Property Edges & Common Thresholds:

Tracing the Maintenance & Evolution of Edge Cultivation in Locust Grove

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The landscape of Locust Grove is defined by edges, boundaries, and thresholds that take shape in planting patterns. Some edges are created by meticulously maintained shrubs, while others take shape through sprawling urban wilds. The construction of these edges have broad implications for how the landscape is experienced, by guiding or hindering movement and visibility. In addition, particular plant species communicate values and are tied to histories of the global botanical trade.

Research Questions:

- What kind of edges exist in the landscape of Locust Grove today?
- What is the nature of the relationship between these edges and parcel delineation, land use and management patterns through time?
- How are property boundaries maintained, reinforced, or contested through the maintenance of edges in Locust Grove?
- What role do various cultivated and wild plant species play in the communication of property boundaries? Where and how did these horticultural associations originate?
- Ultimately, what practices are existing or possible for “commoning” in the post-plantation suburban landscape of Locust Grove?

Methodology:

The research began with examining the structure of edges and their experiential effects on the site as it exists today through field observation and plant identification. We then analyzed historical aerials to identify changes in maintenance regimes and land use, which was coupled with mapping historic property boundaries as the parcels were subdivided over time. The property ownership research revealed that one study area was largely owned by Valley View

Greenhouses from 1924-1950s, which prompted archival research on the role of the nursery in the global plant trade, as well as the planting design of homes within Locust Grove.

Findings:

A. Edge Dimensions and Types

In our research, three edge types have emerged: property boundaries, constructed or vegetated edges, and maintenance edges. Property boundaries include the legal boundaries of a parcel, which in both study areas have shifted geographically and passed between different owners over time. Maintenance edges, such as the boundary between mown and unmown, are less easily identified from historical documents, but are easily read on site. On the other hand, edges created by little to no maintenance like the sprawling wooded areas or shrubby rambles at the intersection of two backyards create thick edges that pass through and adjoin several parcels. In some of these cases of the thick edge, the lack of clearly defined boundaries creates opportunities for a commons, a smaller-scale, suburban manifestation of what JT Roane terms “the Black commons,” which are located “at the interstices of plantation ecologies,” (Roane 2019, 239).

B. Site 1: Sinclair House

Our research focuses on two sites in the Southern part of the Locust Grove neighborhood of Charlottesville that were chosen as a comparative analysis of edge typologies. Site 1 represents an example of large, highly maintained hedges that define the property edge. Site 2 is an example of emergent vegetation along the borders of backyards that represents a kind of suburban ecological commons.

The first case study is the Sinclair House located at 810 Locust Ave., dating back to the antebellum plantation economy of Locust Grove. At present, the 160’ by 300’ property is enclosed by nearly twelve feet tall boxwood and barberry hedges at its street-facing edges. Research into property ownership history has revealed that the parcel on which the Sinclair house sits has largely remained in the hands of wealthy, prominent Virginians long after the plantation lands had been subdivided and developed. The Locust Grove Investment Company acquired the land from plantation owner Geoge Sinclair, which then passed to Judge John White of the Albemarle Circuit Court, and later to Judge Lemeul Smith of the Supreme Court of Virginia. The parcel is now owned by his son, Downing Smith (Charlottesville Landmark Commission, n.d.).

C. Site 2: Hazel St. “Commons”

The second case study is the block bounded by Hazel, Poplar, St. Claire, and Gillespie Streets. Here, a publicly owned strip and several interior parcels on the inside of the block create a series of interesting back yard edges, where differing maintenance regimes meet. Similarly to Site 1,

this site was also owned first by Judge John White after its subdivision by Locust Grove Investment Co. It changed hands a few times and was slated for residential subdivision, with the creation of Hillcrest Ave., which is now the publicly owned "common" space in the block (CDB 47-234). In 1927, those parcels were aggregated and Hillcrest Ave. was closed, as the land was sold to Valley View Greenhouses (CDB 56-189). Valley View was a nursery that specialized in retail plant sales and marketed toward homeowners (Valley View Greenhouses, Inc., 1932). The company operated into the 1950s, until the founder's son sold the business to create the Burnet Company located on Lankford Ave. near Elliot & Ridge Streets (James Burnet Obituary, 2009). They began selling off parcels for residential use by 1955, creating the suburban condition on the site today (CDB 187-360).

For this site, we conducted more thorough property research with the intention of overlaying historical parcel boundaries on top of historical aerials to examine the relationship between legal property boundaries and the physical maintenance of edges. However, as J.T. Roane and Justine Hosbey write in Mapping Black Ecologies, "Projecting and transforming a multilayered 3D place onto a 2D digital map necessitates the literal and figurative flattening of that location, producing a colonial, 'bird's eye view' of a landscape" (2019). The process of flattening the 3D landscape highlighted the mismatched projections of aerial photographs and GIS-generated parcel boundaries, which made it quite difficult to have certainty of the exact geographic location of parcel boundaries with respect to the fine-grain scale of maintenance edges. This relatively small "hiccup" in our research methodology, nods toward a break in the translation of the parcel map as a model for the real world. This process did, however, allow us to track broader changes in vegetative massing as the parcels were subdivided and as land uses changed. As the block became enclosed by residential parcels on all sides, the never-realized Hillcrest Ave. and inner parcels have become absorbed into neighbors' backyards. This remnant of past subdivision plans has become a rare entrance to the inside of a suburban block in Locust Grove.

