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## Managing nature in the home garden

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# Nature, Temporality and Environmental Management

Scandinavian and Australian  
perspectives on peoples and landscapes

Edited by  
Lesley Head, Katarina Saltzman,  
Gunhild Setten and  
Marie Stenseke



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**Lesley Head, Katarina Saltzman,**  
**Gunhild Setten and Marie Stenseke**

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## 8 Managing nature in the home garden

*Katarina Saltzman and Carina Sjöholm*

Lawns look nice but require a lot of work. Ours is becoming invaded by dandelions, moss and a small yellow flower that stretches out its tentacles and reproduces kind of like strawberries. It's terrible. I struggle with it everywhere.

(DAG F 1229)

Owners of a private home garden get involved in, and influence, the growth, life and death of other organisms through simple actions like mowing, pruning, trimming and weeding. In the garden, humans inevitably interact with other, non-human actors, such as various plant species. The introductory quote by a Swedish home garden owner reflects the common drama where the gardener and various plants struggle with and against each other. Some home gardeners describe their battle against certain weeds in terms of a continuous war (compare Atchison and Head 2013).

In modern Western societies such as Scandinavia and Australia, the urban home garden is important for hands-on daily interaction with nature's processes. The home garden presents an opportunity to observe the changing of seasons and experience first-hand the growth, fight for survival, maturation and decomposition of other organisms. This chapter discusses everyday interactions with 'nature' in domestic gardens; it is based on personal accounts and has a specific focus on plants. The results and reflections presented in this chapter are outcomes of a cross-disciplinary research project examining the complex interactions between people, plants and other actors of different kinds (such as tools, texts, animals and decorations) in modern Swedish home gardens.<sup>1</sup>

Plants comprise a central component of most home gardens, whether we consider a backyard with a single bush and a lawn or a lush and well-groomed garden with flowerbeds, hedges and vegetable patches. And vegetation, often categorised as weeds, can also take root on surfaces that have been paved to keep the vegetation at bay, for example. Despite their rootedness, plants do move and are moved between different places in the garden, as well as from one garden to another. In the following, we are specifically focussing on the relations between people and plants, especially on the temporal and mobile aspects of plants. We discuss plants as non-human actors (compare Hitchings 2003; Jones and Cloke 2008), which are not only growing but also moving within and between gardens, that is, they



refuse to stand still. In many home gardens, there are owners who have stories to tell about how plants have been brought in from a different location, for example, from the garden of an old relative or from a place visited during a holiday. Other plants move by themselves in and between gardens, by spreading seeds, winding roots or rhizomes.

In our project, we have analysed how people interact with their immediate physical surroundings in their home environment. Because the extent to which a home garden can be considered nature is subject to debate among gardeners, humans' relationships with various aspects of nature in the garden give rise to numerous questions. For example, is the home garden considered part of nature or nature part of the garden? Is nature always welcome in the garden, or does it first have to be trimmed, pruned and cleaned up? Who and what is acting in the garden? In order to respond to such questions, we need to attend to issues concerning time, space and social environment. In this chapter, and based on our empirical material, we examine these issues through four larger themes: 'life with a garden', 'cultivated nature?', 'temporality and motion' and 'managing co-species'. However, first we need to put the home garden in context, both empirically and analytically.

### The home garden in context

In Sweden, more than half of the total population reside in single-family dwellings (SCB 2008) with access to some form of yard/garden, and many people consider the garden an important aspect of their home environment. The privilege of living in a non-farm single-family dwelling with a garden was once reserved for the more affluent members of the population but spread to other Swedes a little over a century ago (Wilke 2006). Following the end of World War II, subsistence cultivation of fruits and vegetables was gradually replaced with the view of the home garden as a place for leisure and relaxation (Flinck 1994). Subsequently, the market for garden-related items, media and services has grown significantly, and this affects the ways in which people understand and use gardens.

Interestingly, the 'ordinary' private garden has often been taken for granted and rarely problematised in research. In addition, research on cultural processes and components of people's homes has only given limited attention to home gardens (e.g. Miller 2001; Pink 2003; Winther 2006; Shove *et al.* 2007). It is increasingly acknowledged that the home garden is an arena worthy of exploration, however, and it is now a fairly established international research field (e.g. Hitchings 2003; Head and Muir 2006, 2007; Bhatti *et al.* 2009, 2014; Qvenild *et al.* 2014).

