

Human Privilege in the Garden World

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[If you've read **A New Garden Ethic** you can skip this post, which also made an appearance on Facebook at **Milk the Weed**]

Something you'll hear often is that the planet is constantly changing, has always changed, and always will -- thus planting whatever we want in gardens is a-ok as long as it's not invasive (although there are folks who attempt to show some of the benefits of invasive plant species). The world is always changing and we can't go back to some mythical time in the past.

As I say in *A New Garden Ethic*, native plant gardening is not about going back (we can't) but helping fauna adapt and evolve to a rapidly changing climate WE HAVE CAUSED. Most of those fauna still won't have a chance because the pace of human-induced climate disruption is insanely fast -- we're talking only decades for species to change behaviors or turn into new species. Good luck, bumble bees, a generalist species many will point to using exotic blooms for nectar, but a group of bees that evolved in a cooler climate than the one we are in now.

When someone espouses the line "the climate has always been changing," that's greenwashing and a defense of human supremacy. Psychology 101 is that we will fight harder to maintain what is, even if it harms us or others, because it's both familiar and we've defined our lives and world view through it (see *A New Garden Ethic*). This is one reason we're not curbing CO2 emissions, the use of plastic, big ag, lawns, etc. Also, large corporations have bought our government and duped us into fighting for their profit through trivial culture wars, but that's a whole different ball of wax.

"The climate is always changing" totally dismisses our role and our responsibility; it's a sign that we either don't have the tools, are unable, or are simply unwilling to work through our environmental grief (did I mention a certain book yet and its third chapter?). Facing environmental grief is hard, uncomfortable work on a dozen levels; often, being asked to think critically is quite naturally interpreted as being shamed or made to feel guilty. Both are perfectly normal responses to engagement with topics that shake our beliefs and lives to the core, but that's also just getting stuck on one stage of grief, like denial or anger or bargaining.

The world is always changing, yes, indeed it is. And it has likely never changed so quickly, or so wholly, due to the effects of one dominant species; a species with the rare cognitive and empathic ability to change course overnight, but also so vulnerable to emotion that it trips over itself and can't adapt efficiently. With CO2 at around 415ppm, 75ppm over the threshold we need to be at to curb insane climate disruption, there's

not one square inch on land or sea that we haven't changed (toss in microplastics, too). That realization can make us defensive of our culture's privilege, or it can shake us from our minute-by-minute mental defense of that privilege and break open our hearts; it's the fostering of that breaking that native plant vs. exotic plant discussions are making raw.

The real conversation is not about indigenous plants -- the real conversation is about our legacy over the subsequent millions of years on a planet that will, yes, keep evolving, even if it goes through a mass extinction event we caused but didn't have to. And while gardening with exotic plants is not a core cause of extinction or climate disruption, it is a symptom and part of the larger systems at play; gardening is, for most of us, the only place where we have intimate experiences with lives other than our own. In a time of mass extinction and climate change, gardens are at the very heart of exploring our relationship with other lives, other cultures (flora and fauna) we've silenced through our collective actions. Gardens are not an escape from trouble like a monastic cloister garden -- they are the heart of good trouble, and a place where we gain empowerment to practice [reconciliation ecology](#) and foster compassion for one another (human and non).

I think most gardeners all across the spectrum are keenly aware of extinction and climate disruption and genuinely care about supporting wildlife sustainably. So in that, we're together, closer to being able to do the hard work and tough thinking than we even realize.