



Four Tenths of an Acre: Reflections on a Gardening Life

Laurie Lisle

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“The rituals of gardening give a rhythm, even rapture, to everyday life that is apart from the routines of writing and the flows of relationships. Tending my garden became the same as taking care of myself.”

When Laurie Lisle fled the city for the country around the age of forty, she was so eager to buy a certain old clapboard house on the green of a historic New England village that she didn't notice the awkward shape of the snow-covered backyard. When she later saw the surveyor's map of her property, she was shocked at how very long and narrow a rectangle it was, and she wondered how she could ever turn such an awful shape into a graceful garden.

This modern pastoral tells how she heaved compost, removed rocks, dug holes, planted and replanted her less than half an acre—and how she found herself digging into her feelings about love and loss, work and play, roots and rootlessness, solitude and sociability. In intimate essays—such as “Arrival,” “Sharon,” “Inside,” “Shadows,” “Weather,” and “Color”—she explores the connections between one's intimate landscape, village life, and the natural world.

In “Roots” Lisle writes about the generations of women gardeners in her family and the question of whether she has exiled herself into a “floral cage.” “Words” contrasts “the easy pleasure of gardening” with “the more elusive satisfaction of writing,” and goes on to examine the role of the garden in the lives of writers such as Emily Dickinson and Edith Wharton. “Woods” tells of the “dramatic demarcation point between nature acted upon and nature left alone. In “Outside,” Lisle battles back the deer and contemplates the mature garden that has grown up around her. *Four Tenths of an Acre* is a testament to a woman's glorious engagement with place.

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