

Wilderness and Care

Silvia Mundula

Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano, Italy
silviamaria.mundula@polimi.it

Abstract

Questo articolo propone un punto di vista per riflettere sul richiamo della wilderness nei giardini contemporanei, esplorando la percezione culturale del selvatico nell'Antigone e considerando come i giardini che includono la wilderness nel loro disegno necessitino un particolare tipo di cura, riflettendo una visione olistica del rapporto con la natura. Questo articolo dimostra che il significato di wilderness cambia drasticamente a seconda del livello di conoscenza dello stesso. Nell'Antica Grecia la natura non era percepita come un'entità separata, non c'era una chiara distinzione tra naturale e umano, o divino e terreno; piuttosto, la distinzione era tra visibile e invisibile. La natura selvatica era quindi intesa come ciò che si trovava al di fuori della città. La selva, o il deserto come nel caso di Antigone, erano luoghi temibili perché sconosciuti. Tuttavia, attraverso il ribaltamento delle sfere di azione dei personaggi, Sofocle rivela una percezione complessa del selvatico, sollevando questioni etiche. Sia nella tragedia ateniese che nel giardino contemporaneo, la wilderness emerge dunque come valore da cui imparare e come serbatoio di riferimenti.

This paper offers a reflection on the legacy of the wild in contemporary gardens, by exploring its cultural perception in Antigone focusing on the consideration that gardens that include wilderness in their design require a particular kind of care, providing a holistic view of the relationship between design and nature. This paper aims to demonstrate how the meaning of the wild completely changes with a greater level of knowledge. In Ancient Greece, nature was not perceived as a separate entity and there was no clear distinction between the natural and the human, or the divine and the earthly. The distinction mainly was between visible and invisible. Wilderness was perceived as something located outside the city. The wilderness or the desert, in the case of Antigone, were fearsome places mainly because they were unknown. However, Sophocles, by overturning the characters' spheres of action, reveals a complex perception of the wild, leading to ethical questions. In both the Athenian tragedy and the contemporary garden, wilderness emerges as a value to learn from and as a storage of references.

Keywords

Wilderness, Cultura occidentale, Antigone, Wild garden contemporaneo, Cura Wilderness, Western culture, Antigone, Contemporary wild garden, Care

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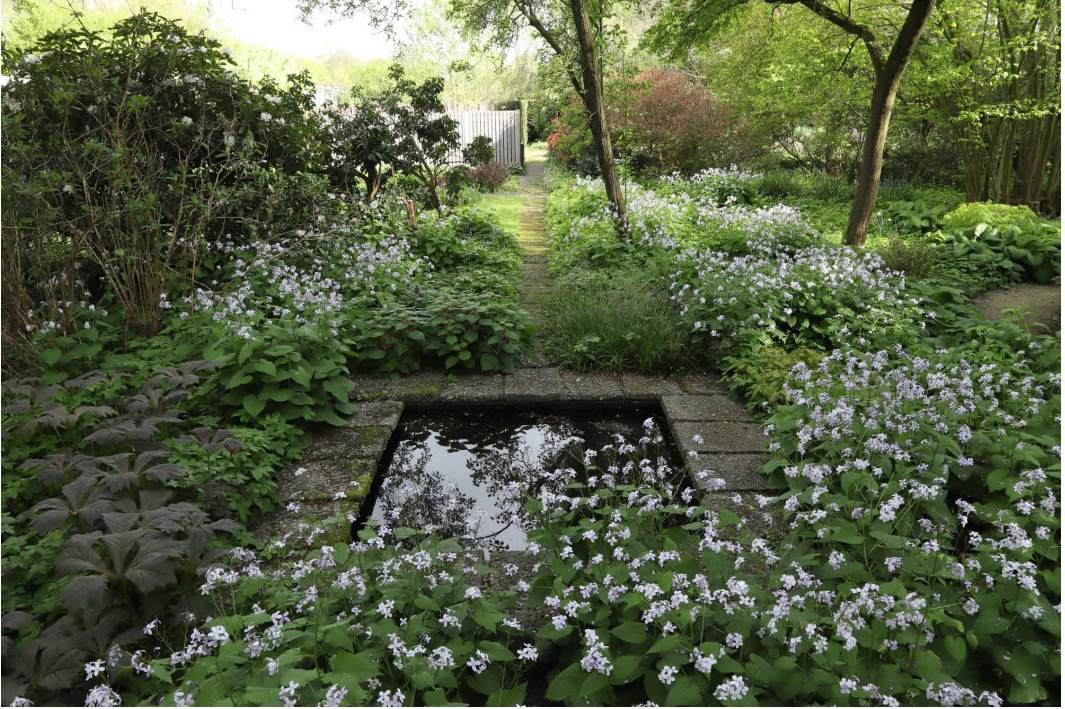
Today, the garden speaks to our needs to create a new faith, to exercise power prudently and fairly, to make sense of a changing order, to express our cultural diversity and our personal creativity, and to heal ourselves and our garden earth. In the future the garden will take on new oppositions, paradoxes, and muses; but it will still be profoundly sunshine, skill, love, struggle, and a good dirt. And it will always be an idea, a place, and an action. (Francis & Hester, 1990, p. 19)

