

# Sound *in the* Garden

Welcoming and becoming attuned to sound in a garden adds another dimension of enjoyment.

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY KAREN BUSSOLINI



This simple water feature adds soothing sound in the Cape Cod garden of Judy and Dave Rogers.

SOMETIMES YOU can hear spring before you see it. In my Connecticut garden, cardinals whistling from my side-yard thicket in early February are a signal that winter's end is in sight.

Gardens engage all the senses, but the realm of sound is often overlooked. Planting right outside windows and passageways, rather than way across an expanse of lawn, provides opportunities to intimately experience “surround sound.” At my home, all I have to do is open the windows to be in the garden, which I do as soon as the peepers start up in spring.

Sounds vary from one garden to the next, especially those in different climates. It was great fun to be surrounded by creaking, groaning, knocking-together giant timber bamboo canes on my first trip to Florida. Another lingering sound-memory comes from Mississippi. To my Yankee ears, attuned to fine-textured grass, walking across winter-brown St. Augustine grass sounded like treading on a lawnful of Rice Krispies cereal. Paying attention to sounds while visiting gardens around the country has made me appreciate the symphony at home and given me ideas for bringing even more sound into the garden.

## INVITING BIRDS

Provide birds with what they need, and they will fill your garden with song year-round. They need to drink, so add a bird-bath—scrubbed frequently to prevent the spread of disease—small water feature, or even a plastic jug with a hole poked in the bottom hung to drip over a saucer—the sound of water attracts birds. A carefully selected blend of different kinds of plants will provide food, cover, and nesting sites. Planting a variety of native plants that support insect life and a long season's harvest of seeds,



berries, nuts, and nectar ensures that birds are well fed throughout the year.

Although I love the flickering play of sound, light, and shadow of bamboo leaves outside one window at my house, birds rarely alight in bamboo because it offers no sustenance. Native eastern juniper (*Juniperus virginiana*), red chokeberry (*Aronia arbutifolia*), brown-eyed Susans (*Rudbeckia triloba*), and ground-covering *Phlox stolonifera* and foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*) outside other windows are al-

ways humming—audibly—with bird and insect life. My attention is often called to a Carolina wren’s scolding chatter, a bluebird’s sweet song, or the cry of a pileated woodpecker; sounds that I invited by placing a red chokeberry shrub in a pot on my office doorstep, hanging a bottle gourd for nesting from the eaves, and leaving rotting logs for woodpeckers to forage on.

Providing diverse habitats and plants—shrub thickets, open space, bare ground, evergreen and deciduous trees, grasses, seed

producers, nectar producers, flowers with different bloom times and shapes—will attract and sustain a diversity of songsters. Gardening organically and keeping cats indoors protects birds from poisoning and reduces predation. Unconventional foundation plantings composed of broad garden beds filled with mostly native shrubs, trees, and herbaceous plants not only sustain life, they turn the house and patio into the equivalent of a “blind,” where birds can be appreciated up close.

## THE SOUND OF SILENCE

I’m a member of a classical vocal ensemble, and once, during a recording session, we were instructed to remain utterly still after the last note of each song so the silence unique to that particular space could be recorded. There’s a characteristic silence in gardens and natural places, too. I know it’s really winter when I go outside to look at the stars and it’s almost dead silent. But if I listen carefully for a time, I’ll hear a faint rustling sound from my oak grove and be thankful for the dried leaves that hang on all winter and give voice to the garden when all is cold and bare.

It’s a completely different kind of silence from that of a snowy night or the deep dark piney woods I roamed as a child, where all sound was muffled by a thick layer of pine needles. Christine Cook, owner of Mossaics garden design firm in Connecticut, loves listening to the “who” of wind in pine trees and the rattle of beech and pin oak leaves in winter. She theorizes that space changes our perceptions, that in a tight and leafy space you slow down and listen harder. The quietest garden she ever designed was inside the foundation ruins of an old Colonial house, where she says “the silence reverberated.”

