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# The Good-for-Nothing Garden

By MICHAEL TORTORELLO

KINGWOOD TOWNSHIP, N.J. — The best kind of garden is a useless garden. James Golden’s green parcel, in the quiet hummocks above the Delaware River, is literally good for nothing. He has made sure of it.

“Use implies something utilitarian,” he said on a recent weekday after a rain had doused the yard. “I don’t want it for anything utilitarian at all.”

Mr. Golden does not grow vegetables. He leaves the farming to the farmers. If he wants to cook or dine, he’ll do it in the house. And although he is 68 and seemingly into his hammock years, he doesn’t maintain a lawn for sitting. There is no tetherball pole. He leaves the entertaining to the entertainers.

But useless is not the same as meaningless. Mr. Golden was puttering around the mahogany-paneled parlor, looking for one of his favorite books, by the designer Rory Stuart, titled “What Are Gardens For?” Though the garden, called Federal Twist, is at the center of Mr. Golden’s life, he admits that he has trouble formulating an answer.

“I would say the main purpose of this garden is aesthetic, ornamental, even emotional,” he said. “And I don’t think most Americans think of gardens in those terms at all.”

This Saturday, Mr. Golden invites the curious public to visit as part of the [Garden Conservancy’s Open Days program](#). (Tickets are \$5.) Agnostics can inhale the fragrance of the JPEGs on his blog, [View From Federal Twist](#).

Taking in the scene evokes the breathless rush through the fabric store Mood on “Project Runway.” Like the endless bolts of cloth, there are grasses here that shimmer and grasses that undulate, grasses that you’d like to feel caressing your neck and grasses you might don as a hair shirt. (Mr. Golden also maintains a judicial list of fashion crimes; for years, he rejected all yellow blooms as “brash.”)

The grass is a hint: The garden at Federal Twist is meant to be a prairie — or a prairie masquerade. It is an ecosystem that most likely never existed here on the edge of a shaded woodland.

Mr. Golden has sowed native plants by the thousands. But he is not restoring habitat. When he started landscaping here, eight years ago, he cleared 80 acres to bring in light. A good part of the garden grows over his septic field.



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The plants he prizes bear the oversize, fantasy foliage of a Maurice Sendak dreamscape. “I don’t care that much about flowering,” he said. “I’m much more into dead plants and seed pods” — or rattling calyxes that look as if they might contain goblin teeth. If this is a prairie, it is a prairie of the imagination.

A garden, Mr. Golden said, should be a place “to sit in, think about, look at the sky in, live in. In my case, it’s sort of a psychological exploration of the hidden, the part of myself that never got expressed because I was such a timid, shy little boy. I learned to adapt over the years to living in the world. On sunny days, when the garden is in full growth, it’s quite exuberant and in-your-face. It’s pretty much the opposite of my personality.”

In other words, Mr. Golden’s garden is useless, except as an all-encompassing creation that fills his days and reveals his innermost feelings to the world.

And the world, for once, is listening. William Martin, an iconoclastic gardener and lecturer in rural Australia, discovered the Federal Twist blog and now counts himself among an international fan club. “It’s not really about horticulture,” he said of Federal Twist. (“Haughty-culture,” is the way Mr. Martin pronounces it, although this could be an accident of his Scottish and Australian upbringing.)

Though his own dry-climate garden, [Wigandia](#), showcases vastly different plants, Mr. Martin reports that the two often correspond about “gardens as places for the mind instead of places for shovel and spade.”

Mr. Golden claims no formal training in haughty-culture. “I didn’t grow up seeing many pretty gardens,” he said. “The closest I came was the cemetery in Canton, Mississippi. I used to play there.” His favorite spot was the old brick columbarium, built for the casualties of a yellow fever epidemic.

There is a profession designated for children with such a rarefied disposition: poetry. And a place where they migrate when they grow up: New York. Specifically, an M.F.A. program brought Mr. Golden to Columbia University. “Then I ran out of money,” he said. “And I had to get a real job.”

At this point, his vocation and his avocation diverged. “I realized I wouldn’t be a poet,” he said. “I would be gay instead.”

Mr. Golden recalls the rush of freedom that he felt amid “the beginning of the gay revolution in New York.” Or a certain kind of freedom. He has actually spent the last 40 years with Phillip Saperia, 67, the director of a nonprofit trade organization.

Mr. Saperia recalled: “Our first real date, we took a train to Long Island from the city. He actually quoted poetry to me on the train. It was ‘The Bridge,’ by Hart Crane.” He added: “I

thought I was marrying a poet.”

The couple wed in Niagara Falls, Ontario, almost a decade ago, though Mr. Golden admits to having a strained relationship with the word “husband.” It’s going to take a while, he maintains, before it stops sounding so conventional, so constrained, so heterosexual.