In a Swedish context, research on home gardens and their cultural history and significance has so far been surprisingly scarce (Saltzman and Sjöholm 2013, 2014). Swedish garden history research has given considerably more attention to parks and more formal gardens than ordinary home gardens (e.g. Nolin 1999; Åhrland 2005).

Our research project has hence paid particular attention to the home garden, including things people do in the garden without making a big deal of it: for example, the home gardener's daily walk through the backyard to remove overblown

flowers, pull out a few weeds or kill a couple of slugs. Routine tasks may include mowing the lawn, pruning trees and watering, but also sitting down comfortably to eat, sunbathe or read. Then there are trips to the nursery to buy seeds, bulbs and summer flowers, but also to the waste recycling centre with twigs, branches and leaves. These are tasks that in a Scandinavian context are associated with changes related to the seasonal cycles.

This chapter is methodologically and theoretically based on ethnological cultural analysis. Ethnology is an interpretive science with similarities to anthropology as well as cultural studies, looking for meaning and understanding in cultural fields. Ethnologists are concerned with exploring everyday life by problematising all sorts of seemingly trivial phenomena, and by studying such mundane activities up-close, cultural analysis can contribute to knowledge about central aspects of our lives. The underlying notion is that people are carriers and active creators of culture (Shove *et al.* 2009; Ehn and Löfgren 2012). By implication, we seek a deep understanding of individual stories and lives. In order to explore individual accounts of what people do in, and say about, their gardens, we have collected material through ethnological questionnaires sent out across Sweden as well as fieldwork including interviews and filmed visits to homes in two residential areas in two communities in southern Sweden.

The use of question lists has a long tradition in Nordic ethnological research (Hagström 2001; Hagström and Marander-Eklund 2009). Their purpose is to gain access to accounts and reflections in relation to everyday experiences (compare Sheridan *et al.* 2000; Bhatti *et al.* 2014). In Sweden, the method has been developed jointly by academic researchers and the folklore archives, which have played an important role in the documentation of past and present everyday culture.<sup>2</sup> As the method encourages informants to write freely using their own words, the responses can vary quite a bit. For example, they may be anywhere from one to dozens of pages in length and can include illustrations and pictures. This chapter is based on responses to two different question lists, one titled *Nature to Me*, which was used in a national documentation project on the roles of nature in everyday life (Midholm and Saltzman 2014), and one titled *The Home Garden*, designed specifically for our project. The latter consisted of questions regarding home gardens in general since not all respondents had their own garden. In total, the two lists have generated about 300 written responses.<sup>3</sup>

We have also conducted ethnographic field studies in two residential areas in southern Sweden. We selected areas where the yards and gardens initially looked the same in order to explore how use of garden space has developed over time. Our case study areas consist of one residential area built in the 1930s and one area developed in the 1960s and 1970s. The fieldwork has consisted of ethnographic observations (Fangen 2005), spontaneous conversation and scheduled semi-structured conversational interviews (Ryen 2004) as well as filmed walk-along interviews (Kusenbach 2003; Pink 2007). We have completed about 40 in-depth interviews. In addition, we have taken pictures, and several informants have shared their own documentation with us. The filming has enabled us to capture some of the small and large changes that take place continuously in the gardens.

In the following sections, we will examine what people show us and say about their gardens.

## **Life with a garden**

The ways plants, objects and environments from the past are approached and handled, in relation to both new trends and the innate dynamics of a home garden, form a recurring theme in the material. Some new homeowners choose to completely remake their yard and garden, while others decide to maintain what is already there. Both approaches can be a significant part of a lifestyle project for the homeowner where the garden becomes an expression of who they are.

We can see movements in space and across boundaries as plants, objects and ideas are moved from one garden to another or from one location in the garden to another. Some of these movements are slow and ‘invisible’, yet very significant, as when trees grow or new species take hold and spread. In our view, plants can be seen as actors, for example, when they migrate to a garden by themselves, as welcome additions or dreaded weeds. An older woman, now living at a nursing home where she has access to a patio area, talks about a plant that has accompanied her through life:

When we moved to Silvergatan [in 1945], my uncle Axel brought us a rhubarb root from his allotment. When I moved to Partille [in 1959], my mother gave me a root from the rhubarb. Then when I moved to Gotland [in 1977], I brought the rhubarb roots to my new garden. It became a 10-metre long hedge, and now [2011] I have a small root from the hedge in a pot!

