

The World in your Garden

When I was developing the first cultural garden at Walnut Tree Walk School in London, I talked to a friend who trained in horticulture at Windsor about identifying plants which came from the countries of origin of the inner city children. She laughed and said, 'The typical British Garden is but a collection of glorified foreign weeds !'

Indeed, to create a garden with plants from different parts of the world, we can get only what is already here. And, what is already here is astonishing. Dahlias from Mexico, Magnolias from China, Gladiolus and Red Hot Poker from Africa, Bergenia from Siberia, the Indian Bean Tree from South America, Peach Trees from Iran, Oriental Poppy from Armenia and so on. Through taking part in the creation of the cultural garden, the children at Walnut Tree were amazed to find that all the 'English' gardens they see on their way to school are full of plants connecting them to all parts of the world. They came into school shouting, 'I have Chinese plants in my garden.' Finding out created a shift in vision - a discovery that multi-cultural elements are all around us, that plants from their countries of origin have been here and loved for a long time !

The idea of a cultural garden is not just about having a collection of plants from around the world. Most gardens are already collections of plants from different areas of the world. Botanical gardens are the ultimate examples. The defining motivation of a cultural garden is to create a garden linking the people who it is for to the plants in the garden. As such it becomes a statement of recognition of ethnicity. The cultural garden expresses a conscious inclusion of the diverse groups of people in the community.

It is not just ethnic groups who have an emotional link to the countries and cultures of the world. My neighbour has children who have migrated to work in New Zealand because of the lack of jobs in their area of skill in rural Wales. The plants they have from New Zealand in their garden is therefore very special to them.

There are many surprises. Some plants you see everyday will exhilarate you with their history of arrival. Many people think of palms as hot country plants, but some of these dramatic trees will survive at temperatures down to -30c.

There are now hundreds of variations of cultural gardens across the UK, ranging from school and community gardens to public parks. You can find something that will grow here from any country in the world. Discover the world in your garden. Grow a world in your garden. Involve people with a link to the countries of the world and plant a cultural garden.

A resource sheet with a list of plants from many different countries and information about getting plants for a cultural garden can be obtained by sending an A4 SAE marked Cultural Garden to : Black Environment Network, UK Office, 9 Llanwen Uchaf, Llanberis, Wales LL55 4LL.

Written for 'Up the Garden Path' National Federation of City Farms 1997