My garden’s sonic reality—a steady chorus of chirps, chips, and cheeps, the liquid song of orioles floating over the air, drumming woodpeckers, bees in the apple tree, peepers in spring that modulate to the key of summer’s cicadas, quietly falling maple leaves in autumn, great-horned owls and groaning ice on the pond on subzero nights—anchors me in place and season. I can tune it in or out, but it’s always there informing me about the world around me.

## SOUND VERSUS NOISE

Of course the difference between an en-



In the author’s garden, rustling oak leaves create a soundtrack for quiet winter nights.





A stone bench along the sidewalk encourages passersby to stop and savor the plantings in Lucy Hardiman's Portland, Oregon, garden.

joyable sound and an irritating noise is exceedingly subjective. For instance, personally I am annoyed to be awakened by a dog barking at 4 a.m., but I don't mind the geese honking on the nearby pond at the same hour.

"Sound becomes noise when someone perceives the sound as a problem," says Seattle resident Marty Wingate, author of the newly published book *Landscaping for Privacy: Innovative Ways to Turn Your Outdoor Space into a Peaceful Retreat* (Timber Press, 2011). In her book, Wingate offers solutions for creating sound buffers that reduce or mask bothersome noises such as city traffic, playgrounds, or loud neighbors. A hedge, she writes, won't eliminate traffic noise, but offers a psychological barrier—out of sight, out of mind. An evergreen planting dense enough to substantially reduce traffic noise would have to be 16 feet broad to make a difference, which is not an option in space-challenged city lots and small suburban yards.

Sound bounces off hard surfaces such as solid fences, stone or concrete terraces

and blank walls, so siting hardscapes away from bedroom windows, covering bare walls with vines, and planting shrubs and trees between you and the source of the bothersome sound helps. Wingate recom-

## MARTY WINGATE'S WATER FEATURE TIPS

- The more points of contact the water makes, the more sound it produces.
- Water falling onto a metal surface makes more sound than water falling on wood, concrete, or ceramic surfaces.
- Water falling into a deep basin or chamber that is only partially full makes more sound than water falling in sheets down the side of a container into rocks below.
- A sheet of water pouring into a basin makes more sound than water falling into a single spot.
- Water that falls another level into more water creates even more sound.

—K.B.

mends masking unwanted sounds with more pleasant ones to divert attention. Creating a distraction allows natural garden sounds to reach you first. Nearby trees with rustling leaves—a large maple in summer, or oaks, beeches, or hornbeams whose leaves rattle throughout winter—or bamboo, perhaps in containers, create a relaxing, pleasant sound, as does even a small water feature. (For Wingate's water feature tips, see sidebar, left).

Sounds that are a noisy intrusion to one person might be celebrated by another; it's a matter of perception and personality. Garden designer and writer Lucy Hardiman, who is gregarious and keenly attuned to the richness of language, welcomes sound from neighbors and the street into her garden in Portland, Oregon. Her family lives on the top floor of a big Victorian house on a corner lot, sharing a large enclosed garden with neighbors. "There's a murmur of fellowship and camaraderie that is part and parcel of what the garden was designed to do," Hardiman says. "Cats and dogs visit too. I love the neighborhood cats. They hang out in



the garden and I hear their territorial spats. It's nature in the city."

The Hardimans keep street-side double doors open all summer and often lean on the railing listening to sounds rising from below. Hardiman's riotously colorful hell-strip plantings and bench built into the corner's stone retaining wall invite people to linger. Just as I invite woodpeckers and other birds, Lucy invites people to participate in her garden by providing a perch and some enticing habitat. "I love how people express their relationship to the garden," she says. "You never know what you're going to hear. It might be a mother walking with a child talking about the flowers. Once I heard skateboards come clickety clickety clickety down the street; then that flip and splat as riders stopped and got off and the voice of a teenager, "Hey dude, look at that plant!" And another voice, "Man, that looks like Sputnik." (It was *Allium schubertii*.)