(DAG F 1316)

Many home gardeners tell stories about special plants that came from somewhere else, such as from older family members or from places visited. In this way, the plants become carriers of stories and are assigned special meanings often related to the gardener’s personal or family history. One informant with a strong interest in gardening talks about some plants that were moved to her garden. She grew up and lives in southern Sweden and talks about when her parents sold the allotment where she spent all her summers as a child. Her uncle from further north, the only person in her family with a garden, adopted some of the perennials from her parents’ allotment. Newlywed and pregnant, she eventually obtained her own garden, to which her parents brought shoots from the perennials that had originally come from the allotment garden. She carefully describes how her parents travelled first to her uncle by public transport and then with a mishmash of trains and buses to her new home in the province of Skåne in southern Sweden with, among other plants, an iris: ‘We lived there for about ten years, and the last thing I did before we moved, we were just about to leave ... “Oh I have to bring dad’s iris!”’ So there she was, in her present, much smaller, garden, showing us what she call ‘dad’s iris’: ‘I have it in several places, you’re supposed to split it in autumn ... and I’ve planted it pretty much everywhere’ (interview 6).

Maintaining an older garden or special plants that have been moved from older family members' gardens, for example, may represent a very concrete historical link and a manifestation of identity and cultural heritage. Accounts of the origin and development of the garden are common when people talk about or show their gardens and yards, as in the 'dad's iris' example above.

The conservation of an old garden can be a matter of consciously maintaining a piece of green cultural heritage, a practice sometimes held as a responsibility to future generations (Andréasson 2007; Flinck 2013). Aesthetic and economic aspects may also be relevant, as an old-fashioned garden may be an asset when selling a house and a garden. However, the owner of a garden can never be certain a new owner will appreciate what he or she has accomplished. A garden does not exist only at a physical level but also as ideas in the owner's mind, and it is obvious that different garden ideals operate in parallel. The notion that the garden is a perhaps not perfect, but at least pleasant, reverberation of a lost paradise implies still that dreams often trump the actual outcome (Gunnarsson 1992). Thus, ideals and practice merge in the garden, and many garden projects may contribute most to the owner's enjoyment while still only imagined.

### **Cultivated nature?**

Many researchers have pointed to the problem of considering nature and culture as two completely separate spheres, as it leads us to think of objects, plants, people, ideas and so on as belonging to one or the other of these categories. This limits our ability to see and understand boundary-crossing relationships and processes, according to researchers such as David Harvey (1996), Sarah Whatmore (2002), Bruno Latour (2004) and Donna Haraway (2008). The word 'nature', however, is firmly rooted in both the knowledge tradition of Western society and in more trivial understandings of the world around us. Our research confirms that the concept pair nature/culture is a strong figure of thought and an important part of many people's understanding of their everyday reality, not least in the garden.

Home gardeners display great diversity in their views of the extent to which the natural elements in their gardens can and should be cultivated and controlled (Pollan 1991). Some gardens can be seen as a manifestation of human control of nature. Other garden owners prefer an environment that resembles nature as much as possible. According to one informant, a retired farmer who now devotes much time to her garden:

The ultimate goal is to have a natural-looking garden, one that looks like nature itself. There are no straight lines in that type of garden. Things are planted and allowed to grow wherever there is a piece of bare soil. It's not easy, let me tell you, it's a lot harder than making straight lines, and I think I have created a wonderful piece of 'nature' here. You need to keep on top of the weeds, of course, and the lawn has to be mowed.

(LUF M 25977)

Having the garden resemble nature is a strong and widespread ideal among gardeners (Kingsbury 2006) and gives rise to many questions among home gardeners. Issues gardeners struggle with include whether or not to apply fertilizers, prune and mow and whether to introduce new plants or only work with what happens to shoot out of the ground. The question of how and how much the natural environment should be controlled yields different answers depending on who and when you ask.

