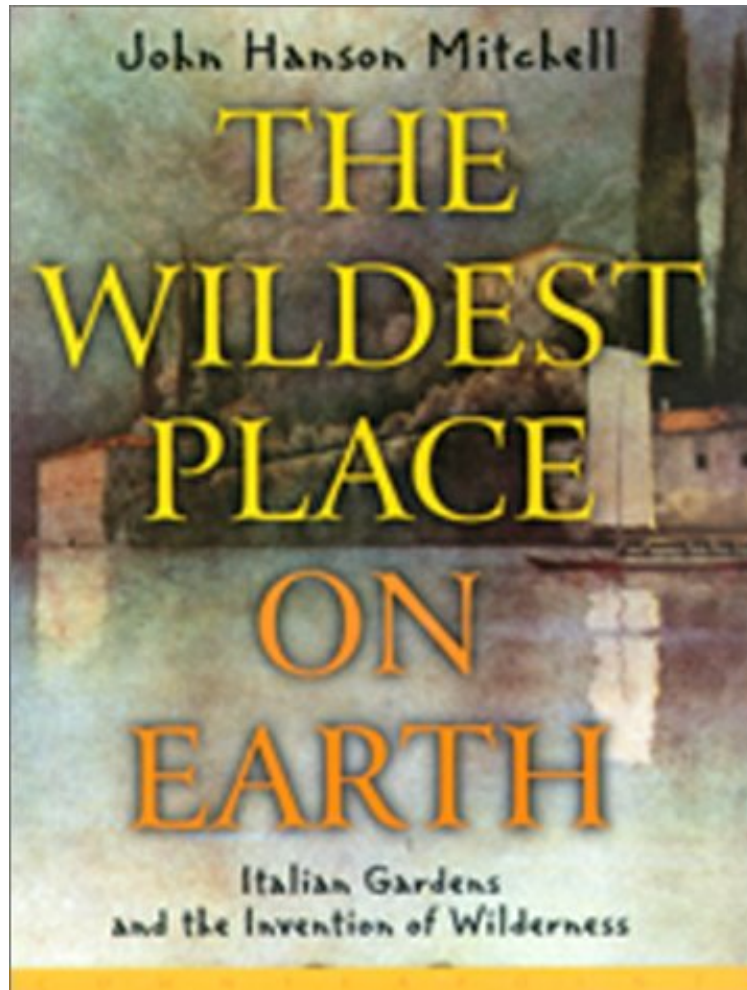


The Wildest Place on Earth: Italian Gardens and the Invention of Wilderness

John Hanson Mitchell
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John Hanson Mitchell : The Wildest Place on Earth: Italian Gardens and the Invention of Wilderness before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Wildest Place on Earth: Italian Gardens and the Invention of Wilderness:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy Peter W.Fascinating10 of 10 people found the following review helpful. Rambles in The Wildest Place on EarthBy Thomas ConuelJohn Hanson Mitchell has spent the past two decades prowling a square mile or so of suburban woods and fields in Eastern Massachusetts, searching for its past and speculating on its future, and in the process producing 4 books (Ceremonial Time, Living At the End of Time, Walking Toward Walden, and Trespassing) dealing with the nature of place and its affect on the people who live there. His latest book, The Wildest Place on Earth, may at first glance seem, if not exactly a detour, at least a stroll

down a side street, away from his favorite square mile of land known as Scratch Flat, but read on and you will find that Mitchell is once again exploring in small spaces. In *The Wildest Place on Earth*, Mitchell sets out to discover the nature of the American wilderness and the influence of Italy's tamed landscapes on the American experience. In a series of rambles that span decades and move effortlessly from the history of Renaissance gardens to American conservationists, and the Hudson River school of landscape painters to encounters in America's overcrowded and over-loved wilderness parks, Mitchell pokes and prods and writes of the past. This book is part travelogue, and part informed speculation as Mitchell comes to realize that wilderness is perhaps more a concept than a true reality for most of us, and that the wildest place on earth may be his own somewhat haphazardly planned backyard garden that has grown over the past decade into a lush and relaxing presence. Mitchell writes much in this book about the Greek and Roman myths and how they influence, even to this day, what we see and feel as wilderness. The god Pan is always present, and the history of mazes and labyrinths makes for some fascinating side trips through Italy. If you are looking for a few good modern-day gardening stories, he supplies those as well. The editor of the Massachusetts Audubon magazine *Sanctuary* and the winner of the 1994 John Burroughs essay award and the 2000 New England Booksellers Award, Mitchell is a graceful stylist who will win you over as he rambles and speculates much like a close friend who you may not always agree with, but you can't stop listening to those provocative opinions.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. In search of the spirit of the wilderness
By Valerie Fletcher Adolph
This book is a pilgrimage. Not a linear pilgrimage that sets off from a given point and progresses towards a distant goal, but a pilgrimage through a labyrinth or maze - a circular pilgrimage, if you will. The writer, a naturalist with a home and garden in eastern Massachusetts, is at home also in the wilderness of the western United States as well as in the historic gardens of Italy. He traces for the reader the influence that the great gardens of Italy, part cultivated, part bosky wilderness, have had on the development of both the gardens and the wilderness of the U.S. But the book is not so simple and direct. Through it runs the theme of the labyrinth, its symbolism of the complexities of nature, its paradoxes, twists and turns. The true spirit of wildness is seldom to be found, the writer says, in our large "wilderness" parks polluted by ATV's, rangers and over-run camp sites. Human connection with the land is most strongly felt in our gardens - not the front yard with its neatly mowed lawn and well-pruned foundation planting but a truly creative garden with wild spaces and vistas that welcome wild creatures. We can save some land from developers, build small parks, add in gardens with their boskyness (lovely word, that) and create our own web of wilderness even in our most built up areas. Did the nature god Pan die with the birth of Christianity and the idea of dominion over all the creatures of the earth? The writer is optimistic that he did not and that the true spirit of nature can be revived, one natural garden space at a time. This is the work of a respected nature writer who is stringing together ideas about wilderness and gardens loosely and creatively. It is both evocative and provocative, a mental ramble for an open and enquiring mind.

