

## *Looking to the Future*

By Kim Smith

Walking along a wooded lane last weekend, I couldn't help but notice the lack of songbirds. One singular, startled robin, that was all, poking about a hedge of scraggly privet. The time of day was late afternoon, which is the same time of day our yard is typically host to a chorus of songsters. Eerily disquieted, I paused for a moment and closed my eyes, imagining what this same lane would look like if found growing there were winterberry and summersweet, blueberry and chokecherry, juniper and holly, and the chattering collection of songbirds these fruit-bearing plantings would surely attract. Perhaps there was a disappointing lack of songbirds because invasive species such as privet has engulfed both sides of the road, or perhaps because the road abutted a golf course, which is regularly doused with insecticides intended to kill every living insect, the songbird's primary source of food.

A friend forwarded an article, posted from the Guardian U.K., about the charismatic head gardener Alain Baraton, of the Palace of Versailles. Appointed in 1976, Mr. Baraton has made it his mission to transform the 2,000-acre traditional landscape into a model of sustainable gardening. Climate change has affected Versailles in ways Baraton never imagined. Because the chestnut trees are flowering twice a year, they are losing their glorious autumnal hues. Pine trees that have lined the park's avenues since the reign of Louis XIV are dying in gross numbers. The previous year saw so little rainfall that the lawns did not have to be mowed. It is imperative, Baraton says, to move with the times. "The gardener always has to look to the future," he explains. "We are witnessing an enormous change in climate."

Baraton saw in the changing environment an opportunity to reform the long-standing use of pesticides. Realizing the futility of applying chemicals to rid the gardens of bugs, which would only return and in greater numbers with warmer temperatures, insecticides were the first to go and he declared a blanket ban. No matter how tiny, Baraton believes every living creature deserves a place in his garden. Enticed by the prospect of plump, juicy insects to feast on, the birds returned to Versailles in prodigious numbers.

Trees and shrubs have benefited tremendously under Baraton's guiding hand. Long gone is the tradition of planting the same species in neat ordered avenues. The gardeners vary the plantings to prevent major loss in case any one species becomes diseased.

If the most formal of public gardens, scrutinized under the demanding microscope of an international audience, can afford to forgo the use of insecticides, is there any possible justification for the use of insecticides and herbicides in the individual, business, and public suburban and urban landscape?

Our Dragon Lady hollies have grown tall and the winterberry is flourishing, and because of that, for the past several years we have been graced with a flock of robins in early February ([\*Round Robin Red-Breast\*](#)). The first winter the robins arrived I noticed that, after they had devoured every morsel of red berry—the winterberry, holly, and crabapple—they moved to a neighboring privet hedge. My first thought was, well at least that's one good thing about privet, perhaps the robins will eat the overly abundant and plain little blue-black berry of the privet. No, the robins did not care too much for it and the flock soon departed our neighborhood.

When we first moved to our property we immediately removed a privet-tree that had seeded itself, growing smack-dab in the sunniest center of our yard. We cut down the trunk and limbs and spent laboriously long hours digging out the root mass. We continually find privet

seedlings sprouting in our flower borders. Privet is tedious, and if one has the misfortune to inherit an established hedge, very challenging to remove. On the other hand, a natural arrangement generally requires a modicum of once-yearly maintenance, a light hand with the pruning sheers, to shape or remove dead wood. Imagine if all the suburban privet hedges were replaced with welcoming avenues of flowering and fruiting shrubs that provided nourishment and shelter for the songbirds.

*Excerpt from Oh Garden of Fresh Possibilities! ~ The idea of a garden planted in harmony with nature is to create a loosely mixed arrangement of beauty combining native and ornamental flowering trees and shrubs. This informal style of a woodland border or bucolic country hedge is not new and is what the French call a haie champêtre. Perhaps the country hedge evolved because it was comprised of easily propagated, or dispersed by wildlife, native species of plants and perhaps as a revolt against the neatly manicured boxed hedges of formal European gardens. The country hedge is used, as is any hedge, to create a physical and visual boundary, but rather than forming the backdrop for ornamental plants, it is the living tapestry of foliage, flowers, fruit and fauna. Working and living in our garden we are enchanted by the creatures drawn to the sheltering boughs, blossoms, and berries.*

End Notes: Mass Audubon's 17th Annual Birders Meeting: Saturday, March 7, 2009, Worcester Technical High School, Worcester, MA "Birds and Birders on our National Wildlife Refuges." This year's Birders Meeting, co-sponsored by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, offers anyone with an interest in birds the opportunity to learn more about the rich resources that comprise the National Wildlife Refuge System, along with some of the challenges and opportunities constantly facing resource managers. Also, in recognition of the 100-year anniversary of the birth of Roger Tory Peterson - "America's greatest naturalist" - this year's Birders Meeting will feature reflections by Lee Allen Peterson, son of the late RTP. In addition, a presentation by well-known birder and author, Kenn Kaufman, will make this an event not to be missed. For more information or to register, go to: <http://massaudubon.org/birdersmeeting>.



*Robin Red Breast*