. But if we were to imagine each mood as a kind of garden, a mood garden if you will, we might be inclined to wander within its boundaries more thoughtfully, taking note of the different plants that grow there. We could observe the soul's landscape, its unique qualities, its fragrance in early spring or autumn. We might also ponder its peculiarities and apparent shortcomings, without thinking we had to take immediate action. A mood garden speaks to the soul, saying, "Feel me, touch me, sit with me...but please do not judge me. I have something important to say. Will you listen?"

Here are examples of some of the mood gardens in which you might find yourself: exuberant, melancholy, meditative, playful, reminiscent, romantic, convivial, and healing. (There are many others, of course.) What would it be like to visit each of these places? Let's find out.

THE EXUBERANT GARDEN

Exuberance is a passion and enthusiasm that cannot be contained, a celebration of life. It bubbles up and spills over without the slightest self-consciousness. Children are more likely to express this emotion frequently, whereas adults may only experience a brief snippet of it now and then, if they are lucky. Intellect tends to easily overpower such a carefree and spontaneous thing as exuberance. Again, we've been well trained to guard and mete out even something as positive as joy or excitement. Chances are, we generally stop far short of the sort of ease that would allow us to give voice to real exuberance.

What might an exuberant garden, home, or even a room look and feel like? In the garden we like to think of it as beautifully bright, with flowers spilling over a fence or rock border with wild abandon. Orange, purple, red, hot pink, yellow, white—all colors commingle effortlessly. Jann's garden is like this. There seem to be no rules, no careful structure, no visible theme or plan. Clearly, magic is afoot there. We were drawn to her garden like magnets to the north pole. In fact, it's one of the few gardens I've seen that has actually made me consider scrapping my own garden and starting over. Exuberance, whether expressed in landscaping, room decor, or personality, is contagious and ever willing to share itself with any passersby. And of course you'll want to return again and again, just to feel that good.

THE MELANCHOLY GARDEN

Melancholy, though too often mislabeled as depression, is more akin to a nostalgic kind of sadness. It may seep quietly into your awareness on a certain kind of day that stirs old memories deep in your soul. There is a sweetness about melancholy. Some might call it bittersweet, but that is a shade different. Many of us find that we feel melancholy in the autumn when the flowers begin to die and the leaves fall to the ground. I associate this with the decline of my beloved garden and also with the fact that I have always moved in the fall. Remembering ones uprooting, even if essentially positive and necessary, inevitably generates melancholy. So does the anniversary of a loved one's death, the forlorn call of an owl perhaps, or the smell of the rain. It's different for each of us.

Melancholy gardens were quite common in the middle ages. They are quiet, shady places to be sweetly alone with one's sad thoughts. To remove oneself for a time to dwell on the past should not be viewed as morbid or self-pitying. Such a focus can be a great relief to the soul. We have the need for introspection more than ever in these stressful, fast-paced, modern times. The occasional sadness and loneliness that we all feel are most certainly part of the human condition. Why not find a way to honor the soul's urge, in these moments, to hide away in the comfort of darkness and shadows.

A small, secluded bench hidden beneath the hanging boughs of a tree or tucked away in the back corner of your yard might constitute a perfect melancholy garden. Or you might have a big, overstuffed chair in a dark corner of your house, hidden behind plants, a screen, or a bookcase. You might even have a shrubby area on the north side of your house where you could place a grouping of dark rocks, a water bowl, and a single chair or sitting stump. Wherever it takes form, let this place comfort you, like a mother's arms.

THE PLAYFUL GARDEN

Many of us are parents or grandparents, yet how much space do we allot in our regimented lives for pure spontaneity and playfulness, with or without our children? Probably very little. And where might there be a place in our home or garden, or even an object or two that symbolically reflects our connection to our own inner child? Can we still feel and nurture that child, or have they been long forgotten in some photo album, or gathering dust in a closet?

A playful garden or home is happy and bright, fun loving, unpredictable. It may contain a secret fort or hiding place behind a bush, a place for tea parties, or a tiny bench for fairies. Whimsical garden art is an important addition, often setting a playful tone where plants alone can't fully convey it. Cheerful sunflowers, snapdragons, multi-colored sweet peas: these might be flowers the child in us can love. Don't hold back. What can your inner child imagine?

THE MEDITATIVE GARDEN

When we pestered him before Christmas and birthdays, my father always asked for peace and quiet, nothing else. Only now do I fully understand his request, for it has become mine as well. A daily time and place set aside for spiritual communion, regeneration, contemplation-whatever you choose to call it- is paramount for all of us. If we deny our souls this much-needed sanctuary, we may find that we pay a heavy price somewhere down the line.

As with the other mood gardens, a meditation garden need not be a complicated affair. But a few of the criteria worth considering are a relatively quiet place (inside or out), the opportunity to sit in solitude (choose a comfortable chair or a small bench), and colors that soothe and uplift the soul. Vicki's meditation garden is hidden behind a viney trellis in the shade. Anna's has a small fountain that screens out the sounds of the neighborhood. Gina's is planted with flowers all in shades of pale pink and white. Begin to visualize and articulate for yourself the kind of sacred space you can best create to regenerate your soul.

