



A
GARDEN
OF
WOODLAND
PATHS

BY RUSSEL WRIGHT



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he land which I bought 25 years ago, in 1942, was a nondescript piece of woods on the side of a hill where similar woods stretched for 15 miles. This is called second growth because it is the remains of firewood operations of 80 years ago, and it has been considered useless because of the lack of soil and of any level spaces which could be used for farming.

These hills have grown into the typical monotony which nature produces unless man or the elements disturb the overall repetitive pattern. It is typical uninhabited, uninviting dry and impenetrable woods, with no views or vistas.

Today, my land contains two miles of paths, many vistas of the river and the mountains beyond a large natural pool with a waterfall. Friends and neighbors consider it a fascinating and unusual piece of land, and I am amused and pleased to often be asked, 'How did you ever find such an unusually beautiful site?' — pleased because these friends think that I found it this way, and therefore I know that it looks natural. Actually, a very small percentage of it has been thinned, and no formal landscaping has been done, and only indigenous growth is allowed here.

In the beginning, our small bungalow was so closely surrounded by woods that my wife was unhappy with it. It was hot and claustrophobic, so I began to cut back around the house to create a gradual transition to the woods, and I began to explore the possibilities of a view. In my explorations, I found many interesting features on my land — great sculptural boulder formations, cliffs, small ravines, large areas of ferns, and some giant trees, and by climbing some of them, I discovered great vistas of the river. So I began cutting views, and I am still doing this. Thinning must be done slowly and carefully over the years. No big openings may be made or the trees, not having time to accustom themselves to the wind, will topple and you will lose some. So I cut only a few trees at a time. I take photographs and then make tracings over them to decide on what trees to eliminate. Sometimes only a few limbs are cut to reveal a bit of the river.

In the course of this slow process of thinning, I grew to know and to love my land. I felt that it was unappreciated, and I wanted my wife and weekend visitors to see the beauties I had discovered. Thus began weekend projects of making paths. It is the story of the making of these paths which I would like to share with others. The protective land which many of us have acquired around our weekend places need not be an unloved, unenjoyable tangle. It can be much more than a wall separating you from your neighbors. With small effort, it can become a wonderland for your children, or a revitalizing stroll for your guests.

Here are four simple general rules for planning the paths:

No. 1. Follow the natural contour of the land. Look for a path which the dogs, the deer, the cows or the rabbits may have made and use it as the inspiration and base of the plan. Unless you are trying to develop an alle, avoid straight lines. Make paths which always curve.

No. 2. If possible, make it unnecessary to retrace your steps on a path, that is, make it complete a contour.

No. 3. Plan it to show off the most interesting features of your land. Have it pass through a bed of ferns; turn around a knoll or a rock formation. Find a good place for picnics. Open a place where there is a vista. These features should be placed not on the side or the straight line of your path, but your paths should be arranged so that they are in a portion of a curve, that is, the interest of the path can be sustained if the walker finds a feature or change as he turns a curve in the path.

No. 4. Vistas should be cut very slowly, as I have stated above. Do not make the usual crude mistake of a panoramic vista by cutting down everything in front of the viewer. It should be framed with large trees, and have many trees between the viewer and the vista to create more depth and a subtle, natural effect.

The labor of making paths need not be great. I recommend that you limit yourself to weekend projects because if it is left entirely to hired labor, much will be destroyed that could have given you much pleasure. Mine have been made merely by my own work, occasional help of guests and of "moon-lighting" laborers and, in a few instances, I have retained professional tree surgeons.

The techniques are primitive, and workmanship can be unskilled. After I have determined the course of a path, I begin by heavily spraying the growth on it with a brush killer. Within a





year's time this growth has been killed and falls to the ground, or the roots can be easily pulled. Where there are rough spots, you use a grub hoe and smooth out the terrain. A path is oppressive and dull and uninteresting if the growth on both sides all the way forms a kind of solid wall. Therefore I make openings of alcoves to relieve the walled-in effect which can be desirable just preceding a panorama.

Thinning can be done by cutting down (be sure to cut the roots) small sickly trees, but generally leaving those which are healthy and straight. A complete thinning can be done where you would like to show a small grove of a certain kind of tree or shrub, a cliff, or a group of boulders.

If you find some interesting wild flowers or ground cover, weed out all of the other growth which surrounds it, and encourage it to spread, or you can even buy from wild nurseries plants of the same kind to increase the area of the wild flower.

If there is an interesting feature at some distance from the path, make an offshoot off your main path in to the feature.

Here is a list of tools which I use for my very rugged land: grub hoe, bushwhack, machete, aerosol spray, portable spray tank, pruning clippers, ax, pruning saw, shovel, chain saw, baskets, crow bars, pick, sickle.