Gardens can stimulate discussion about compositional themes in landscape architecture but also provide an exploration of cultural topics. A garden, in order to exist, requires a gardener, someone who takes care of it. Indeed, a reflection on the meaning of care in contemporary wild gardens could lead to crucial questions about the current relation between design and nature as well as the relationship between aesthetics and ecology in landscape.

In *The Aesthetics of Horticulture: Neatness as a Form of Care*, Joan Iverson Nassauer (1988) highlights how the act of care in garden design usually implies a human perspective and an aesthetic of care. Taking care of a wild garden, however, is quite different from maintaining other gardens: actually, its proper care defines this type of garden itself. A garden can be considered wild even if its initial design is formal, as in the case of the *Wilderness*

garden by Mien Ruys (1924). Even though this garden has a geometrical form, Ruys' use of herbaceous plants and experimental materials demonstrates her innovative taste in garden design, which draws inspiration from wild nature. The beauty of this garden lies in the contrast between its exuberant and apparently wild vegetation and the rigorous simplicity of its plan. In the *Garden in motion* by Gilles Clément (1992), the interest in wild nature emerges even more clearly, as Clément's idea was to let plants move freely and, by doing so, let them change the design of the garden. Wild garden care does not concern the maintenance of a fixed design but it's related to the management of natural processes. The aim of this type of garden is to make these processes acceptable to, and even desirable for, man. This idea overturns the historical perception of wilderness as something dangerous in garden design.

In Greek tragedies, it was often difficult for men to approach natural phenomena and they attributed them to the divine sphere. In *Antigone*, by Sophocles, a conflict emerges between the natural law, which is borderless, implying brotherly love and respect for all men, even enemies, and the law of the city, which must guarantee order and safety for the community who live inside the polis. Consequently, different values exist in the wild land outside the polis.



This paper is divided into three sections. These sections, despite appearing fragmented at first glance, are all expressions of the same idea: when wilderness is studied, it ceases to be frightening and can be used as a reference to learn from and as something to care for. The first section, *Paradisaical Spontaneous Garden vs Earthly Designed Garden*, introduces the wild garden by suggesting a comparison between the wild garden itself and the metaphor of paradise, bringing the theme of the garden care into question. The second section, *The Wild from Unknown to Familiar in Antigone*, speculates on the complex perception of wilderness in ancient Greek tragedy, as this is still relevant today, and provides a means of exploring the perception of the wild in landscape design. The third section, *The Wild from Outside to Inside the Garden*, examines how the wild has been included in contemporary garden design on various levels and points out how the care of the wild garden does not require maintenance

but, rather, management, demonstrating a holistic relationship between culture and nature.