D. The Botanical Trade and the Planted Edge

The story of Valley View Greenhouses provides a window into the productive significance of the Locust Grove backyard in the mid-twentieth century. The company was started by an unnamed mother, in 1926, in the backyard of her home. Valley View provided a rich array of horticultural material to the residents of the Greater Charlottesville area until the company was sold to the Burnet Company, which also conducted florist and landscaping services, in 1950. Two of Valley View's advertising brochures and leaflets from 1932 and 1937 are located at UVa's Special Collections, which describe the variety of plant specimens available for sale, offer landscaping services by Valley View, and offer advice about how to achieve the in-vogue garden styles of the day. Read using Dianne Harris's methodology in Little White Houses (2013), these brochures indicate either prevailing or marketable trends in popular gardening. For instance, both year's catalogues advertise a rock garden special, lauded for its low maintenance requirements. English Ivy and Kudzu vine are both advertised for their ability to provide screening and privacy,

demonstrating ideas about living, property, and space particular to white American norms and standards.

E. Significant Plants of the Locust Grove Edge

Field observation has identified four main plant species that grow at the edges of property boundaries at the two case study sites: English Ivy *(Hedra helix)*, Boxwood *(Buxus spp.)*, Barberry *(Berberis thunbergii)*, and Briars *(Rubus spp.)*. With the exception of Briars, all of these species are native to continents other than North America. And yet, the plants as horticultural objects have taken on a defining character in the Virginia suburban landscape. It is a great irony that the typology of gardens replicated at a majority of the front yard gardens in the Locust Grove neighborhood, that of a sodded "tapis vert," dense shrubs near the house, and canopy trees interspersed within, are the result of immigrants to this continent.

The 1932 and 1937 ValleyView Greenhouse catalogues boast of the value of this garden typology, based on the definition of hard edges akin to walls, with recommendations such as "The time has come when no modern home is complete without an 'outdoor living room.' Nothing can add quite so much character as the proper planning of your home grounds, nor so inexpensively enhance the value of your property" (1932, 9). In one fell swoop, this statement describes the spatial character of boundaries afforded by dense plantings and links it to a sure return on investment.

First cultivated in Egypt in 4000 BC, the Boxwood, has long been used as a living garden sculpture or as an edge definer. It occupies a particularly significant position within the landscape of 20th century Virginia gardening life and horticulture. The American Boxwood Society, founded in 1961 by members of UVA's Blandy Experimental Farm, published quarterly "Boxwood Bulletins" that described uses, forms, cultivation, and maintenance strategies for the plant that was characteristic of a certain edge type we see at 810 Locust Street.

Boxwood's hedge companion at 810 Locust, the Japanese Barberry, has a fabulously interesting history in relation to nativism and garden cultivars. Brought to the US by early colonial settlers, the Common Barberry (*B. vulgaris*) was a popular garden plant across much of the temperate US. Beginning in 1918, though, it was discovered to be an alternative host to Black Stem Rust which had begun to plague the wheat crops of the country's breadbasket. The federal government deployed mass media campaigns advocating for private citizens to eradicate the plant, later appealing to patriotism and anti-communist sentiments during the World War I period. The Common Barberry's non-native cousin, first documented in Japan for Western audiences by Carl Peter Thunberg in 1784, however, remained popular in the garden trade. Japanese Barberry *(B. thunbergii)* is now listed as a "medium" threat on Virginia's invasive plant list.

Briars, or clumps of thorny raspberry and blackberry bushes are found growing abundantly at the interstitial wild edges of the Hazel St. site. This plant and its group at the wild edge of property is

significant both for its fruit production and its thorny tangle. A handful of Works Progress Association narratives, collected between 1936 and 1938, offer windows into the medicinal uses and refuge offered by the briar patch for enslaved people seeking refuge or forms of care outside of the master's control. Harriet Collins, born in Houston, Texas described "queer things white folks can't understand" of the role of briars in enslaved care and medicinal practices. She says "My mammy larned me a lots of doctorin', what she larnt from old folkses from Africy, and some de Indians larnt her. If you has rheumatism, jes' take white sassafras root and bile it and drink de tea… Put red pepper in you shoes and keep de chills off, or string briars round de neck."

Laura Cornish, also enslaved in Texas described the briar as a place where enslaved people hid from their enslavers. Her narrative reads "One time us chillen playin' out in de woods and seed two old men what look like wild men, sho' 'nough. Dey has long hair all over de face and dere shirts all bloody. Us run and tell Papa Day and he makes us take him dere and he goes in de briar patch where dem men hidin'…" Briars are native to the Cheaseapeake and were noted in Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book as a source of native pride of the vast productive potential of the new American landscape.

English Ivy (H. helix) is a very old plant that has long been depicted in art. The Roman god Bacchus, for example, is often depicted wearing a crown of Ivy and Grapevines. English Ivy was first documented in the Americas around 1800, brought over by colonial settlers. In the 17th and 18th centuries, English Ivy was clipped and pruned in a highly formal manner, while the English "naturalist" tradition, it was let loose on ruins as a way of exaggerating age and giving a sense of time in the garden. During the Victorian era, Ivy was used as a "fedge," where ivy is grown up a fence. Ivy plays an important ecological role for many invertebrates and insects. Today, there is much debate about whether or not the ivy hurts the trees. Though in some cases, the ivy can actually help to maintain integrity of masonry structures. It is listed as a Virginia invasive plant of "medium" concern.

F. Conclusion

Ultimately, we conclude that the edges at Locust Grove subdivision offer a great deal of richness in the reading of the neighborhood's histories. The two case studies, the Sinclair House and the Hazel St. "Commons" reveal the dual dimensions of edges in the suburban landscape. Edges can at once function as the imposed delineation between us and them, mine and yours, or private and public, but they can also function as spaces of great socio ecological production and richness. Edges have complicated stories to tell; we just have to learn to read them.

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