I have used three types of construction for paths:

No. 1. The easiest is a cross-country or through-the-woods path which is really not a path at all. I either blaze with an ax a small cut in trees to mark the path, or with an aerosol spray of an orange color, I make a spot always at eye level on the right side of the way that I have found it easiest to go through the woods. This is an intriguing kind of path that your more enterprising guests may enjoy.

No. 2. A single file path.

No. 3. A double path, that is, a path on which two can walk together comfortably. If your land is rough, this is a great deal more labor naturally than the single file. But it is friendly and more comfortable.

I like to give each of my paths a theme. Here are few suggestions:

A Morning Path leading toward the east so that the sun shines through the trees as you walk.

A Sunset Path leading toward the west, if possible with a sit-down place for watching the setting sun.

A Springtime Path that shows off the wildflowers that bloom in the spring.

An Autumn path that will show off the great variety of fall color in your trees and shrubs.

A Winter Walk which is predominantly evergreen.

If you want novelties, there are two that I can suggest: I have a place which I call a secret room. It could also be called a sanctuary or retreat. I have disguised the path to it so that no one knows how to find it but myself. A very small area has been semi-cleared which is delightful to sit in or picnic in alone or with one or two friends.

A more elaborate novelty is a labyrinth. This can be made in an area where there are lots of bushes by the use of the brush killing spray, and clippers and grub hoe.

The pattern of the path is arranged in such an elaborate pattern that people following it "get lost". The labyrinth path can be an attraction for small children.

The first woodland path I made is short (fifteen minutes) but carefully executed. It starts close to the house and returns to the house. I use it as an introduction to Nature. My most urban guests can walk it in a short time and feel that they have gone through the woods. It is designed for spring and summer strolling, and many elements are arranged to make it seem and feel cool as ours is a very hot region in the summer. It begins with crossing a simple bridge over the waterfall. This region naturally has many boulders and rocks in it, and I have added many more from places where I do not want them. Growth among the rocks is removed and prevented because I want the path to begin with a barren feeling to contrast with the lushness to be found further on at the first curve. Here the path, padded with thick moss, runs between many hemlocks, underneath which are the glossy dark green laurel bushes which I have planted there around the pool. The lower branches of the hemlocks have been removed so that you can look down through these trees to the water in the pool. On the sides of the path, small paths or stone steps lead to alcoves which I call rooms. There is a little hollow that you look into which is carpeted with a wonderful growth of partridge berry. There is a room whose walls are tall hemlock. It is inhabited by a huge family of

many sized boulders, and between these I have seeded a large amount of wild thyme, always fragrant. In the next one, the main planting is of the silvery leaved sweet everlasting (it has a white flower), mixed with the feathery lady fern and surrounded by huge bushes of laurel, in back of which are more hemlocks, and in the distance the white trunks of canoe birches.

Hypatica is planted on both sides of the stone steps leading to the lady slipper room. The lady slipper and the other wild orchid, rattlesnake plantain, have seeded themselves in many areas outside this room. In fact, they form the overall pattern of the whole walk.

This is the highest point of the path and here you can carefully step out on the crown of a sheer granite cliff which drops straight down to the water of the pool thirty feet below. You look out across the pool, the trees beyond the dam, and see a bit of the Hudson River and the mountains on the other side of it.

A curving flight of stone steps lead down to a mossy plateau where I cleared all trees except a small grove of twisting grey birch. A friend has dubbed them the Martha Graham girls, because they look like dancers. In the spring the moss is dotted with tiny bluette flowers. Here one always pauses to look across the pool to the waterfall and its fifteen cascades. Next you pass by large hemlocks in front of which I have planted chickory whose grey leaves and blue flowers contrast with the somber trees.

A path of New York ferns has been annually weeded so now it makes a great furry swath which sweeps around the curve here.

You walk down through a clearing of field grass and wild strawberries and then cross the dam on stepping stones.

The shallow end of the pool offers fish, underwater plants and reflections to enjoy. Stone steps lead you from the pool to a path which curves through a small grove of dogwood.

For the final lap of the walk I wanted a more civilized mood so I created a small pastoral hill. At its base are two field cedars flanking a big comfortable boulder on which you can sit and look back across the water at all you have walked through on this excursion. Finally, you climb the sun-drenched hill sprinkled with daisies, butterfly weeds, bladder campion, Queen Ann's lace to the living room terrace which is shaded by tall sycamores.

Thus my guests have experienced in a concentrated area samples of much that my land can offer — boulders, cliffs, dark hemlock groves, sunny fields, vistas and the water, all in a fifteen minute walk on a path which goes up and down, and provides a little exercise as well

as interest — a good idea before lunch or dinner.

Another of my paths doubles as the Morning Walk and the Winter Walk. The direction of the path is entirely eastward so that in any season that you walk up this hill before noon, the sun will be shining at you through the needles of the hemlock, and will be strong on the tops of the large trees, where the birds fly and the squirrel's leap. Below you will see the sparkle of the little cascades of the brook.

