

The Garden From the Outside Looking In

BY JONN KARSSEBOOM

I've just had a rare chance to visit the Netherlands recently. It's been awhile since I've been there. When you travel, they say, you never return home quite the same way.

I'm not sure if that's because the entire experience of immersion into another culture may change our perspective ever so subtly or whether it's because the neglected work and duties you were suppose to be doing while you were away suddenly comes crashing down the very moment you whisper to yourself "I'm home." And that can change you too.

Either way, I think it's a good thing.

Of course it doesn't help matters that I saw Holland entirely through a gardener's perspective. That means in practical terms I had to stop often on my bicycle to take a photo of an inspirational plant or an interesting garden. This is no small matter over there, by the way. Stopping suddenly on the wonderfully dedicated bike paths often meant causing, quite literally, a bicycle traffic jam. (It's the favored way to get around Holland.)

Interesting side note: In Holland the pecking order ranks bikers first, then pedestrians and the vehicle that needs to yield or pull over first (and most often) is the almighty car. While traveling, it seems, differences in how things get done seem to get noticed first.

Another instance? Since the first of the year it's required that every store in the Netherlands charge for a plastic carryout bag. (It's roughly 15 cents each.) I'm a very slow learner yet by my second trip to the

grocery store I had my bags in hand. (This also applied to nice clothing stores, shoe shops and yes, even garden centers.)

Coming back home and rushing to our "local" Fred Meyer's, I noticed how few of us shoppers brought our own bags even though its "encouraged" here with a small discount. It's the same goal in becoming a bit more earth friendly done from a different perspective.



Only with a vastly different outcome. (It's enough to make me say, "hmmmmmm...")

Not that everything in The Netherlands is done better by any stretch of the imagination. For instance it took me a bit to get over my instant gratification and get accustomed to very traditional retail store hours. I couldn't imagine a grocery store here opening as late as 8 am and closing as early as 8 pm. Don't even ask about Sunday hours.

Nor expect to pay anything with a normal Visa card. (It can happen on rare occasion but grocery stores, restaurants,

cafes, even buying train tickets in a small town won't accept charge cards.)

Differences aside it was an otherworldly experience to see the same varieties of plants in gardens that were quite literally half way around the world. For a gardener, it's a comforting experience, almost like seeing old friends.

Still yet again, seeing those old friends doing things differently. It's like recognizing familiar ingredients in a meal that's been cooked entirely unexpected. (Ever had a Dutch kroket?)

In Holland there were Beech trees grown just a foot apart for hundreds of feet and trimmed tightly to create a dependable, attractive hedge or fence. I saw big plants grown small and small plants thrown unexpectedly together in window boxes hung over bridges, doors and sides of buildings for no apparent reason than for a warm surprise. I saw boats that looked like floating gardens. I saw intense community garden competitions. I saw plants bought on bicycles.

It's still a nice feeling to be back home too. Travelling can do that too. It's a welcoming feeling to know again the familiar. And as much as I welcome it in my garden I'm also excited that it won't be the same for it.



Jonn Karsseboom is a determined vlogger about gardening against all odds. Sign up for his newsletter at www.thegardencorner.com.