A captivating journey to uncover the essence of wilderness, by one of this country's most original nature writers. In five highly acclaimed books, John Hanson Mitchell has explored small local landscapes to ask the larger question of what it means to be living on earth in our time. In his newest exploration he sets out from the convoluted paths of a traditional hedge maze in his own garden to find, in the civilized and ordered gardens of Italy, the inspiration for the painters and conservationists who shaped our American concept of wilderness. While searching for wildness in today's crowded, smog-filled "wilderness" parks, however, he is pulled inward and toward home, back to what Thoreau called "contact": an abiding, enduring, and daily connection with the world of nature. Throughout this quest are the exquisite observations, the wit and the aura of magic that have endeared knowing readers to the work of this consummate natural historian. A Merloyd Lawrence Book

.com In the hearts of the elaborate Renaissance gardens of Italy, writes essayist John Hanson Mitchell, lie small patches of untended ground, overgrown with moss and tangled undergrowth, called *boscus*. These wild patches are there to remind us of the untamed country that lies far outside the city walls, the abode of wild animals, where wilderness experiences are to be had for the adventurous traveler. A veteran of many such experiences, Mitchell counsels that wilderness does not teach us much about how to live in and with nature; such lessons lie closer to home, for, he writes, wildness "lurks in the wilder corners of suburbia, or even in cities, and exists as potential even in some of the most barren, devastated environments." In *The Wildest Place on Earth*, Mitchell travels to Mediterranean gardens, writing of their meaning and history. Heeding his own counsel, he also sticks close to his own home, restoring a hardscrabble New England farm called Scratch Flat, building mazes and trellises, and exploring the lessons that making a garden offer a student of the natural world. Though his efforts at environmental philosophizing tend to be underdone, his dedication to gardening is evident, and his account of that hard but rewarding work may inspire like-minded readers to take up their trowels. --Gregory McNamee
From Publishers Weekly
Mitchell (*Ceremonial Time*) opens this lush, labyrinthine book with his long-ago encounter, in the American desert, with "a wildman," "who claimed you could live forever in the wilderness with two or three milk goats and a working knowledge of edible plants." The younger Mitchell embraced this philosophy, but, ultimately, it was in "the most thoroughly transformed landscape of all, the hedged terraces, alleys, pathways, pools, fountains, and hidden rooms of what was left of the old

Renaissance gardens of Italy" that he "rediscovered that old sense of goatly wildness." From the great mazes of ancient Egypt to the 12th-century hedge maze where Henry II's wife murdered his mistress, to the construction of his own backyard maze and tea house, Mitchell explores the wilderness of the human imagination and "the undiscovered country of the nearby." Three of what Thoreau would have called "clews" to Mitchell's project keep cropping up: first, Thoreau's idea of "Contact," or oneness with nature; second, the contrast between conceptions of true wilderness "as a separate place" with "a certain aura of power or ability to bestow information or insight" and the construction of the garden; and finally, the beloved demigod Pan, who physically embodies both the untamed forests and deserts (his goat half) and sculpted gardens (his human half). Part travelogue, part garden history in the tradition of Edith Wharton's *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, this poetic little book traces the transportation of humankind to the wilderness and the transformation of the wild into rich human habitat. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

From Booklist
In a vibrant blend of personal anecdote and fresh historical interpretations, nature writer Mitchell offers stimulating observations about unexpected connections between garden design and wilderness preservation. After realizing that a vacation-style "wilderness experience" didn't satisfy his need for a "life in nature," Mitchell turned to gardening. He soon developed a fascination with hedge mazes and labyrinths, ancient emblems of humanity's connection to the earth, and the Italian Renaissance garden, a "model of divine order." Gratified to discover that he was following in the footsteps of the nineteenth-century American visionaries Emerson and Muir, Mitchell discerned that their appreciation for the gardens of Italy, supremely gracious manifestations of civilization, contributed mightily to their perception of the spirituality of nature and their pivotal roles in establishing a tradition of American wilderness protection. As for Mitchell, he revels in the fact that wildness, the "life-sustaining current," flows just as gloriously on home ground as in a remote forest or desert and has come to prefer the quiet of a garden to the clamor of car- and tourist-filled national parks. Donna Seaman
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