THE MEMORY GARDEN

Looking back on our life and recalling the places we've been, the people we've known, the experiences we've had, is like walking in a veritable garden of rich memories. We can choose the best of these memories, if we like, to use as suitable material for a reminiscent garden. A bookcase of treasured books or a wall full of family pictures is such a garden. So is a bowl of special shells or pebbles sitting on a window sill. Outside, we might create a lovely flower bed filled with our favorite flowers from childhood, as Elizabeth has done. Or we could set aside a certain area to honor a person, now gone, who is very dear to us. We have seen many examples of the healing effect of this type of reminiscent garden.

In each case, the looking back, the reflecting, the honoring can serve to unify the various parts of ourself that may otherwise seem to be disconnected. Providing continuity between the past and the present, and especially between our childhood dreams and our adult realities, is highly therapeutic and valuable to the soul. So let the home movies roll in your mind's eye and see what they stimulate. What flowers did your parents or grand parents plant that especially attracted you? What fragrances from earlier times still have a primal effect on you whenever you come across them? Are you pleasantly haunted by the vague memory of a certain water sound, a particularly beautiful color combination, or the way your father's tool shed looked and smelled. Give yourself the permission to lovingly integrate these memories into a reminiscent garden.

THE CONVIVIAL GARDEN

Convivial means ----- so it pertains to the social aspect of our personality. This is the part of us that dearly loves to gather for a few precious hours with one or more close friends. Such a time of ease and heartfelt sharing can do wonders to lift us above the ordinariness of daily life. Almost every home has one or more areas where friends may gather, sometimes both formally and informally. In almost every garden we visit, as well, there is evidence of careful thought being given to the creation of some type of convivial garden, as we call it.

Whether you envision a place for casual or formal dining, bridge parties, tea and crumpets, or deep conversation, let it be a gathering place that enfolds your visitors and family alike, each in their proper time. Try to imagine how you might make the most of the different seasons. You might choose, for example, a shadier gathering place for those hot summer days, planted with deciduous trees that turn beautifully red or golden in fall and then drop their leaves to let in the winter sun. Perhaps a partially covered back deck can be beautified or chairs and a table with optional umbrella can be placed in a quiet, more intimate part of the yard. You never know: a few simple changes could vastly improve the quality of your social life. Our garden has become a mecca for friends who yearn to sit comfortably with us and pour their hearts out, in the peace and quiet of nature.

THE ROMANTIC GARDEN

Is it possible that each of us holds somewhere in our heart of hearts the ideal of pure, undying love? Dime store novels, soap operas, and cynicism aside, can we call up our high hopes, resonate with them, and translate their sweetness into a physical place? Be assured that an appreciation for the romantic does not necessarily require a beautiful or dashing young lover to swoon over. It isn't about a knight in shining armor or running away from the pain of our present reality. Neither is it the glittery, Hollywood image of love. Rather, romanticism in its deepest sense can reflect the beauty and honesty of true love: love between dear friends, love for the innocence of the child, love as loyalty to a worthy cause.

This kind of noble love was the keynote in the remarkable love courts that thrived in southern France and northern Italy in the late twelfth century. There, for a period of some twenty years, was kindled a model for a non-sexual, heart-felt love between men and woman that has never since been duplicated on such a scale. The souls inner knowing shone through in this honorable love, giving rise to fine poetry and art, sacred songs, and the careful articulation of the heart's deepest yearning. We will explore this theme and its powerful reverberations as we give examples of images of romantic gardens to suit various personalities.

THE HEALING GARDEN

While healing may not be perceived as a mood, per se, it is important to give it the full attention it deserves. Every one of us expends a fair amount of energy, whether we realize it or not, in our efforts to heal the wounds of our past. If we can make conscious choices to create an environment around us that truly contributes to this healing, it stands to reason that we will heal more quickly and more lastingly.

In a recent talk with my dear friend Wren, she beautifully expressed to me in visual and psychological terms the profile of this current period of deep healing in her life. It is clear to me that she intentionally and artfully constructed it down to the finest detail. We're not just referring to a healing garden here, in its literal sense. We're considering the large picture: what goes, what stays, and what is born anew. Wrens picture of healing includes a lot of solitude, a place and time to paint, a relationship with water (in this case a river), the growing and harvesting of herbs, soulful friendship, and deep introspection. When you are in a healing mood, if you will, what is it that your soul craves and how might you insure that those needs are met in the best way possible?

If some of the mood gardens we've discussed seem to overlap for you, so much the better. Our goal throughout this book is simply to explore the subtle realms of awareness that exist within each of us. Whether we label them as moods, emotions, thoughts, or craziness, and whether we express them in gardens, rooms, poems, or art pieces, it really doesn't matter. It's also far less important to articulate exactly whether you're feeling romantic, reminiscent, or mildly melancholic than to affirm your right to give a voice and physical expression to your feelings instead of denying they exist.

Human beings are such complex creatures, so intricately fashioned, so unique. In paying close attention to the fine details of who we are, we uphold our own personal evolution and that of each of our fellow human beings. We also encourage ourselves not to get stuck in any particular emotional place, but to speak our truth and move on, as most children do quite well. Finally, there is a certain sense of sanctuary provided by wrapping oneself up in a mood for the day and seeing the world through that color of glasses. Keeping abreast of our often rapidly changing perceptions will in time lead us to the very heart of our own deeper intuition about what is and is not worth creating and endlessly recreating on the layered canvas of our life.

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Excerpts from forthcoming book: Islands of Grace: Creating Sanctuary in Daily Life. By Dr. Christopher Forrest McDowell and Tricia Clark-McDowell