

Garden-visiting season is here

Let in visitors for a new perspective on your own plants

By Margaret Roach, *Albany Times Union*, Tuesday, April 19, 2016



Margaret Roach's garden (Courtesy Margaret Roach)

It's garden-visiting season, when local programs and a national one entice people to venture out in search of landscaping ideas, new plants, or perhaps to get their questions answered. I don't visit many gardens in peak season these days, because I am home welcoming guests — or preparing for their arrival.

"Show me your garden," said the British poet laureate of a century ago, "and I shall tell you who you are." If [Alfred Austin](#)'s premise is true, then I am the kind of person who thinks big (to a fault!), and whose nails shall never come clean.

For 20 years I've hosted Garden Conservancy Open Days, as do hundreds of homeowners around the country, so I should by now also be a person who knows better than to try to direct visitor traffic. Each tour day, guests enter the gate and impulsively head every which way toward whatever catches their eye, but I can't resist trying to get them to see it my way.

I want to tell you how to look at the garden, and in which order — which path to take in what direction. I just don't see the garden counterclockwise around the house, for instance; I never walk that route. To me, it would be like telling a story backward, and it — this garden — is my story.

As much as I long for complete crowd control, compulsively managing every visitor's experience, it turns out their viewpoints have rubbed off on me. Garden hosts learn from their guests, if sometimes by accident.

I inevitably see someone pointing out something to a companion, or taking a photo — but in a spot where hard as I try, I cannot conjure what's in the intended frame. "What are they looking at?" I wonder to myself, from my registration-table perch. I've never stood in that place; I'm sure that there's nothing there to admire, or at least nothing intended.

And then, as if hearing my skepticism and wishing to prove me wrong, they trot over — usually for an ID of a plant in the photo. In return for the proper name, and maybe even where to buy it, I'm offered a glimpse of my own garden that I'd never get without the visitor's fresh eye.

Officially, I'm there to answer questions — or should I say the same question, as if on instant replay. Depending on what time of year it is and what looks particularly showy, the list: What is the perennial that looks like a pink Queen Anne's lace (*Chaerophyllum hirsutum* Roseum), or the tree with oversized, silver-blue leaves (the rosemary willow, *Salix elaeagnos*)? What are the big dark blue fruits on that shrubby little tree (drupes of the female *Chionanthus virginicus*, or native fringe tree — and with that answer, you get a bonus tip: to never to buy a female fringe tree except in fall, when you can see how good her fruit is, as every female is different).

In every season, the wine-leaved cultivar of *Physocarpus opulifolius* called Diabolo gets a lot of questions, not because it's rare, but probably because I've let mine grow so big that it confuses people. They might be asking about *Angelica gigas* if it's late summer or early fall — the "[Little Shop of Horrors](#)" biennial with its giant, unearthly buds and maroon-red umbel-shaped flowers. Or about common old rhubarb in springtime, because I grow a very hefty swath in a prominent spot as if it's something fancy, some real prize among bold-leaved plants. But sometimes a rhubarb's just a rhubarb.

And then there is this one other little hiccup to my hosting garden visitors:

My place was planned for viewing from inside-out, not for walking through. I think the best advice for designing a garden is to go inside and look out the window before you site any

plantings. After all, if you're a real gardener you'll mostly view your efforts from inside; outdoors, you're probably crawling around in search of weeds, or dividing that really nice hosta.

The prime viewing happens out the kitchen window each morning when I'm making tea, or from the seat where I sit typing by day. The best garden tour of all here? It would be a house tour — but we couldn't all fit inside.

More Information:

From her organic garden in Columbia County, Margaret Roach is a writer, columnist and creator of AWayToGarden.com. She's also the host of a weekly public radio show and podcast, "A Way to Garden," available free on iTunes.

Garden Open Conservancy Days To find out more about the open local gardens or how you can volunteer go to <https://www.gardenconservancy.org>.