Managing a home garden is also a matter of learning to cooperate with nature. In recent years, the home garden has increasingly been recognised as an important environment for biological diversity, where a lot can be done to benefit wild plants and animals (e.g. Gaston *et al.* 2007; van Heezik *et al.* 2012). Although some informants expressed firmly that a garden is not nature, the distinction between what is perceived as nature and culture is rather fuzzy. Several informants wrestle in their responses with questions of an almost philosophical kind about where nature begins and ends (Figure 8.1). Hence, it can be difficult to determine the boundaries of what a garden is and what it is not. After all, what is it that makes a piece of land a garden?



Figure 8.1 The owners of this house cherish, cultivate and collect 'wild' plants such as raspberries on the public parkland hillside adjacent to their garden.

On the outskirts of one of the residential areas, we interviewed a couple with small children whose garden neighbours a hill that is publicly owned parkland. This interview illustrated a variety of permeable boundaries within a single garden, including wild/cultivated, order/disorder as well as private/public. Here, we became aware that something that may appear as disorder and neglect on the surface can in fact be a result of the gardener's specific ambitions and understandings of order. The couple told us that they had 'sown wild plants' and both have an interest in what they call medicinal plants. 'I want to have plants that are useful, that are good, that we can take advantage of', said the woman in the family. She added that an inventory of the flora in the parkland had identified some protected plant species close to her garden, implying that these might have spread from their garden (compare Head and Muir 2006). This family actually regarded a significant part of the hillside behind their backyard as a part of their garden. And so, it seems, had previous owners, ever since the house was built in the 1930s. In the interview the current owner, who also grew up in this house and garden, reflected on this: 'It feels like my piece of land. I was a bit surprised when I learned that it was not part of my property, because I have always regarded it as my land' (interview 5).

It can be difficult to draw a line between what constitutes a garden and what does not, and a range of answers to what makes a garden is possible. Many garden owners see boulders, large trees, a creek or a natural pond as attractive features of a garden and are willing to invest considerable resources in incorporating such elements in environments where they are lacking (Londos 2004). Others take the natural features of the garden for granted. Other responses, such as this one from the west coast of Sweden, indicate a clear distinction between more 'natural' and more 'cultivated' parts of the garden.

A few words about the yard around my house. I have a mixed yard measuring about 2 000 square metres. I have a big lawn and several flowerbeds, but leave parts of the yard as-is. Looking at what nature has to offer in these parts, there are alder, elm, ash and birch, as well as an enormous poison ivy covering the bottom 10 metres of the trunk of an ash tree. ... I enjoy the variation between natural and cultivated elements, in particular since it is my home.

(DAG F 1210)

Many respondents talk about experiences related to the natural environment they have acquired in the garden. These accounts often concern the hands-on confrontation with all the things that grow in their gardens. They talk about enjoyment and recreation, but also about maintenance and weeding. Our informants' examples help shed light on the ambiguous distinction between desirable and undesirable aspects of the garden, including what happens when plants grow too numerous or too large. One interviewee describes the transformation of her garden by explaining how one task – mowing the lawn – after a couple of years was replaced with another – weeding – when she redesigned her small yard by replacing the lawn with several rock gardens. The weeding does not bother her much since she remembers



the mowing as a major nuisance. She talks about strategies to minimise weeding, though, as she allows many plants to spread and cover the soil:

A lawn requires a lot more work than you think. If you want a nice one, that is. And I did, of course. Yeah. So I mowed it, and raked it, and mowed it again and I also brushed it. ... So it wasn't easy, but this is not too bad. I pick weeds. ... And then, all the plants cover the ground so the weeds don't stand a chance.

(Interview 1)

The lawn is often discussed as a symbol of the cultivated aspects of the garden. Whether a lawn is a low- or a high-maintenance project is subject to debate. In the end, it seems to be a matter of ambition. Lawns seem to be assigned special importance in many parts of the world, and this has been discussed, not least by Paul Robbins (2007), who has examined the lawn from ecological, economic and social perspectives, and Russel Hitchings' (2006) study of 'retreating lawns' in the UK. Without being directly asked about it, many informants talk about the maintenance of the lawn but also about a weed-free lawn as an ideal. Few informants seem to be content with a lawn 'as long as it's green'. A lawn full of weeds and moss is frequently referred to as a problem, yet not everybody agrees: 'I guess we're a bit Japanese in that way, we actually like the moss', says one informant (interview 2). Some have sacrificed flowerbeds and vegetable patches for a bigger lawn, often with reference to their children's needs and activities: 'We wanted a larger lawn for the children. We used to have just two small patches of grass. We threw away all the berry bushes and removed a path and a vegetable patch' (LUF M 26211). This is one example of how the home garden evolves through adaptation to the changing phases of family life, which leads us to the issues of time and change in the garden.

