

# Landscapes of defiance: A review of Benjamin Vogt's *A New Garden Ethic*

## Bill Vitek

### About the author

Bill is Scholar in Residence at Middlebury College, Middlebury, VT, USA.

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### About the book

Author: **Vogt B**

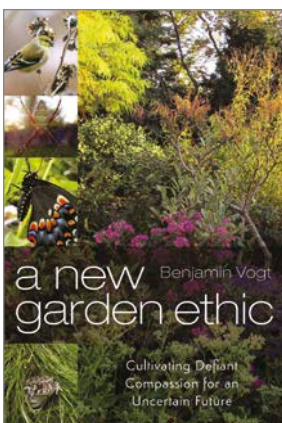
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In the beginning was a garden – at least according to one well-known origin story in which the first human couple is well provisioned, commanded to be vegetarian and to till and care for a garden in which they were placed, and warned against eating the fruit of one tree prominently placed in that garden's centre. It was fruit so dangerous to them that, should they be tempted to eat it, they would surely die. The fruit, alas, was consumed. The couple survived, but they were banished from the garden to live a life of pain and toil, expending sweat of the brow confronting thistles and thorns while provisioning their own food beyond the garden gates.

The rest is history. Much of agriculture around the world today requires toil and fossil energy, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and contributes to climate change, species extinction, and hardship and misery for too many who continue to provision food for others.

And still the garden remains: an image, a metaphor, a place of practice and opportunity to renew relationships with the living Earth. Gardens are places where we can engage with and participate in the other-than-human world; where we can feel the soil, discover the myriad creatures, and – as all gardeners must – make life and death decisions in our weeding, thinning and 'pest management'. Where we see up close the beauty, cooperations and competitions of the living world – what philosopher Alfred North Whitehead called "tragedy" and defined as "the remorseless working of things." And that is just what is going on up top, not below. In the words of Rainer Maria Rilke:<sup>1</sup>

*Though the planter toil and care  
he cannot reach down to where  
the seed becomes summer. Earth confers.*

Benjamin Vogt's *A New Garden Ethic* contributes to the long and valued tradition and ecological impulse to return to the garden, the desire to connect to the living Earthly fabric too long denied, denigrated and destroyed by hegemonic cultural norms and practices. The 'New' in the book's title takes its cue from Aldo Leopold's land ethic. Like Leopold, Vogt urges his readers to use the 'garden' – a term that in his book is as multifaceted and large or small as one imagines it – to connect to a community of life and to become, in Leopold's words, citizens and plain members of this community. As Vogt points out, this was a radical claim when Leopold wrote it in the middle of the last century, and remains, sadly, radical today, rather than common good sense.

Part memoir, part history, part ethical deep digging, *A New Garden Ethic* offers readers an honest and big-picture view of what is possible when we think of the garden as a place to practise compassion, resistance, protest and advocacy. A place where communities of plants, animals and fungi mix with soils, sunlight, water and human choices; and where growth brings bounty, awareness and – with some luck – transformative and radical (*at the root*) change to institutions and ideologies. Vogt offers an impassioned defence of native plants, and claims that every garden (or lawn) is an ideology, a reflection of values buried deep within us and in our cultures. And as the world is now faced with cascading climate and social-justice emergencies because of an ideology – or many – that sought to tame the natural world for human benefit, let our new gardens be landscapes of defiance, and let those who tend them begin to reflect, imagine and create living, rooted and diverse social and ecological systems.

Let these gardens become incubators of social transformation “that will shape our response to climate change and extinction, and the social justice issues they call up, like classism and racism” (p 95).

This may seem to some like a tall order for the weekend gardener who ventures out for some sun and physical labour, who enjoys the rhythms of the seasons, the tending of plants, the harvest, natural beauty and the neighbourliness. These were my delights in 30-plus years of maintaining small backyard gardens where I have also toiled digging up sod, weeding and fencing out critters while cursing and thanking rain, heat, frost and drought. I never liked thinning young plants, refused to do it, even if doing so would increase the overall harvest. It felt wrong somehow. And I battled old grapevines in one plot for two decades with anger and vengeance in my heart. I did not win; I moved. That was a lesson in resilience and in nature’s wisdom and tenacity, something that took me too long to learn.

Gardening, as Vogt so clearly demonstrates in his book, brought me closer to Leopold’s land ethic, and it helped me better appreciate what nature does so effortlessly even while the gardener too often must work at it. Over

time, perennials like berries and asparagus slowly replaced annuals in my raised beds. And I became more tolerant of plants and creatures I was not intentionally growing. But I never thought I was creating an ideology, nor did I want to. And except for the grapevines and rocks the size of small boulders heaved by last year’s frost, I did not think getting “angry, mad, and pissed off” – the fuel for Vogt’s ‘defiant compassion’ of the book’s subtitle (p 67) – were particularly useful virtues for a gardener.

I do think the work and love of the garden teaches lessons increasingly unavailable in daily life. Benjamin Vogt’s lovely book does that, too, connecting the gardener’s work of cultivation with the prosperity of wild things; with what that ancient creation story called The Tree of Life, and what Henry David Thoreau named Wildness and declared as necessary for the preservation of the world. Down to Earth, in place, just outside our windows: the garden awaits. ■

#### Notes

- 1 *Die Sonette an Orpheus*, XII (1923): “Selbst wenn sich der Bauer sorgt und handelt, / wo die Saat in Sommer sich verwandelt, / reicht er niemals hin. Die Erde *schenkt*.” Translation by Robert Hunter.

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