Paradisaical Spontaneous Garden vs Earthly Designed Garden

The wild garden appears to be an oxymoron if one considers the garden to be a product of man's activity. However, the wild garden can be considered the best metaphor for paradise if one thinks of paradise as a place where plants grow spontaneously. English garden historian Penelope Hill talks about two categories of gardens "the first one wild and mythical and the other one domestic" (Hill, 2022, p. 49). The spontaneity of the wild garden implies that this garden requires a special type of care, which results in the gardener's job changing from being one of sovereignty to one of collaboration. The act of caring for the garden is key to reflecting on the relationship between man and nature, as in the past the relationship between man and nature assumed dominance on the

Fig. 1 - Mien Ruys, *Wildernessgarden*

(photo: © Tuinen Mien Ruys, 2023).

This photo shows the contrast between the geometrical simplicity of the garden's plan and the natural aspect of its vegetation.

part of man. However, different meanings of care in landscape and garden design reflect different ideas about nature and different forms of dominance.

Le jardin, partout dans le monde, signifie à la fois l'enclos et le paradis. L'enclos protège. Au sein de l'enclos se trouve le «meilleur»: ce que l'on estime être le plus précieux, le plus beau, le plus utile et le plus équilibrant. L'idée du meilleur change avec les temps de l'Histoire. L'architecture du jardin traduisant cette idée change en change en conséquence. (Clément, 2012, p. 15)

When describing the meaning of the garden, Gilles Clément explains that it encompasses both the idea of enclosure and that of paradise. Indeed, the etymology of the garden includes the idea of an enclosed space. The English word 'garden' derives from both the Indo-Germanic *Gharto*, which means 'a fenced place', as well as the word 'paradise' which comes from Avestan *Pairidaēza*, which in turn is composed of two terms: *Pairi*, 'roundabout', and *Daeza*, 'wall'. Indeed, the two terms are often connected in literature, as the garden is often used as a symbol of paradise. In paradise nature behaves in a benign way, appearing in a garden that grows in an orderly and fruitful way, without the aid of a gardener. However, in *Gardens*, Robert P. Harrison (2008) starts his reflection on garden design by pointing out that certain gardens are the result of man's care. He stresses man's caring attitude, by mentioning the example of Odysseus who, despite

being given many opportunities to stop and live in paradise gardens, insisted on returning to his earthly world and his caring activities.

A garden that comes into being through one's own labor and tending efforts is very different from the fantastical gardens where things preexist spontaneously, offering themselves gratuitously for enjoyment. (Harrison, 2008, p. 6)

A comparison between these two types of gardens – the paradise garden, which grows spontaneously, and the garden designed by the gardener, which needs constant care – invites one to reflect on the meaning of gardening. On the one hand, the etymology of the garden invites us to think of the garden as a space which is protected from the wild, by the gardener. On the other hand, the most redundant example of the garden, which is paradise, invites us to think about wild nature as an element and a reference in garden design, by growing spontaneously. As pointed out by Clément, the idea of what is inside the garden, *le meilleur*, changes throughout history. In Clément's thinking, not only does the content of the garden change, but its border also expands. This is key to reflecting on the wild garden. If we look at the world as a limited space, the world itself can be considered as a garden (Clément, 2021). Therefore, the limit of the garden loses its importance. What is outside the garden is taken into consideration by the gardener, for ecological reasons.



Fig. 2 - Gilles Clément, *Garden in La Vallée de la Creuse* (photo: Manuel Orazi, 2023).

The spontaneity of natural processes which occur in the wild and their incorporation into garden design, evoke a certain feeling about nature. In his garden in *la Vallée de la Creuse*, Clément enjoys observing the dynamics between plants and animals. For instance, when he sees the work done by moles, he understands their positive contribution to the soil and appreciates them as inhabitants of his garden. He also observes how many tree species die because of climate change and this stimulates in him some reflections. The special care required by the wild garden, indeed, requires the acceptance of natural processes. This implies a step back in terms of dominance and a step forward in terms of knowledge in the gardener's work.