The path follows an old path which a hundred years ago was used for sleds to bring cordwood down the hill. I found that along both sides of it small hemlocks were predominant. Twenty-five years ago I started cutting out almost all of the deciduous trees edging the path. Now I thin the hemlocks to eliminate the scrawny ones and to encourage the strong ones. It has gradually developed into a majestic alle of these dark evergreens.

Most of this path is at the base of two embankments so that there is always a deep deposit of leaves underfoot — soft and quiet for walking. At the beginning of the path the sides are so high that one has a worm's eye view of the trees from both sides. As you ascend the hill, the sides diminish so that they become eye level and you look at the base of the trees in the woods.

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You pass through a forest which I purposely leave untouched. It is rather like looking at the bottom of the sea through a glass window. Here you witness the dramatic cruelty of the forests. The corpses of fallen trees are being devoured by decay or are caught in the arms of younger ones. Roots attack the boulders. Often you hear the flutter of the wings of partridge and see them flying away deep in the woods. In the early summer many Indian pipes push their way through the leaves of this path and after every rain there is a great crop of mushrooms.

Lest the path become a monotonous alle, I have cut two openings. The first opening shows a bend in the brook where the ferns sweep knee deep down to the water.

At the next bend in the path, I have widened it to encourage the natural carpet of white violets that grow here, and to reveal a small waterfall, a large area of flat rock, and a small clear, clean pool just large enough for one person to bathe in. This opening is an ideal setting for a picnic. Overhead I have cut a large grapevine so that you can grab it and swing out over the brook. In the next portion I have removed the hemlocks to reveal on both sides my tallest trees, which tower eighty feet. This is the best place to see and hear the birds. Here we have on three occasions found the skeletons of deer in the snow, and picked up the tail feathers of





the vultures who had eaten the flesh from the bones.

Next I bent the path to run close to the brook and I have cleared out the fallen trees to show the great expanse of the giant leaved skunk cabbage.

The path again plunges into a hemlock tunnel which curves away from the brook and then back again at the crossing made by four large boulders moved here for stepping stones. In wet weather, the water rushes past between them.

On the other side is the goal of this path: a grove of hemlocks all the same size stretches along a narrow strip of the bank on the other side of the brook. Back of the brook a huge stone, twenty-five feet high, forms a long wall. The grove of hemlocks continues for about 150 feet along this magnificent cliff. You can walk along under the hemlocks looking up and admiring the contours and the rich pattern of the lichen of this giant stone. At the end of the grove, one can recross the brook at a lower point and return to the hemlock tunnel.

My Sunset path also doubles as the Autumn path. It starts as an offshoot of the Winter Walk. The entrance is marked by a few big stone steps which take you over the embankment. To draw one's attention from the main path, I have planted four new birch whose white trunks are seen through the dark hemlocks. As you reach the top of the embankment, it is late afternoon, and you see these dramatically lighted against the screen of hemlocks. Around them I have transplanted witch hazel bushes whose yellow blooms last through late November.

On the other side of the path I have left a baffle of maple and hemlocks to hide the approach to the surprise feature of this walk. As the path turns, you suddenly see the main feature — a theatrical scene at sunset — through the trees (which have been thinned), the setting sun shines from the back of a distant mountain on the Hudson River. The path leads to a window-like vista which is framed by ancient hemlocks and a formation of some eighteen feet high boulders. Parts of this great granite sculpture form flat platforms large enough to hold a picnic or several spectators of the sunset. The upright members of this sculptured composition are great for climbing and exploration. This complex is sheltered by several huge 150 year old hemlocks, and this is where one finds patches of fur so that you know that this is where the deer bed down. The path runs through this huge sculpture and then makes a steep descent, and turns again to reveal another surprise vista: through the trees you see a long horizontal shining streak made by the sun on the Hudson. At your feet and around you is a small sea of viburnum which are many shades of wine red in the fall.

Below, across the paths, I have planted a long horizontal drift of deep purple aster and beyond there is a family of small boulders, among which I have planted trailing bittersweet because of its bright yellow leaves and berries.

Continuing, you will find that I have thinned the woods to make an opening on one side to reveal a beautiful cliff which is about 200 feet from the path.

Further on, on the other side, the clearing made for an old trash pit has been covered and seeded with the weed called Indian tobacco whose red blooms in September are repeated by the leaves and berries of the dogwood which surrounds this little clearing.

At the bottom of the descent you begin to see the sun on the water of a small swamp. This was made by the bulldozer's when they removed fill for my house, and I am naturalizing it with swamp plantings. Continuing downward are two more sharp turns and you get the full sweep of the swamp ringed with dogwood, a black willow, and a scarlet leaved tupelo tree.

A few steps from here you find the parking area and the house.

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