

ARTS CORNER

Plants and Flowers

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My fondness for plants began earlier than my liking for painting, though I associate both with childhood memories. At the age of 4 or 5, I remember uncontrollably and unseasonably pruning the fantastic geraniums my mother had carefully tended in the garden beside our house. I was firmly scolded for my misdemeanor, but it showed me the path I was to take: for I have been a gardener since that day. In elementary school, I was lucky enough to be given natural sciences lessons by Father Roman in the Parque de Maria Luisa near our school in Seville. With this background it was only natural for me to like plants and flowers, and I have been involved ever since in nurturing and cultivating them. For the last few years I have maintained a privileged area for plants in el Aljarafe, in the province of Seville, southern Spain, where I have a house, a garden and a small vegetable patch; in fact, I truly believe our decision to buy the property was sealed by the leafy garden containing a fair number of trees. The times spent at “Jacaranda”—no name could be more suitable—provides me with the best hours of my week: planting, pruning, transplanting, watering, controlling diseases, weeding, mulching... a garden can always provide plenty of work, and more so if you want flowers all year round. From early February the calla lilies (*Zantedeschia aethiopica*) begin to flower, just after the almond tree, the nectarine, and the plums (*Prunus subhirtella*), followed a little later by the freesias (*Freesia refracta*), lilies and irises; all announcing the arrival of spring. This season sees the continual production of other flowers, including the clivias (*Clivia minata*) so abundant on the patios of Seville in the week before Easter. Spring is the most splendid season in a garden: celindas, agapanthus, roses, geraniums, climbing geraniums, petunias, chrysanthemums, pelargoniums, hortensias, daisies, and a whole range of colors of bougainvillea all in flower. In the summer, the garden provides even more color, with zinnias, Mexican marigolds (*Tagetes erecta*) or the periwinkles, and in this season the garden awakens another of our senses—the sense of smell—with jasmine and the heady scent of the “queen of the night” or “night blooming cestrum.”

What can a garden teach a dermatologist? I think the main lesson is patience, a fundamental element in treating our patients—sometimes acclimatizing a plant and getting

it to flower can be just as difficult as controlling an outbreak of atopic dermatitis. Plants provide a great deal of satisfaction, above all when we see how we can achieve fantastic flowers from something that only a week ago was a seed, a cutting, or a flimsy seedling. However, dermatological practice and, above all, our terrible devotion to attending a meeting or congress every week, is clearly on a collision course with the cycles of nature. For nature cannot wait, and when seasonal work in the garden—like pruning, making seed beds, and transplanting new plants to flower beds or pots—has unfortunately coincided with congresses, dermatology has always won, so far. However, attending scientific meetings can also offer opportunities for a visit to a famous garden (Figure 1), specialist seed or bulb shop, or even a botanical park. A garden also teaches you to consider ranges of colors; something important in our specialty, as dermatology is essentially a visual discipline.

What satisfaction do I get from something so unprofitable? There is immense aesthetic enjoyment to be achieved in contemplating a flower garden you have cared for yourself. You know these plants are unique and you know all their secrets: the smells, the ranges of colors, the shapes. They are your plants, and you wouldn't change them anything! Although I tell a lie, for gardeners are jealous creatures, and when they visit a more fertile land with a different range of plants, they feel they would like to stay and live there forever. However, this cannot be, so they bring seeds home and attempt to grow the strange plant for themselves, mostly with little success.



Figure 1. The gardens of Villa d'Este, Tivoli.

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And it is definitely the case, that when you have a garden in Andalusia (Figure 2) you can understand the people who lived here before you still longing for this land, and even that for some religions it represents their idea of paradise.

And his heart was lost...

*God Almighty first planted a garden.
And, indeed, it is the purest of human pleasures.*

FRANCIS BACON

Human beings: are they naturally good or bad? A difficult question to answer even for Confucius, Rousseau, Heidelberg, and genetic determinism—to mention some of the lead players who opted for one point of view or the other. The strange controversy over whether we are born good and become bad, or are born bad and become good, has still not been settled definitively.

But without sophist polemic, and having no need to argue over how many angels can dance on a pinhead, what most philosophers, psychologists, therapists, jailers, educators, politicians, housewives, and general good sorts will all agree, is that a person who is fond of plants cannot be all bad.

So, if this is true—and it does seem to be—we already have Antonio Rodríguez Pichardo classified as a “good person.”

And I think that is close to the truth

People can quite often appear cryptic to their fellow human beings. We display an external image, but we jealously guard the mysteries of our spirit. Our secret garden. We can only occasionally, in a pool of intimacy, open ourselves to the world, letting the words spill out to provide a fuller portrait. And today we have the opportunity to see deeper inside one dermatologist, someone who knows how to care for human skin and the skin of the Earth carefully and efficiently. Skin with skin.

His fondness for flowers and the vegetable patch, his taste for gardens and their fruits, his indiscriminate hard work with calla lilies and irises, or green beans and tomatoes, to be fair, comes close to an art form. Making a plant sprout, grow, reproduce, invade the most inhospitable corners, the most solitary environments, the most monotonous spaces with light and color is a great artistic endeavor. Combining tone with form, structure with location, life with aridity, the aroma of the rose with that of spearmint (*Clinopodium*



Figure 2. A corner of the author's garden in spring: begonias, clivias, and azaleas.

douglasii), can require the virtuosity of a genius. The gardener thus becomes a small domestic God in a familiar mythology, as timeless as it is transitory.

The floral art of this dermatologist is both romantic and erudite at the same time. A conjunction full of enchantment. The humility of mother nature—as St Francis of Assisi would say—infects those who care for her. Patience, temperance, generosity...are all gardening virtues shared by Antonio.

In nostalgic afternoons, he may consider the poems of Juan Ramón Jiménez as he surveys his greenery, the product of his labors:

*And his heart was lost,
pained and embalmed,
in the green honeysuckle...
And his heart was lost...*

But how strange these things are. For I, who love beauty, who seek and fall in love with it; I, who can tremble at a poem and cry before a painting; I, who get goose bumps at melancholic love scenes in films, for me...my plants simply wither!

And the truth is, as Billy Wilder said: “nobody is perfect.”

I will simply have to accept my limitations, resign myself, and wait for our dermatologist-gardener of the day, Antonio, to invite me to his paradise in Aljarafe.

Don't you think?

A GUERRA