The Wild from Unknown to Familiar in Antigone

The theatre in Ancient Greece provides powerful examples to reflect on the relationship between nature and culture. The theatre was a space where citizens could discuss ethical questions which emerged from the political and social dynamics of the *polis* and deal with the complexity of natural *phenomena*, which were often explained as manifestations of the gods. The first alienation of man from nature is attributed to the rise of the Hellenistic cities (Glacken, 1976), which, by creating a divorce between man and nature, stimulated man's feelings about nature and the resulting forms of artistic expression. In *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, Clarence J. Glacken noted that Greek

and Roman descriptions of nature refer to a domesticated nature, “a pleasant commingling of nature and art” (1976, p. 12). Before this period, in the Classical age, nature was not perceived as a separate entity, rather it was “an ever-present good and never far removed in Ancient Greece” (Glacken, 1976, p. 25). However, there was already an intricate idea about the wild, meant as the outside and the unknown, which was both frightening and attractive and which is explored here in the text of *Antigone*, written by Sophocles around 440 B.C.

The wild, which in spatial terms coincides with the wilderness, is often associated with the term ‘forest’, which comes from the Latin term *foris*, which means being outside. In ancient Greece, while the inside was the space of civilisation, the outside was a lawless territory. The wilderness, thus, is meant as the space outside the *polis* and outside its laws and regulations. In *Antigone*, wilderness is perceived in different ways. At the beginning of the tragedy, it is seen as a dangerous space, as an unknown place, which is outside the regulated space of the *polis*. However soon it becomes a space which refers to the natural law of the gods. This law does not coincide with the artificial law of humans, rather it surpasses its value from an ethical point of view.

Indeed, different interpretations of the outside reveal different feelings for the wild. Even though An-

tigone’s outside (i.e. the wilderness) is regarded suspiciously by the audience as a hostile space, eventually it proves to be the space of the natural laws of piety and brotherly love. Indeed, the tragedy is defined by the conflict between written and unwritten rules, between politics and ethics. Sophocles played with the visual organisation of his world through a complex displacement of certain events. The events which should happen inside, happen outside, and vice versa.

It should be remembered that Antigone belongs to the tradition of ancient Greek narrative, which has a very particular idea about space. There is no clear distinction between the divine and the earthly, or between the natural and the human. In the world of the *antiques*, natural *phenomena* are manifestations of divine forces. Thus, the difference is not between real and unreal but between visible and invisible. The Chorus invokes the sun and the gods before introducing Creon, who is “the new king of the land” (Lloyd-Jones, 1998, p. 19). On the one hand, this appears to be a link between two worlds, that of the gods and that of humans, t on the other hand, it underlines the difference. This link is demonstrated by the proximity of the two subjects in the text, while the distance is demonstrated by the insistence on the term ‘land’. The connection to the natural world is also emphasised in the description of the burial, which lasts “un-



til the bright circle of the sun took its place in the sky” (Lloyd-Jones, 1998, p. 41), and which allows the Chorus to imagine that the action has been demanded by the gods. Antigone, who belongs to the natural sphere, is, finally compared to “a bird when she sees her empty nest robbed of her young” (Lloyd-Jones, 1998, p. 41) by the Chorus, and to “a viper hiding in the house” (Lloyd-Jones, 1998, p. 53) by Creon. In addition to the ambiguous distinction between natural and human, there is the division between known and unknown. Knowledge, according to its etymological meaning, passes through the act of seeing, in fact, the two words ‘see’ (*eidon* – I saw) and ‘know’ (*oida* – I have seen, then I know) come from the same root. In light of this assumption, the outside, which is the unknown, is the enemy’s space, while the inside is the civilised world’s and the *nomos*’s space. The *nomos*, which is the law of the *polis*, should be in harmony with the law of the gods. Here is the tragedy. There are other levels of distinction between inside

and outside, which are often ambiguous in this tragedy, such as the boundary between private and public, female and male, *oikos* and *polis*. The Greek audience had a conventional idea of space, with certain places invoking certain values. The women’s space, for example, was the private indoor space of the *oikos*. Antigone overturns these conventions. The tragedy, indeed, is established on the opposition between these spheres and on the misfortune of displacement. Firstly, Antigone, as a woman, ought to stay in the private space of the *oikos*, while she, in fact, enters the space of the *polis*, which is already revolutionary. She goes even further by going out of the city. Through this movement, she becomes an enemy. Thus, the displacement occurs between several spheres, private and public, civil and wild, above and below and inside and outside. Antigone acts in two kinds of desert or wilderness, the vacant space where Polynices’s body lies and the cave where she is enclosed by Creon.

