

Northwest Flower & Garden Festival 2020

Seeing Color in the Garden

Focus & Refresh

Lorene Edwards Forkner

Color is both a gratuitous gift and one of nature's most sophisticated tools, engineered to capture the attention of all living creatures. While the lure of color is universal, our response to it is personal and emotionally evocative.

In a word: *powerful*.

“Instructions for living a life:

Pay attention

Be astonished

Tell about it.”

— Mary Oliver

The backstory:

This project began in April 2018 when I joined an online creativity challenge. For 100 days I plucked a plant from my garden and tried to capture and record its colors in simple swatches of watercolor. This wasn't botanical illustration—far from it. This was an exercise in concentration and seeing what was right in front of me.

Nearly two years later, I haven't stopped. “Seeing Color in the Garden” has become my daily practice; a meditative exercise that quiets my mind even on days when my clumsy attempts frustrate me and fall far short of depicting what nature does so elegantly.

Naturally, the garden is the center of my practice because it is the lens through which I view the world. I *am* a gardener.

Constantly foraging for color has taught me to be mindful of and accept my own cycles of attention. Some days flow with a colorful chime. Others produce nothing but noise and a tiresome repetition that just about does me in. Usually, the doing of it is enough. And there's always tomorrow... and the day after, and the one after that.

Though not necessarily any easier, my practice has become second nature; a virtuous cycle that's helping me to cultivate awareness.

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I seriously doubt that I'll ever pin down in pigment every color I see. Like the sun and light itself, the source of all color, my practice is in constant motion. Blue + yellow = green. But the greater truth is hours + days = life.

How we direct our attention matters.

Since beginning this practice I've learned to look more expansively at the world around me. In the garden I notice details found in every part of a plant, its stem, bark, petals and seed heads. Recognizing secondary and tertiary hues deepens my experience of a landscape in the same way that hidden top and base notes add layers of complexity to an interesting perfume.

I notice how morning light is cool, while evening glows warmly. Midday light is bleached and flat. Cloudy days diffuse color and soften shadows. Sunny days create contrast and dark shadows. And yes, even shadows have their own color.

All this information can be used to create unexpected plant combinations and garden compositions that knit together and settle pleasingly into the landscape. We can place plants to harness the time of day and leverage light to spectacular effect. Or we can simply enjoy and embrace the visual riches around us.

I encourage you to slow down and see the colors in your garden.



Artist and designer, writer, editor and educator, Lorene Edwards Forkner is a columnist for The Seattle Times' weekly GROW column in *Pacific Magazine*. She is the author of five garden books, including *The Timber Press Guide to Vegetable Gardening: Pacific Northwest* and *Handmade Garden Projects*.

Follow Lorene on Instagram @gardenercook and visit her website, ahandmadegarden.com, where you'll find her recent writing, a schedule of upcoming workshops and events and a selection of giclee prints for sale, produced from her daily Seeing Color in the Garden practice.