### **Temporality and motion in the garden**

I can enjoy nature in my small and not always well-kept garden every single day. Sometimes I can see clearly how things grow and the garden changes from day to day, but other times I just don't notice what happens for several weeks. When you come back after a week away, it's easy to see that a lot can happen in a short time. The garden also shows clearly that nature lives its own life.

(LUF M 25943)

Gardens involve many movements and motions; changes connected to the cycles of the year, of day and night, life cycles of individuals, intermingled and combined with decisions and actions of human and non-human actors. Within the field of 'more than human geographies', Lesley Head and Jennifer Atchison (2009) have recognised a growing interest in the hybridity (compare Whatmore 2002) and fluidity of human-plant relations. Similarly, within the field of anthropology, Tim Ingold and Gisli Pálsson (2013) argue for an understanding of all organisms – human and non-human – not as bounded entities but as biosocial becomings that

can be understood as ensembles of relations in flows of materials. All life, Ingold argues, has in common that it is simultaneously social and biological.<sup>4</sup> And living organisms are better understood as trajectories of movement and growth (that is, becomings) than as discrete, preformed entities (that is, beings). These perspectives direct our attention away from individuals and objects and invite us to focus instead on flows and motions or, as Ingold phrases it, ‘to think of humans and indeed of creatures of all other kinds, in terms not of what they are, but of what they do’ (2013, p. 8).

The garden contains clearly cyclical changes, leading to various motions and transformations. Seeds are sown and plants planted; they grow and flourish, wilt and may face their last days in the compost bin. Some of these movements are fast and lead to considerable change, while others are slower and pass unnoticed. Our material gives many indications that the home garden can be a place for everyday rituals and routines, and in connection with these accounts, many informants reflect on various aspects of time and change. As mentioned, some garden owners take a daily walk through the garden, at least in the warmer half of the year, either as a morning routine or to wind down after a day at work. They often describe how this enables them to follow the yearly cycle of growth, blooming and wilting, day by day and week by week (Figure 8.2). Swedish garden owners see the changing of seasons as a basic component of their experience of the garden, and the yearly cycle is often emphasised in descriptions of seasonal tasks in the garden. Some



Figure 8.2 Eagerly waiting for her wood anemones (*Anemone nemorosa*) to flower; this gardener almost tries to open their buds with her hands.



informants describe how they feed birds and squirrels every winter, while others make it a tradition to gather Christmas decorations from the garden. However, most people seem to take a break from their gardens in the wintertime and may instead spend their time making plans for the next gardening season. When the spring finally arrives, the results of the previous year's efforts may show:

Last autumn I planted flower bulbs for the first time ever, and have enjoyed watching all the grape hyacinths and tulips pop out of the ground. I also enjoy picking weeds. It's a never-ending job and somehow seems meaningless, but I love it! Pulling them out of the soil, making it look nice, it smells fresh somehow.

(LUF M 25935)

This informant stresses how she enjoys the 'meaninglessness' of weeding. In fact, the seemingly meaningless tasks in a garden appear to offer many garden owners a special kind of meaning. They pull out weeds, the weeds grow back, they pull them out again, the cycle never ends, and that is precisely what makes it meaningful. The repetitive tasks in a garden become a way to connect with the cycles and processes of nature. The garden and its many organisms are in a constant process of change, resembling the contexts of life, growth, ageing and death of which we are all part.

Many informants laugh in recognition when asked about weeds. 'It's a never-ending job. So I don't care anymore, I just mow the lawn before they seed. ... But you simply can't get rid of them' (interview 3). Weeding is something garden owners just do and are expected to do. Our material includes many descriptions of different types of weeds as well as strategies to minimise their presence in the garden, a topic we will return to in the next section. Some plants grow too big and the magic line between too big and too little becomes a problem to many garden owners. Some informants also talk about their mistakes. 'We have a problem with this walnut tree. We really want to keep it, it keeps growing, it's too big. We're not sure what to do. It's very productive, you know' (interview 4). Trees and bushes end up much larger than planned and a hedge harder to trim than expected. A hedge might even turn into an unplanned impermeable green wall.