Fig. 3 - Marie Spartali Stillman, *Antigone from 'Antigone' by Sophocles*, date uncertain, end of the nineteenth century. Oil on canvas, Simon Carter Gallery, Woodbridge, UK.

This painting shows Antigone burying his brother outside the walls of the city, which is represented as an uncanny landscape.

Antigone's action is not seen directly by the audience. It is rather described through the words of other characters. "She is taken on a path which no man treads, into a cavern where she will be lamented by no friend" (Lloyd-Jones, 1998, pp. 77-85). The connotation of below and above, as spaces related to particular conditions, can be found in the ordinance of Creon. Eteocles, according to Creon, deserves the noblest death, that is, below ground, while Polynices' body shall be left unburied for birds and dogs to devour and savage (Lloyd-Jones, 1998, pp. 21-23). Throughout the tragedy, Creon tries to keep Polynices, who belongs to the world below, in the world above, and Antigone, who belongs to the world above, in the underworld. This decision, which goes against the natural and spatial order, will provoke the final catastrophe. As Antigone and Ismene enter the scene from the central door, they briefly remind the audience of their tragic condition linked to Oedipus and, before communicating the shameful and painful news, Antigone gives some spatial information. She states that she brought her sister there, out of the gates of the courtyard, because she wishes they were alone (Lloyd-Jones, 1998, p. 5). Her moving out of the palace already defines her character as an outsider and makes us anticipate the danger in what she is going to say. Ismene does not want to follow her sister, who claims to follow the

unwritten law based on the bonds of genos, tribe, blood and kinship (Stoppani, 2014, p.121). She does not want to act against the will of the people of the city. The law of the city states that they, as women, cannot take part in public life, or politics, and they must live within the confines of the house's space. Circularly, the tragedy ends with another woman's movement outside her normal environment. Eurydice, Creon's wife, who appears to come from the house (Lloyd-Jones, 1998, p. 117), commits suicide. The messenger, who sees her, hopes that she will order her servants to mourn their private sorrow inside the house, indoors, to avoid other disasters. As they see that she is no longer hidden indoors (Lloyd-Jones, 1998, p. 121), it is evident that the tragedy is happening.

The tragedy of Antigone reveals complex ideas about the wild because wilderness is a lawless land and, at the same time, outside the *polis*, there are unwritten laws which are timeless and boundless.

The Wild from Outside to Inside the Garden

The wild is not a new element in the history of gardens. For the ancient Romans, forests had a spirit of divine origin and were considered to be mythical gardens (Grimal, 1984). In Roman times, when cities started to become overcrowded, the forest was already a place to find peace and to reconnect to bucol-

