

# The Garden and Human Purpose



Above: “The Sacrifice of Cain and Abel” by Mariotto Albertinelli ca. 1514; this ridiculous painting expresses a cynical view of God’s decision to favor Abel’s offering; was it a test for the first gardener?

## The Garden and Human Purpose (in Central Kentucky) Julian Campbell, August 2015: [bluegrasswoodland.com](http://bluegrasswoodland.com)

“And in the process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering; But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth [angry], and his countenance fell.” [*Genesis 4:3-5*]

“If you want to be happy for a day, get drunk; for a month, get married; for a lifetime, take up gardening.” [*Chinese saying adapted by Peter Bauer, 1996; Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*]

The increasingly vast numbers of human beings have increasingly diverse sets of views about nature and our workings with it, but we all share the dependency on green leaves. Moreover, the Garden—in deep or shallow sense—remains a concept we can all understand, even as we feel increasingly disconnected from good examples and even as our meat comes from increasingly remote places. In Kentucky (at least), there seem to be three broad types of interest in plants: horticultural interests—getting hands directly involved for varied reasons, intellectual interests—with either scientific or aesthetic aspects, and material interests—from focus on extractive profit to attempts at restoration. These three often seem unbalanced within us as individuals, and relevant organizations tend not to have linked goals. Associated groups of people have diverse subsets that often disagree about technical or ideological matters. Indeed, the lack of coordination among ‘plants-people’ in general, I suggest, has weakened the role that botanical issues should play in society.

Let me outline three examples of problems within central Kentucky. Griffith Woods in Harrison County provides the best opportunity for restoration of something like the original native vegetation in the central Bluegrass on a large scale, with 745 acres of land in ancient woods, younger woods, old fields and recent fields. Before settlement, the woods in this region—including this site—were mostly continuous, with deep shade in place, but large herbivores exerted significant effects, especially along their many trails and in the few larger canebrakes or glades (often at mineral-

licks). Although we have protected this farm from development, using a large initial private donation plus funds from state government, it has been difficult to build consensus on management among potential partners. The Nature Conservancy and University of Kentucky gave up and transferred their ownership to Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife, but an agreeable management plan has still not been produced, 12 years after the initial acquisition. Problems—which could be reduced through better dialog—include claimed uncertainty about the original vegetation (despite much historical information), conflicts among different approaches to simulation of naturalistic disturbances (such as browsing versus burning versus mowing), lack of agreement about what species to plant and how (such as experimental patches of cane), and how best to reduce alien plants (perhaps using livestock in some cases). Beneath these somewhat technical issues, there are varied financial dependencies: the Conservancy’s general interest in reselling land that they claim has been protected; the University’s obsession with generating their own gifts and grants; Fish & Wildlife’s fee-paying constituency of hunters. Sadly, another potential source of income has been largely set aside—sustainable production from the vegetation itself, in native seeds, nursery stock, fruits and nuts, medicinal herbs, selected timber, and forage for livestock. Livestock were removed after 2003, and housing for resident managers has been abandoned. The future for this farm remains obscure.

A more local example of insufficient dialog—yet also involving over a million dollars of public funds—lies in the “Coldstream Park Stream Corridor Restoration and Preservation Supplemental Environmental Project” that has been proposed by the city of Lexington along Cane Run between Citation Boulevard and Interstate-75. After decades of inadequate design in its sewer systems—for both storm-water and sanitary purposes—the city was threatened with a lawsuit by environmental groups and government agencies. A portion of the settlement was negotiated in 2007 to include this project along Cane Run as a face-saving substitute for paying the same amount of money as an official “fine”. Unfortunately, the plan did not get good broad transparent review.



Griffith Woods: the world's 'largest' chinquapin oak, with browsing-resistant hickory saplings.

Through elaborate engineering for two thirds of a mile along the stream, taking out many trees planted in 1999 (as part of the initial “Reforest the Bluegrass Program”), and completely rebuilding the stream with heavy equipment, the plan claimed to be a “restoration” that would “reconnect the stream with its floodplain”. But this stream has been sinking into limestone passages for millions of year and usually flows above ground for only a few months each year—there is almost no active floodplain! Rather than enhancing the natural environment, a radically new ecological balance was designed at great expense, with no clear guarantee of improvement in water-quality. Yet the public was told that the project would result in overall improvement of the environment. Planting plans included a suite of species that are more typical of western prairies than Bluegrass Woodland, and that will need the full sun created by clearance of existing trees. However, an eventual goal here is to restore arboreal shade throughout most of the new stream corridor, so the initial prairie plantings would apparently just be for a few years in order to provide temporary flowering color and tall grassland before trees grow larger.