Our material also includes interesting descriptions of how new plants necessitate removal of old ones and how this in turn affects other plants. Some gain 'new vitality', as described by one informant (LUF M 26236). The same informant's awareness of the different roles of plants becomes evident when she concludes that some plants 'take a lot of space and really don't look very good, but are indispensable on hot summer days when the awning and magnolia don't cut it on the patio' (LUF M 26236).

Sometimes the changes in a garden are linked to other events in life, as it is not uncommon to plant a tree to commemorate the birth of a child or the passing of a family member. Plants hence carry memories; they may have been received as a gift, shared with friends or acquired in a special place. For many garden owners, the garden may be considered a social project in which an exchange system is of central importance (compare, for example, Belk 2013). The practice of trading plants with other people is not new, but the extent and opportunities have

increased and plant exchange is not limited to specialists. For example, today home gardeners can easily obtain cuttings, seeds and split perennials either online or at special ‘plant flea markets’.

### Managing co-species

The garden is clearly an arena where humans and other organisms interact in reciprocal relationships, involving the gardener and other people, as well as plants and non-human animals. It is also true that the garden is created through both refinement of and a battle against nature. As demonstrated, ‘nature’ can refer to a certain part of a garden, an aesthetic or environmental ideal, the wild and untamed – pests and weeds threatening other plants – but at the same time also a notion of a greater context of which the garden is part. One of many issues garden owners face concerns how much the garden should be controlled and arranged (Figure 8.3). Sometimes it is obvious which plants should be kept or eliminated, but this decision may also be a matter of personal preference: ‘I let the plants grow wherever they want and don’t care if they end up in straight lines or not. Some pop up all by themselves – I’ve never planted tansy and foxglove, but they’re there anyway’ (LUF M 26033).

Many people associate home gardening with dreams of the simple, good life ‘close to nature’. In practice, however, nature tends to offer plenty of resistance, and the work in the garden can often be described as a fierce battle. Hence, from this perspective it is of particular interest to reflect on issues relating not only to ‘weeds’ but also to ‘alien species’:

Garden work is not my thing. Maybe because of the Spanish slug and ground elder. I used to plant flower seeds, vegetables etc., but when the pests get all of it, you lose interest. Every single evening after it rains in the summer, I go out in the garden with a hand trowel and an empty milk carton. I chop them (the slugs) in half and put them in the carton. Sometimes I count them; one evening I got 150. I don’t think it makes much of a difference, though, since I don’t think my neighbours are doing anything about them.

(LUF M 26222)

Whether an organism in the garden is considered an asset or a threat is determined through cultural and social processes. This becomes particularly noticeable in cases where neighbours have different attitudes to, for example, ground elder (*Aegopodium podagraria*) or the Spanish slug (*Arion vulgaris*), infamous intruders in Swedish gardens that can spread rapidly across property lines. It is also important for a garden owner to learn which plants may become too comfortable in the garden. A woman who has lived in her house and garden for 40 years mentions cicely (*Myrrhis odorata*) and oregano (*Origanum vulgare*): ‘You need to be strict with the cicely or else it takes over the whole garden. So does the oregano (wild marjoram), but the butterflies love it’ (LUF M 26033). When these plants act and spread in her garden, she is ready to interact with them and interfere with their motions.



Figure 8.3 For many people, an important aspect of gardening is order and control.

Many informants talk about plants popping up here and there, often in large quantities, and that they do not know what it is, where it comes from and how to handle it: 'It pops up by itself, a lot of it, I don't know what it is, ... it just keeps coming, you have to keep ripping it up' (interview 4). Unexpected and uncontrolled spreading is usually described as a problem but sometimes also as something intriguing of which the garden owner may even take advantage. Ground elder is edible, and so are, for example, the nettles (*Urtica dioica*) that thrive in some gardens. For some, the presence of these plants would be a problem, while for others it is not. For example, one gardener who grows a lot of vegetables mentions how the nettles become a seasonal delicacy (interview 2). Another who claims that she is 'definitely not a meticulous gardener' appreciates the hollyhocks' (*Alcea rosea*) seed setting: 'A nice colony of hollyhocks has grown up along the external wall (a hopeless location for most plants!). They take care of their own reproduction, too. You just have to pull up the ones that come up in the wrong places' (LUF M 26236). Some informants point to plants they like but do not have a clue where they came from. A couple of devoted gardeners (interview 2; LUF M 26194) talk about how they like to dig up or pick seeds from plants that they want and that grow outside other people's yards (compare Phillips 2013). Others mention plants in their own gardens that tend to spread. One example of a plant that can be considered both a weed and a decorative addition is the creeping bellflower (*Campanula rapunculoides*), a bluebell that spreads easily: 'I have a hard time deciding whether it's a beautiful flower I want