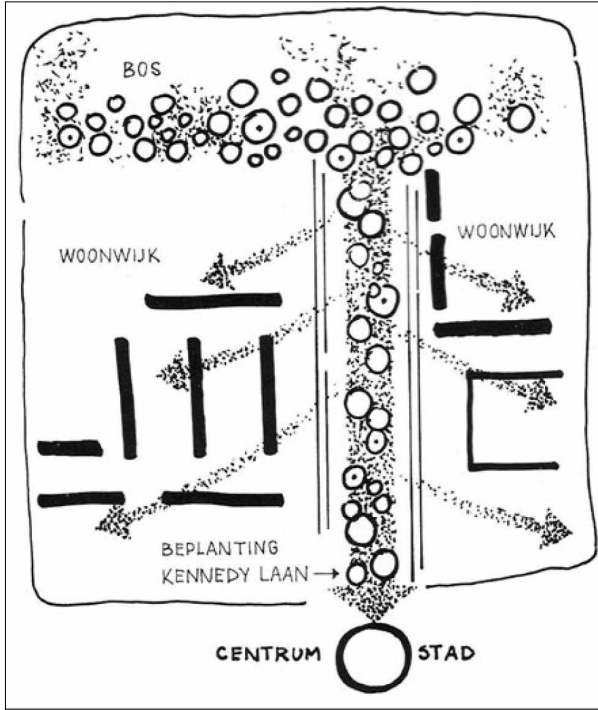


Fig. 4 - Le Roy, Louis G. *Conceptual plan of the project at Kennedylaan, Heerenveen, 1966.* Drawing published in Le Roy L. G. 1973, *Natuur uitschakelen, natuur inschakelen*, Ankh Hermes, Utrecht, p. 190. This drawing shows Le Roy's idea of making nature penetrate deep into the city.

Fig. 5 - Louis G. Le Roy, *Kennedylaan Street in Heerenveen* (photo: Jan Woudstra, 2022).

ic origins. However, research about wild gardens can raise many questions about the oxymoronic association of wild and garden. While the idea of 'garden' calls forth a closed, pleasant, and carefully designed space, 'wild' usually suggests an open, untamed and often unpleasant space, located beyond the boundaries of human control. In *Inspirations. A Time Travel through Garden History*, Nadine Olonetzky wrote that "A garden is a garden because it is protected from the wilderness by a fence" (Olonetzky, 2017, p. 18). However, when wild nature becomes a subject of study in garden design, ideas about wilderness change. There are examples in garden design, where garden designers invite us to rethink this dichotomy, by including the wild in their design. Some use the wild in a symbolic way, as is the case with the Forest Garden of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (1995), others allude to the spontaneity of the natural processes which occur in the wild, as in the gardens created by Gilles Clément, others contain wildflowers and wild plants

which are displaced, as in schemes which exist in wildness, as described by James Hitchmough in *Naturalistic herbaceous vegetation for urban landscapes* (2004). Just as in *Antigone* the wild is discovered and revalued by opposing the natural order with human formalism, in contemporary garden design the wild is studied and reproduced using the rules of nature, which differ from traditional horticultural rules.

The first garden writer to describe his fascination for the wild is William Robinson (1870), but many other authors of the twentieth century have taken an interest in wild garden design, for not only cultural but also scientific reasons. The necessity of designing gardens which are sustainable, and which appear to be in tune with the environment, led to the development of wild-oriented garden design and the wild being interpreted both as an ecological and an aesthetic reference. This tendency increased after the 1970s when ecological movements started to influence landscape architecture. Authors from the European



Counterculture such as Lucien Kroll (1927-2022), Louis Le Roy (1924-2012) and Dieter Kienast (1945-1998), contributed to the introduction of the wild into garden design, by reassessing the relationship between nature and project. In *Composant, faut-il industrialiser l'architecture?* Kroll (1979) wrote that industrialisation is unbearable if it is not softened by the intervention of craftsmen, residents and plants. In Le Roy's project at Kennedylaan Street at Heerenveen, designed in 1966, one can see some of his theories in practice. Kennedylaan was a long path that started in the woods and finished in the city center of Heerenveen separating two new residential areas. This path was a long and boring strip with no ecological interest; however, the potential was there to create a relationship between nature and the city, i.e. to bring nature into the city. Le Roy also wished to involve the inhabitants of the surrounding areas in the creation of this project, however, for political reasons, he had to make some concessions. Indeed, the reception of

his work was twofold: some landscape designers and park officials considered his work to be an expression of anarchy in landscape architecture but a large number of the people living in the surroundings appreciated it. According to Le Roy, giving an active role to the local inhabitants would lead to a more spontaneous and creative process and a deeper relationship with nature. The wild appears in these authors' projects, both as a source from which to draw compositional elements such as weeds and as a model of dynamic processes to be learned from.