## PLEASURE AND PLAYFULNESS

Not all climates or neighborhoods favor open doors and windows. The garden might be a place to go to rather than live in. Gardens are restorative places, conducive to stilling internal chatter. The sound of running water is enormously relaxing, a beautifully tuned wind chime a focus for meditation. Tall grasses such as *Miscanthus* varieties swishing and the flickering sound of leaves in a birch or aspen grove or a weeping Katsura tree (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum* forma *pendulum*) provide pleasure far beyond their ability to buffer the sonic assault of nearby lawn mowers, leaf blowers, and air conditioners.

Many of the gardeners I spoke with emphasized participation and playfulness. Hardiman savors the crunch of quarter-minus gravel (crushed stone with particles a quarter-inch and smaller) underfoot and can't resist wiggling bare toes in it. She includes it when designing clients' gardens to integrate sound in a subtle way.

Garden photographer Susan Roth recalls the rustle of dry leaves when she walked through the woodland garden in autumn and when she raked them up from her former Long Island, New York garden. She says, "I would kick up the leaves just for the pure pleasure of the sound and the smell of them." In her much noisier Washington, D.C., garden, she takes pleasure in

## Gardens Worth Listening to

**Lan Su Yuan Chinese Garden.** Portland, OR. [www.portlandchinese garden.org](http://www.portlandchinese garden.org).

**Marie Selby Botanical Gardens.** Sarasota, FL. [www.selby.org](http://www.selby.org). (Bamboo collection)

**Portland Japanese Garden.** Portland, OR. [www.japanesegarden.com](http://www.japanesegarden.com).

**Robert Irwin's Stream Garden.** The J. Paul Getty Museum. Los Angeles, CA. [www.getty.edu](http://www.getty.edu).

## Resources

**The Audubon Society Guide to Attracting Birds: Creating Natural Habitats for Properties Large and Small** by Stephen Kress. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 2006.

**Landscaping for Privacy: Innovative Ways to Turn Your Outdoor Space into a Peaceful Retreat** by Marty Wingate. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon, 2011.

**National Audubon Society's Audubon at Home Program,**  
[www.audubon.org/bird/at\\_home/index.html](http://www.audubon.org/bird/at_home/index.html).

**National Wildlife Federation's Backyard Wildlife Habitat Program,**  
<http://nwf.org/backyardwildlifehabitat>.

the steady splashing of a small fountain and a set of hefty bamboo wind chimes beside the steps to her hillside garden. "Once they get going, the deep resonating gongs of the chimes combined with the swishing leaves of the tall chestnut oaks above plays music to my ears."

Clucking chickens are part of the auditory experience in *Tulsa World* garden columnist Russell Studebaker's Oklahoma garden, while dry-climate garden expert Nan Sterman gets a kick out of the

pop-pop-popping of *Euphorbia rigida* seeds explosively launched from their dried pods on warm sunny days where she lives in Encinitas, California.

Garden designer Christine Cooke recalled hearing that Russel Wright, the 20th-century modernist home furnishings designer, left instructions to not rake a certain woodland path to preserve an experience—the sound of walking through a particular type of fallen leaves on a dry autumn day. I wasn't able to find any reference for this, so I drove to Manitoga, Wright's former mountaintop home, now the Russel Wright Design Center, overlooking the Hudson River in Garrison, New York. Stepping stones along the top of a merrily sloshing waterfall led to a stone path and steps to the clifftop house. And there, gigantic crispy brown sycamore leaves scraped, wind-driven, along the stones and made a most satisfying crackling crunch underfoot—an exuberant sound well worth preserving.

## THE SOUNDS OF WATER

Water has many voices: Force of flow, the height from which it falls, wind, surfaces, and obstructions alter the sound. Tinkering with these variables allows tuning to a sound that pleases the ear—rather than imitating a dripping faucet or overflowing bathtub. Plug-in, tabletop water features and constructed waterfalls and streams have vastly different siting considerations, costs, and purposes. Consider the intention—is the desired effect a



**Modernist designer Russel Wright so enjoyed the sensation of walking through fallen sycamore leaves that he ordered them to be left unraked in his New York garden.**

soft murmuring hiss, splish-splash, gentle trickle, or torrent?