to keep or an annoying weed that's impossible to get rid of. I think I'll at least try to limit the spreading of it' (LUF M 26236).

Some plants grow out of control and even become invasive if allowed to grow freely in an area they like. While in Australia the spreading of invasive, non-native plant species is a widely recognised problem (Atchison and Head 2013; Head 2014), this is not as much acknowledged in the Scandinavian countries, with the possible exception of Norway (see Setten, this volume) where a 'black list' has existed since 2010 (Qvenild 2013; Qvenild *et al.* 2014). In both Australia and Europe, many species that have turned out to be invasive have been spread via cultivation in home gardens. The European Union has started working on a list of invasive alien species since a new regulation (1143/2014 on invasive alien species) came into force in 2015. The European network for invasive alien species, NOBANIS, lists a total number of 387 invasive alien species in Sweden as of May 2016 ([www.nobanis.org](http://www.nobanis.org)). The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency has been involved in the listing, inspired by the Norwegian 'black list'. Among the species suggested for the list, we find many that are mentioned and grown by our informants, such as lupine (*Lupinus polyphyllus*), loosestrife (*Lysimachia punctata*), lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*), and elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*). Many people pick the elderflowers to prepare a popular sweet drink. A retired man with a large rural garden in southwest Sweden considers the spread of elderberry in the area a sign of a more general change in the landscape:

I consider the elder bushes a weed. They are everywhere. I have shaped a few of them to nice-looking trees. When we moved here in the mid-70s, there was no elderberry anywhere. We had to go to Hjärnarp to pick flowers for the drink. The spread of it, and of cow parsley and soft rush, is the change in the vegetation I've been most concerned about in our 36 years on Hallandsåsen.  
(LUF M 26203)

This brings our attention to a dimension of change not many informants addressed: general changes in the flora and the landscape which can be both local and global.

Let us return to the couple who had incorporated part of the neighbouring parkland into their garden and sown 'wild' plants. Even for the owner of this garden, who otherwise cherishes everything she understands as 'natural', all plants are not welcome in the garden:

I have been the first to combat ground elder in this area. I have removed all *their* ground elder, *their* ground elder and *theirs*. I do not like it, because it is taking over so much. I have nothing against the dandelions, they are healthy and good. And actually, so is ground elder, but it takes over too much.  
(Interview 5)

In his book *Second Nature* (1991), Michael Pollan discusses the modern Westerner's relationship with nature based on his own gardening experiences. It is both more difficult and more important, says Pollan, to find an ethical approach

to nature when you literally are participating in it, as in a garden, than when you observe an unadulterated wilderness from a distance. In a garden, it is hardly reasonable to claim that nature always fares better if humans abstain from tinkering with it. 'The gardener tends not to be romantic about nature. What could be more natural than the storms and draughts and plagues that ruin his garden?' writes Pollan and concludes that the home gardeners therefore also feel they have the right to quarrel with nature (1991, p. 192ff).

Several informants talk about how they welcome the wild and untamed nature with open arms, including various animals, in their gardens. One informant says she enjoys looking out of her sitting room window at the deer that come to visit in winter evenings to eat from the bird feeder, but that she shoos the same deer away later in spring when they want a bite of her tulips. Thus, what is welcome can vary over time and depending on the situation, which is another example of how diverse and contradictory our relationship with what we call nature can be. It is not uncommon that gardeners see their plans and dreams shattered by some four-legged visitors:

The other day when I was looking up something in our old gardening book, I found my husband's crossed-out notes about what was supposed to become our fruit garden. Apple and plum trees were purchased in 1987 and 1988: Reine Claude, Victoria, Gyllenkroks, Transparent Blanche, Silva, Oranie, Lobo, Cox's Pomona and Åkerö. An elk put an end to our plans not once but twice.