A few years later, from the 1980s onwards, Richard Hansen conducted scientific research about habitat planting and plant sociology, to define some garden habitats for perennial plants. In *Perennials and Their Garden Habitats*, Hansen (1993) described different garden habitats for numerous perennial plants: from the rock garden to the woodland garden habitat, etc. The study of 'habitat planting' is the first step to recreating plant communities which behave similar-

ly to those found in the wild. The study of wild plant communities helps in the design of plant communities which grow in biological harmony within a garden, contributing to sustainable development. For this reason, gardens which reproduce plant schemes which are similar to those found in the wild, seem to be ecological.

Ecological wild gardens, however, pose a cultural problem: "What is good may not look good, and what looks good may not be good" (Nassauer, 1995, p. 161). Ecological design tends to look messy, so people do not always perceive its quality. For Joan Iverson Nassauer, the hardest challenge in ecological design is about design.

The difference between the scientific concept of ecology and the cultural concept of nature, the difference between function and appearance, demonstrates that applied landscape ecology is essentially a design problem. It is not a straightforward problem of attending to scientific knowledge of ecosystem relationships or an artistic problem of expressing ecological function, but a public landscape problem of addressing cultural expectations that only tangentially relate to ecological function or high art. It requires the translation of ecological patterns into cultural language (Eaton 1990). It requires placing unfamiliar and frequently undesirable forms inside familiar, attractive packages. It requires designing orderly frames for messy ecosystems. (Nassauer, 1995, p. 161)

Fig. 6 - Louis G. Le Roy, *Detail of wild area along Kennedylaan Street in Heerenveen* (photo: Jan Woudstra, 2022)

The perception of the wild garden has changed during previous decades. This change is due to an increased awareness of the environmental crisis which calls for ecological landscape design solutions but is also due to an approach to planting design, which created "orderly frames for messy ecosystems" (Nassauer, 1995) and which defined a narrative about wild nature and delineated an ecological aesthetic. Garden designers such as Piet Oudolf and Nigel Dunnett are key figures in the development of an ecological aesthetic, because they evoke wild nature in their gardens by designing forms which are perceived as beautiful. Oudolf designs gardens which are not really wild nor ecological but his deep knowledge of plants and original use of perennials has contributed to changing people's taste for this type of plants, which were considered just weeds in the past, and which are appreciated today. Even though the selection of plants comes from the wild, the way he uses plants is often traditional as he groups plants of the same cultivar into blocks.

As mentioned in the first section, the design of wild gardens implies the acceptance of natural processes, such as the fact that the initial form of the garden will change. The gardener of the wild garden, indeed, must take this idea into consideration. This garden does not need to be maintained, rather, it needs to



be managed. The care of the wild garden can be considered as a particular type of care, which is stewardship. The main difference between care and stewardship is that the last one connotes something which belongs to others rather than only to oneself (Nassauer 201, p. 321). Stewardship encompasses environmental systems which are usually broader than just the garden. This implies that the border of the wild garden gets larger. From a theoretical point of view, the definition of the garden expands by incorporating the category of third nature, which refers to wilderness (Hunt, 2000, 142-154). From a practical point of view, the wild garden's relationship with its surrounding landscape is improved by its promotion of biodiversity and natural processes. Wild gardens, indeed, can function as migratory devices, or contribute to the increase of pollinators (Herrington, Lockman, 2016). Finally, the wild garden, by bringing elements of wild nature into domestic contexts, con-

tributes to changing people's perception of wilderness and to making a different order desirable. Similarly, Antigone's behaviour in expanding her field of action by going outside the city, into the wild, is revolutionary and exemplary. Her act of caring towards her brother, which she performs by scattering earth on his body, demonstrates values which transcend the gates of the city and which call into question the laws of the city.



Fig. 7 - Piet Oudolf, *Oudolf Field*, Hauser & Wirth Gallery, Somerset UK (photo: Silvia Mundula, 2015)
This photo emphasises the beauty of the garden in autumn when the flowering season ends.

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