“Every day involves compromise,” he said. Start with their dwelling. The couple owns a four-story building on the east side of Washington Park in Fort Greene. And they had hoped to carve a spacious residence out of the bottom two floors. Instead, with retirement looming, they settled on renting out the top three floors and overhauling the garden level.

Mr. Golden negotiated a concession for this reduction in circumstances: another garden. Like a set of toy boxes, a planting frame surrounds a placid gravel rectangle that encloses a reflecting pond. Style doesn’t stop at the water’s edge: Mr. Golden dyed the pool black.

But until the four tent-pole trees, honey locusts, grow in and form a canopy, Mr. Golden finds the Fort Greene garden to be a little “Rear Window” for his temperament. The best view of the garden, he has concluded, is from inside the house.

He spends part of each week alone at their second home near Stockton, N.J., where he can walk the grounds in seclusion (or in his boxer shorts, which is sort of the same thing). The couple bought the rambler together in 2004 for \$440,000, and they have jointly appointed its 2,000 square feet with paintings by friends, ceramics and a few outdoor sculptures.

Mr. Saperia’s sphere of influence ends more or less at the back door. As he said, “I can’t tell a weed from a plant.” (To be fair, Mr. Golden’s distinction between the two is either highly liberal or erratic.)

Mr. Golden admitted, “I would sort of hate to have to share my garden and accept what someone else wants in it.”

While Mr. Saperia remains passionate about his job, Mr. Golden is winding down a quotidian career in marketing communications. His aspiration at this point is to avoid becoming dirt poor — and he means that literally.

“I suffer from an illness,” Mr. Golden said. “If I want a certain plant, I’ll get it, unless it costs thousands of dollars. It’s one reason I’m still working and not fully retired.”

FINANCES HAVE SHAPED Federal Twist in many ways, starting with the shape. Mr. Golden paid \$7,000 to erect an eight-foot-tall deer fence around an acre of sodden land. While he regrets the look of the barrier, he takes comfort in the bang-bang that resounds from the hunt club across the road. “If anyone will kill deer, I am in favor of it,” he said.

He can scarcely afford to lose any of his precious specimens. Traditional garden primers

often suggest plantings in groups of five, seven or nine. But on his epic scale, this effort would be like seasoning a tray of paella with a peppercorn. “I often need 10 or 20 or 30,” he said.

At this stage, the better part of his planting scheme is editing. “Sometimes it starts looking messy and crowded,” he said, stopping along one of the paths to survey a solid mass of growth. A single square foot was sprouting at least a half-dozen perennials: an astilbe, a turtlehead, a sedum, a filipendula and a large coneflower.

Mr. Golden sees a pattern here, but he is willing to entertain the possibility that it may be utter chaos. The creation process, he said, “is planting highly competitive plants and seeing how they live with each other.”

He added: “A wild garden is not a low-maintenance garden. I used to think it is, but it’s not.”

Tovah Martin, an eminent garden writer and horticulturist, visited Federal Twist one afternoon last fall and wandered there, beatific, until night fell. “It looks deceptively wild, but it’s not easy to do this,” she said. “Most gardens are very much about the gardener. More the gardener than nature. He’s taking the dare of letting nature take the upper hand.”

Mr. Golden may have started out the composer of this symphony of colors and textures. He set down the notes: a boxwood hedge here, a tuft of giant miscanthus there. But ultimately, the gardener is more like the conductor of an unruly marching band. The instruments promenade where they will as the melody evolves (or devolves) into something like free jazz.

Until the song comes to an end. Someday, Mr. Golden said, “someone will buy this house and cut down everything.” The prospect is abominable and also just fine. “I think most gardens should depart with their owners,” he said.

Granted, he has no plans to die soon. But then the poor souls in the Mississippi cemetery of his childhood hadn’t planned on the yellow fever passing through. In the garden, there is always more room on top of the compost heap.

Down in the pond, frogs were rampaging through the broadleaf arrowhead plants (*Sagittaria latifolia*). The XXL leaves were handsome, Mr. Golden said, “but it reproduces at an alarming rate.”

In truth, the problem with having so many plants is that it gets in the way of buying more plants. This is a quandary Mr. Golden can live with. Perhaps it is a trick of memory, he said, but “I feel more alive and happy and contented with my life than I ever have before.”

He was meandering toward a bench at the far corner of the yard. The white hydrangeas (*Hydrangea paniculata* Limelight) were screening his favorite view of the house. But really, who would neuter those flowers? A few years ago, he recalled, he sat here with an old friend: the recipient of his unrequited high-school affections. “I was completely smitten,” he said.

Decades later, his friend was twice divorced — and, at this late date, gay. “We sat together here,” Mr. Golden said. “And there we were. And it was so emotional, all these feeling coming up again.”

Maybe that’s what gardens are for.