The third example here concerns scattered smaller planting plans on common land within Lexington, often where grants have been provided through local government for riparian zones and wetlands. Appropriate governmental agencies have advanced these plantings, especially along “no-mow zones” up to 30 foot wide along streambanks for ecological improvement. However, an obstacle at several sites has been the concern that some residents have for ‘weedy-looking’ vegetation close to houses or roads or paths, perhaps even harboring ‘varmints’ or suspicious people. In a few cases, angry residents have even started to cut down or mow plantings funded by government. Then delicate negotiations must proceed to find a reasonable balance based on very local politics within each neighborhood. The best form for such negotiations may appear difficult at first if it involves the city, non-profit partners (such as Friends of Wolf Run), neighborhood associations, and individual residents. An additional interest at some sites could be the production of food. Indeed, a new local non-profit organization “Seedleaf” has

begun to establish small vegetable gardens in town: “Working to increase the amount, affordability, nutritional value, and sustainability of food available to people at risk of hunger in central Kentucky.” This program has taken root in the northeastern half of the city, concentrated in areas with lower average income. There are virtually no sites across the generally more affluent suburban southwestern half of Lexington, even though there are pockets of poverty here—and there are of course considerable problems with diet and life-style among some of the affluent. Another important but diffuse interest-group are the dog-walkers, often promoting the social fabric of a neighborhood through their friendly chat, and diligently picking up after their pooches—something I will never understand! Why can’t we find clear sign-posted unmowed grass for them to “go” in, later rotated perhaps into productive beds for appropriate plants? And then we have a new, radical group called the “Blue Grass Goat Justice League” who seek permission to raise these animals in town—where we are now surrounded by dense thickets of alien shrubs and vines that would be relished by goats. The growing population of hispanic immigrants would be glad to help with the feeding, slaughtering and eating of these creatures! Sadly, this town has not yet developed a good long-term vision that deals with all of these potential interests, fears and benefits related to plant material.

The roots of all these problems involve the general decline in ‘hands-on’ experience with plants among the public, other than mowing. Also, there has been a general compartmenting among more professional humans that are involved with natural resources—into those focussed directly on health-related issues (through diet, soil, water and air), on conservation or restoration of resources, and on extraction or production of resources. Diverse professional agendas and avocations tend to formalize different aspects of the three broad interests in plants that I introduced above. In the Age of Information, it is increasingly easy to dwell on particular parts of this professional panoply, and to seek someone who supports just about any view. But what we generally lack across the vast expanse of increasingly suburban North America is a means to build local consensus about ecological matters within true neighborhoods—large or small.



Plum blossom in town: connecting a little with the ancient horticulture of native american villages?

Questions about roads, sewers, utilities, schools and crimes tend to be more urgent than questions about footpaths, riparian corridors or ponds, composting or other recycling, neighborhood picnics or field trips, more local meat, local natural history, healthy outdoor activities for teenagers during the summer, and especially how to foster collaborative physical work at specific sites.

The best scale for such consensus-building should be a primary concern. At the broadest extreme, we cannot yet Save the World as a group—although will the Internet or United Nations or a Religion eventually allow this? At the narrowest extreme, although some of us could build wonderful gardens around our own individual homes, don't we need to develop relationships within an extended neighborhood for maximum benefit in our communities? Existing intermediate scales that the current political structure offers—from neighborhood to town to county to state to nation—do not necessarily match the natural regions, or other reasonable sections, within which it would be most useful for us to solve ecological problems.

Let's return to my three examples of problems above.

(1) Difficulties at Griffith Woods could be greatly reduced if interested people (representing all relevant organizations and viewpoints) met on a regular basis, shared information and worked more together. In the 1990s, The Nature Conservancy did initiate what they called 'ecoregional planning' among partners, with considerable exchange of technical information, goals and strategies. But the regional scale of this initial effort was rather large and unwieldy, extending over the whole 'Interior Low Plateaus' from southern Ohio to northern Alabama. And, despite earlier good intentions, there has been little continued regular interaction among interested people within the central Bluegrass section. An area of that scale—covering only about 10-12 counties and 60-80 miles across—does offer some reasonable prospect for real team-building among the few dozen professional conservationists here plus the few hundred more active amateur naturalists and environmentalists.

(2) The proposed project along Cane Run could have been greatly improved (or at least the damage reduced) if knowledgeable people

had reviewed the city's proposal—we need an overarching 'natural resources board', with balanced representation from environmental agencies, parks, greenways, horticultural and agricultural interests.

(3) Good management of vegetation along riparian zones within Lexington, together with reduction of alien weeds and plantings of native species, could become coordinated through non-profit organizations like 'Friends of Wolf Run' working together with groups of neighborhood associations and representatives from local government. The Wolf Run watershed in Lexington covers a few square miles, and thanks to excellent leadership by a retired person from the Kentucky Division of Water, the Friends have done great work. But similar organizations are needed in other sectors of the community. Independently, local government has been trying to advance general urban planning also at an intermediate scale—between individual neighborhoods or council districts and the whole city. The recent "Armstrong Mill West Small Area Plan" seems to be a good model, covering a few square miles within the West Hickman Creek watershed. There is much land here in school grounds, parks and greenways that could be used to promote more active gardens or desirable native vegetation, especially around the somewhat blighted low-income areas along Center Parkway and near the schools (who are often curiously silent in local planning).

In all three examples, the best scale for progress has not yet been clearly established, but good concepts have been floated or tried, from which we can learn. Larger non-profit organizations or government agencies cannot lead us to the best scales for local coordination of environmental projects, especially botanical or horticultural aspects. The way forward, in my view, is to solidify attempts at annual meetings, monthly field trips, weekly workdays and the like, at scales that make sense for the more interested people. In this way, modern human beings may rediscover a sense of community that is focussed on old-fashioned gardening (for vegetables and herbs), plus more local meat (reducing thickets), plus more extensive plantings of native species (trees, shrubs, flowers, grasses), plus broader review of general conservation across the region—working together, dreaming and balancing diverse Edens.