

# welcome

## Grass Roots for Grass Roots

A GARDENER TENDS to notice what's happening at ground level. This summer the blooming cycle arrived early, as did a heat wave so severe that, weeks ahead of their normal schedule, the peonies opened, took a deep breath, couldn't get another, and dropped their parched heads to the ground. The heat wave broke, but, within weeks, in blazed another. Tiny, unfamiliar, virulent bugs thrived in the tropical conditions and munched their way through trees. Forgotten calla lilies, left in the ground all winter where they would normally have frozen to death, came to life again. And when we weren't gardening, we were reading about scores of people dying in the heat—in Europe, in the United States, in the so-called developed world. In Phoenix, an unprecedented heat wave saw temperatures reach 110 degrees—and stay there for weeks. Las Vegas hit 117 degrees.

Global warming. Of course it isn't about the weather—the hottest or coldest days; it's about larger trends in climate change. But just as the intimate story of one mother's loss of a child in a war is often more vivid to us than a statistic reporting the dead, so is one warm day a concrete—and compelling—experience of the many intolerably hot days in our future. It takes only a couple of degrees of average global temperature change to trigger a catastrophic chain of events. According to the climate scientists so eloquently surveyed by Elizabeth Kolbert in *The New Yorker* (please, read the series), the challenge that faces us is not to stop global warming, much less reverse it, but to modify our rapacious ways enough to slow it down—as it is, our legacy is already one of rising temperatures, rising waters, and a radically altered planet.

“If current trends continue,” Kolbert writes, “atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> will reach . . . nearly double pre-industrial levels around the middle of the century. It is believed that the last time CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations were that high was during the

period known as the Eocene, some 50 million years ago. In the Eocene, crocodiles roamed Colorado and sea levels were nearly 300 feet higher than they are today.”

2050. It is impossible to know exactly what is going to happen, of course—and no one is predicting that our grandchildren will find sharks on the ski slopes. But it is imperative to imagine a world of severe drought, seaside homes washed out, robins living in the Arctic—in our lifetime. The worst-case scenarios are so horrific, why would we want to tempt fate?

Am I overwrought? How ridiculous that question sounds, when you consider what is at stake. There's something about middle age that makes you consider just what, exactly, you are leaving your children. What town will they call home? In what house will they and their children gather? Will any of the art that you love one day hang on their walls—will it make them think of you, remember a moment in which that same painting graced a room, hovered at the edge of a conversation, or gave benediction to a kiss? Will that ancient Chinese table someday display the garish, stubby, delightful clay artwork that your children's children bring home from school? The minute you start to think this way, you start thinking about keeping things, in the old meaning of the word—securing

them, caring for them. It is only a small jump from art and furniture and houses and gardens into the whole wide world, which we are not caring for properly.

It is hard enough to keep your own house in order, much less contemplate straightening out the world. Often, as I think about intractable global problems, I want to back off: give some money to the right causes, hope for the best, escape to tending my own garden. I'm not apathetic; far from it. Most of us care deeply about the connection between the quality of our lives and the larger world. Many of my friends spend hours lying awake at night, (*Cont. on page 8*)



# HOUSE & GARDEN

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## SHOWHOUSE SWEEPSTAKES

**The Prize:** All it takes is one piece of magnificent furniture to bring character to an entire room. At the **2005 Hampton Designer Showhouse**, sponsored by *House & Garden*, designer Bill Sofield infused his room with the glamour of 1920s Europe with the Kiosk Butler's Cabinet (#4070) from Baker. One grand-prize winner will receive this custom chest, which Baker master finisher John Kiryanoff has lacquered in a gilded, rice-textured finish. The doors open to reveal a rich, mirrored interior, perfect for the display of a treasured collection or for liquor. The retail value of the 29-by-18-by-50-inch piece is \$7,826.



**How to Enter:** Beginning at midnight on September 19, 2005, log on to houseandgarden.com and enter. There is no purchase necessary; you don't have to be a current subscriber, and you don't have to subscribe. You must be at least 18 years old and a legal U.S. resident on the date of entry. The deadline for all entries is 11:59 P.M. EDT on October 10, 2005.

## WELCOME

(Cont. from page 6) worrying about all the things that can go wrong—or already have. We care—and we are overwhelmed. I began to feel that way during the brutally hot summer months. Turning to the weeding and pruning and watering, I suddenly understood how taking care of one's own garden can be a lot more powerful than I ever realized. It might not even represent a position of retreat.

What if we all adjusted our habits? We know what to do, but we've become sloppy. How hard is it, really, to turn out the lights when you leave a room? Or darken an office building at night? What if people turned off the water while brushing their teeth? Took their own bags to the grocery store? Why can't we reconsider the necessity of that supersized house? Leave the trucks to those who need them to earn their living? Pay attention to fuel efficiency? Why can't we turn off the air-conditioning when we aren't home—or keep it off unless it is absolutely necessary? (Or try turning it off for a full day when the thermometer hits 100 degrees, just to remind ourselves of what the future might be like.) Why can't we wear sweaters indoors in the winter, and turn down the heat? All of us could do all of this. The effect would be enormous. We have a lot of power! It accumulates in the small, everyday ways of housekeeping. But of even greater consequence would be the change in attitude. When I told a friend that I was not including AC in the renovation of my house—after all, I don't (yet) live in a southern climate—she was aghast. “But you are going to need air-conditioning desperately,” she said. “You know, with all the global warming, it's getting hotter and hotter.” What if we saw the dangerous absurdity of that thinking?

The biggest if: What if each of us made a point of telling our leaders that we do care, and that we are concerned? What if the moral leadership that we are now missing came, literally, from the ground up—from the place where we will eventually

feel the effects of global warming most catastrophically: home.

Yesterday a small bird flew into the room in which I was sitting quietly, reading. Forgetting that there was no screen, I had left the door open for a little breeze. The bird wheeled around the entire room and, as if suddenly understanding what it had got itself into, began to dart and dive chaotically. It had lost its way to the door, but, evidently recognizing a familiar landscape, it flew to a window. It hovered there, its beak tapping the glass gently, its wings fluttering. As I tried to think how to help, I watched it tap its way up a pane of glass, reach the mullion, stop, and fall to the bottom of the pane, only to get itself as far as the divider again. This went on, over and over, the bird tapping against the glass—the dear world, so clearly visible, the trees and sky, where it wanted to be, if only it could get through the glass. What was this invisible barrier?

The bird continued to trace the same route, its panic growing. I wondered, as I went into the kitchen for a towel, why it always stopped at the bump—which, admittedly, seemed impossibly high to it, though so small to me. Why couldn't it grasp the futility of that path, and find another way? It felt trapped, yet it was actually free to fly elsewhere. When I returned, the sparrow had not changed its course. I walked slowly up behind it, wrapped the towel gently over it, carried it to the door, and released it, watching as it disappeared into a beautiful evening sky.

We are bumping up against something that, though we put it there, is as invisible to most of us as that window was to the bird—a pane of gas across the skies, letting heat in, but not out. If we continue to do the same thing, stopping at the bumps, over and over again, we will be trapped. And who, then, do we think is going to enfold and release us?

  
Dominique Browning, EDITOR