



Kathy's Garden:

IT'S A STRETCH YOU JUST MIGHT NEED

I knew it was an unusually wet winter when mushrooms came up in the garden, lovely white branching coral fungi amongst the crinkled rosettes of the *primulas*, golden *chanterelles* at the edge if the woodland *columbine* bed, & black *morels* beneath the purple-leaved plum tree.

Actually, even without leaving my cabin I know it is a very wet winter, given the water sheeting down my walls & from my ceiling, musically dripping into bowls & pans, pooling on first one bookshelf & then another. I am considering growing mushrooms indoors. I have *shitakes* on the stairs, *reishis* in the rumpus room. Does anyone have a rumpus room anymore, I wonder. I can provide a nice damp environment for all the fungi I want to cultivate.

No, I don't think I'll really do it. My heart still belongs to the flowering plant species though I admire mushrooms & even resolve to pay better attention to the strange & wonderful *lichen* dotting the woodlands. I have learned the names of a few *lichens*, thanks to a micro-biologist friend. *Usnea* is the one that gracefully drapes many an oak with delicate Spanish moss. I am fond of *usnea*. The little strands stretch like rubber bands. When one is going stir crazy in the winter storms one can always romp out to find some *usnea* to stretch. My scientist friend tells me all sorts of useful brews, medical & otherwise, are being created from my tender little lichen. But no, *usnea* is not a rose by another name. *Coral mushrooms* are no *lilacs*. February is not June.

This is why I have been determinedly thinking about *xeric* plants. An impressive little word, isn't it? It comes from the Greek & means drought tolerant.

On the northeast we have a unique gardening situation. Cold wet winters are followed by relatively hot dry summers. While from October through May it may well rain every day (okay, it doesn't rain every day, it just feels like it does), after June we are fortunate to get rain once a month or so. Most gardeners need to supplement those gentle rains from heaven during the hot summer. If you are on a city water system you balance the needs of your plants against the water bill; if you live in the hills you get to spend a certain amount of time in healthy, prosocial activities like patching water lines & having pleasant conversations with your

neighbors about whose spring that really is anyway -- & by the way, was it your dog who ate my ducks? While all this is endlessly diverting, the gardener who would rather spend time in the garden soon starts thinking about plants that can survive summers with little supplemental water & yet withstand the winter floods & cold.

Good drainage is the key to getting your drought lovers through the winter, particularly if your garden is on heavy clay soil. Lucky river bottom & seaside dwellers have it a bit easier than folks like me who garden in the hill country. Raised beds, soil lightened & enriched with ample compost, and a helping or two of nice sharp gravel will be useful. Given good drainage, sunlight, you can use all sorts of wonderful plants for a garden that, after the first year or two, will survive summers with very little extra water.

Many of the drought garden plants are silver-leaved & fragrant – the beautiful *lavenders* & *artemisia's*, *santolina* & *sages*. Some are silver & soft, like wooly *betony* & partridge-feather *tansy*. Most of these are not liked by deer (except, one presumes, to gaze at), which is a definite bonus. *California fuschia* (*zauschneria*) is a pretty, somewhat shaggy spreader that bears lots of bright flowers for your hummingbirds. Lovers of blue flower will want to try *catmints* (*nepeta*) and *veronicas*. Over the past few years I have been growing fonder of *penstemons*, which thrive with little extra water, although they seem to want more sunlight than I have given them. They have wonderful spires of lowers in a number of colors.

Native wildflowers, most of which do very well without summer water, can still be sown in bare spots. Don't you know a gravelly roadside that could us a golden blaze of poppies or a rosy flush of *godetia* or drifts of heavenly blue *flax*? Plant some ow. If the plants take hold you will have made an investment for the future that cost you only pennies – one the birds & butterflies will appreciate as well.

Besides, it will give you something to when stretching *usnea* gets boring.

Kathy Epling

ON THESE BLACK ROADS

On these black roads, in the dark hours
as we try to reach home the wild

animals are there again, with their caught
eyes & their fur not yet touched

& I think this life after all has been
a series of rough collisions

all startled fur, all muscle
stretched for a last great bounding leap

& I think this life after all has been
ringed by so many witnesses

the great eyes staring
& this transparent wing, grief

like a question, that slammed meat
against the wind

shield, oh this damaged clarity
reaching toward us, not quite breaking through

Kathy Epling

THIS SO SEXUAL SEASON

You thought my mouth your remedy
Well, the world survives even kisses
& tears & comes again to its own
birthday in a blur of white

the hyacinths are open, those sugared
flavors, star pillared
& temporary & the crocuses
licked with flames. Oh yes, I was shaken.

But it's worth it, living
to watch these hills again
with my clear eyes to see
the once-mated birds come back

all along the branches
I thought it was death, the dark
wood, but look: everywhere
these spinning catherine wheels

this serial present, petal
& stamen, unwrapped so perfectly

Kathy Epling

ANOTHER GRIMM STORY

I am wearing your pink sweater
this month of the deaths of mothers

color of stolen roses & unscrewed
lipsticks, smelling of powder

& Faberge. I can't walk in your shoes
those rhinestoned stiletos

knowing the stories you murmured
night after night by my oak bed

the slippers danced thin as the new moon
swan's wings & nettles

This life's a glass mountain, truly.
It's a forest without roads.

Your sweater unravels. Your granddaughter
frowns into a dark mirror

smoothing her chopped hair. I finger
this pink wool with my pricked finger

Kathy Epling

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- Lt. Ehren Watada,
Veterans for Peace 2006 National Convention
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