(DAG F 1229)

Some other informants talk passionately about the birds they feed: 'They return what they receive in the winter, [by] eating the pests in the summer' (interview 7). This view, that birds and humans help each other in the garden, reflects an attitude we have come across repeatedly. In the everyday interaction that takes place in the garden with other organisms, both animal and plant co-species (compare Haraway 2008), many people seem to experience a sense of affinity and mutual purpose that extends across species lines.

The garden is often described as the quintessence of our encounter with and cultivation of nature. In contemporary home gardens, it is obvious that plants and animals continuously trespass on attempts to establish boundaries between nature and culture. In this section we have seen how the approaches of garden owners to organisms in their gardens unveil boundaries and categorisations that are important, yet often unreflected, in everyday life in the garden.

## **Concluding reflections**

So, what is there to learn from studies – at this very local landscape level – of interactions with mobile plants in home gardens? In this chapter we have examined some interrelations and biosocial processes through which nature is interpreted, delineated and formed in the context of contemporary home gardens. Based on our informants' accounts, we can conclude that the home garden is

a very important place for everyday interactions with, and negotiations around, nature. To live with a garden is to influence and be influenced by an environment; to form it and be formed by it. Raking leaves, weeding and pruning trees can be seen as a concrete way of controlling 'nature' by creating and maintaining some degree of order and structure. What people have learned to define as nature is continuously managed and shaped in the garden – to a greater or lesser extent – yet it is never fully subject to human control. A garden that has grown out of control can be considered either a failure or an ideal, depending on the perspective taken.

Our ethnographic methods have enabled a close-up examination of the understandings and management of nature by individual garden-owners in their own gardens. Their stories and actions show that categories such as nature and culture are in this context highly relative. They remind us also that the diversity of strategies, interpretations and negotiations that people make in relation to a variety of non-human actors always has to be taken into account.

We have paid particular attention to the informants' perspectives on plants and their movements, and we have observed the agency of spreading plants and their trajectories of motion and growth, as they move within and between gardens. We have seen that some plants in some gardens are regarded as useful and pretty, while in other gardens they are despised as weeds. By looking closely at what our informants have to say about plants and other components of the dynamic microcosm of the garden, we have seen how people relate and respond to temporality and complex processes of change. The life cycles of both people and plants create rhythms in the garden, related to diurnal, seasonal and lifetime changes. With new phases in the garden-owner's life come new priorities that are likely to affect their relationship to, and management of, the garden and its plants. Similarly, plants do develop and affect their human and other co-beings in new ways over time. In the garden, biosocial humans and biosocial plants constantly interact with each other, as well as with other actors and becomings.

The complex, dynamic, multi-species conglomerate of the garden can easily be interpreted in terms of hybridity, fluidity and boundary-crossing biosocial becomings. This kind of terminology certainly provides a more nuanced analytical framework than simplifying binaries such as nature/culture. At the same time, nature and culture is clearly a viable figure of thought in everyday practice, strongly maintained, for example, in the home garden. Hence, we need to remember that these binary concepts have a strong hold on understandings not only of large-scale and philosophical issues but also of everyday matters in our closest vicinity.

## Notes

- 1 The project *Work and Tools in the Garden of Dreams and Realization*, funded by the Swedish Research Council, was carried out in 2012–2015. As such, it reflected primarily the situation in the 2010s, even if many of our informants talked about their lives with their gardens in a longer perspective. Allan Gunnarsson, landscape architect at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, also participated in the project. We thank Johan Hultman for his helpful comments on this text. Parts of the material



presented in this chapter have previously been published in Swedish (Saltzman and Sjöholm 2013, 2014).

- 2 The Swedish folklore archives utilise a fixed group of informants who on a voluntary basis answer thematic questions in a wide range of areas related to everyday life and experiences.
- 3 The chapter includes quotes from the question list material with references to the archives where the responses are kept: Department of Dialectology, Onomastics and Folklore Research in Gothenburg (DAG) and the Folklore Archives in Lund (LUF).
- 4 Ingold even argues that the ‘domains of the social and the biological are one and the same’ (2013, p. 9).

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Interviews:

Recordings and transcriptions are kept by the authors.