Judy and Dave Rogers of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, nestled a ceramic jar with a bamboo spout into the border outside their open-all-summer bedroom window. The soothing sound helps Judy sleep, and she enjoys lingering in bed in the morning to listen to it and the hummingbirds it draws.

Paul Miskovsky, a landscape designer in Falmouth, Massachusetts, had a more elaborate vision—and earth-moving equipment to fulfill it. Inspired by a waterfall in Vermont, he built a multi-level “pondless” waterfall that runs 90 feet in length with a drop of 30 feet on the steep embankment behind his house. “It’s a Zen thing,” he says, “and it’s directional. I was thinking about how this will bring energy to my life, how it will get energy flowing toward the house.” With many configurations of rocks and runs as it drops and disappears into a bed of stone—actually a six-foot-deep gravel-filled chamber that acts as a biofilter—the stream is steady but ever-changing, just like a natural stream. Submersible pumps are virtually inaudible. Although Miskovsky can adjust the flow to create a soft cascading sound, he typically prefers the full-force lively look and sound of a rushing torrent.

## ASIAN INFLUENCES

A trip to Portland, Oregon, a few years ago introduced me to two Asian-inspired gardens where sound is a profound part of the experience. The Portland Japanese Garden struck me as the most serene garden I’d ever experienced. Up-and-down terrain concealed and revealed views and sounds of people, falling water, wind, birds, and fluttering leaves. I watched workers removing leaves from a subtle moss and rock garden, not by blasting through with leaf blowers but by rhythmically and carefully sweeping with handmade bamboo twig brooms. The soft, swishing sounds and dancelike movements were entrancing, akin to those made by raking gravel gardens into

symbolic patterns. A metallic snip-snip-snip of shears among cloud-pruned evergreens added to the pleasant sound of quiet mindful work that seemed more like meditation than chore, a lovely reminder that the tools we use and the care we take also shape our garden experience.

Next, I visited downtown Portland’s Lan Su Yuan Chinese Garden, which is like entering a world apart. A waterfall and layer after layer of rooms, windows, and

of water dripping onto them from roof tiles and that drains were tuned to make different sounds as water spilled into chambers below. Sometimes, the gardeners told me, beads of water dripping from thousands of pointed roof tiles form a “pearl curtain” between viewer and garden.

The pearl curtain never materialized while I was there, but hours spent just listening brought on an inner stillness and enhanced appreciation for sound. Patterns of water dripping into water could be both heard and seen, and each space sounded different. Rain beating on stone courtyard floors sounded softer on the mossy parts, changing with the intensity of the rainfall. Big-leaved bananas in protected corners sounded different than bamboo planted to rustle by windy openings in exterior walls.

## LISTEN TO THE GARDEN

In *The Mind’s Eye*, Oliver Sacks writes about a profoundly blind man becoming a “whole body seer.” When he shifted his attention to other senses, “they assumed a new richness and power...the sound of rain, never before accorded much attention, could delineate a whole landscape for him, for its sound on the garden path was different from its sound as it

drummed on the lawn, or on the bushes in his garden, or on the fence dividing the garden from the road.”

Of course, you don’t have to be blind to enhance your sense of hearing. Every garden has its own sounds, and if you listen to your garden you will notice how its voice varies through the day and through the seasons. Whether it is the splash of raindrops on a pond, the crunch of gravel underfoot, the rustling of leaves in a breeze, or the chirping of birds at a feeder, cultivating sound and listening to our gardens intensifies an already rewarding experience. 🌿

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**The swishing of handmade brooms entranced the author at the Portland Japanese Garden.**

doors opening to planted courtyards progressively muffle city noise. A sheet of water ringed and crossed by covered promenades, pavilions, and bridges lies at the quiet center of the garden. Even the title of a visitor book explaining the garden’s many engraved literary inscriptions—“Listen to the Fragrance”—suggests the importance of sound.

Usually I am disappointed when I visit gardens on a rainy day, but in this case, I welcomed the downpour that ensued on my arrival. In advance of my visit, I had been told that bananas, fat-sias, and other broad-leaved plants were strategically placed to enhance the sound