Imagine a garden. Not a small back garden, nor a stern formal garden, but a sprawling, tangled garden, one that cries out: “You will get lost in here.” Wandering around this garden you can admire well-tended raised beds, gaze up at the canopy of stately specimen trees, and pass through dank understories. Or if you feel more energetic you can potter in the shed, hoe flower beds, harvest some fruit. If you linger there for long, and are of a reflective bent, you may ask: “What is this place?”

Such a garden – any garden – is animated by a desire for perfection. And so, then, ‘a garden is always a utopian construct, for its creation is predicated on hope - hope that what one has planted will grow, that one’s plantings will provide nourishment for the body and for the soul’ (p. 9). Reading *Earth Perfect*, edited by Annette Giesecke and Naomi Jacobs, is indeed much like exploring a vast garden. This patchwork of seventeen essays – some reflective, some more scholarly – is rich and eclectic. The authors unite in taking utopia to denote a process of *seeking* something better, rather than seeing utopia as a place set apart from the world. There are too many chapters to comment on each individually, but collectively they fall into three ways of commenting on the utopian promise of the garden: the lived, the historical, and the imagined.

Several authors write about their own utopian experiments, and beautifully capture the tenor of utopia: an impossible yearning for a better world. For Naomi Jacobs, urban gardens require care, a care that extends beyond the nonhumans in her garden to other people through networks of plant and food exchange, and ultimately out to the planet. But her garden can be a crushing burden, for her capacity to care is never aligned with her capacity to shape the Earth. Her efforts are interrupted by the flecks of lead paint poisoning her marrows and by the Norway maple, an invasive transplant whose saplings sprout all over her garden: by the imperfections of modernity. Towards the end of the book, Susan Willis confronts the question that threatens to undermine any talk of domestic garden utopia: scale. Her essay juxtaposes her love for a half-acre plot (and her obsessive pickling, saucing, and preserving) against the destruction unleashed on the Gulf of Mexico by BP’s Deepwater Horizon disaster. Can one small plot do anything in a world where destruction is routinely wrought on such vast scales? Jennifer Atkinson responds, in perhaps the most original essay of the book. She argues that gardening should not be measured against the predominant way of thinking under capitalism – where success flows from extracting value as efficiently as possible. Instead, the garden is about an increase, with more energy converted into useful (not profitable) produce in ways that do not require depleting the earth. Furthermore, the abundant flows of energy in gardening make it ‘nearly impossible for a single person to absorb the season’s excess by spreading consumption evenly over time’ (p. 265). By gardening, new value can be created from the gift of the sun’s energy, and dispersed along social networks of gift exchange. Or a gardener might even transmute negative value into
'good': witness the popular utopian trope of nursing abandoned spaces to flourishing gardens. Atkinson refuses the logic of the ledger: a thousand gardens cannot be weighed against an oil rig.

Perhaps of greater interest to readers of this journal will be the historical chapters. Many essays cite Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) as an obvious touchstone, but there are also sustained inquiries into a Roman house and garden (I learned that Le Corbusier was a big fan of a courtyard garden in Pompeii, describing it as ‘a little vestibule which frees your mind from the street’ (p. 121)); histories of landscape and domestic gardens in Britain; the story of a small corner of the Czech republic, where, against all the odds, a cheerful garden culture flourished through the Cold War. Stephen Forbes’ chapter on botanic gardens strikes a resonant note. Forbes pinpoints Shennong, the ‘Divine Farmer’ at the origin of Chinese civilisation, as laying the groundwork for the first botanic garden. Han historians and mythmakers credit Shennong with leading humanity from hunter-gathering to sedentary agriculture; he tested hundreds of plants for their utility in the process. Several thousand years later, this mythology inspired Han Emperor Wu-ti (140-186BC) to despatch plant collectors and bring new specimens together to test for agricultural and horticultural purposes: a botanic garden, in other words. Locating the origins of the utopian space of the botanic garden here, rather than the *hortus medicus* of Renaissance universities, is a geographical departure for this book, which otherwise rests rather too heavily on familiar Western-style scaffolding. One weakness of the book is therefore that there is little sustained interrogation of garden cultures beyond Western spaces – this is a real shame, as it is the multiplicity of gardens that makes them so fascinating to study.

Thirdly, ‘imagined’ garden utopias – speculative works of fiction in art and literature – weave their way through many of the essays. A close-up of the ‘Paradise’ segment of Hieronymous Bosch’s triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c1500) forms the book’s cover, and Patrick Healy brilliantly analyses Bosch’s whole work in chapter four. Steve Brown, meanwhile, decries the tendency to erase the human in garden art – it is indeed all too common for photographs to efface the labouring presence of the human. This, Brown believes, collapses the gardener into ecology. The publishers, *Black Dog*, deserve a lot of credit for the way that the utopian imagination comes across so compellingly through this book. If only more academic publications had such attractive type-setting, lovely images and elegant design. Moreover, such style is not mere window-dressing, for any book on nature, utopia and the garden should set the senses alight – and *Earth Perfect* does just that.

Quite what these diverse chapters on lived, historical and imagined utopias add up to remains unclear. But eschewing grand argument is part of the point, because much like the garden utopia varies according to historical and spatial context. For the book to offer definitive conclusions would betray the irreducible polyvalence of the object of inquiry. Fittingly, then, the volume ends not with words, but with a picture of violets: a piece entitled *Laßt Blumen sprechen* (Let Flowers Speak), by Joseph Beuys (1974).

If pushed to identify a lack, I would say that the book eschews the darker sides of gardening – and this despite a promise from the editors not to ignore utopia’s underbelly. Sure, several authors grapple with the burdens of stewardship; others play up the pathos that grips us
when social dreaming is set against the inevitable failure of any such dreaming. However, there is little about how, for many, gardening is profoundly dystopian. Horticultural workers on the economic margins in fact do a majority of the world’s gardening, in any era you care to mention. And when you are labouring twelve hours a days for minimal wages being with plants surely can’t seem so pleasurable. What of the global diversity of subsistence cultures, places where food cultivation is livelihood not hobby? What role does utopia play there? While there is scattered reference to pest and weed control, the book should have confronted head-on the fact that utopia relies on the violence of exclusion – of plants, people and animals – as much as it does a positive, hopeful disposition. For in the end, utopian dreaming in the garden is underpinned by darker, more violent energies: exclusion, social privilege, killing, elitism, and the time-stopped sterility of any vision of how the world should be.

FRANKLIN GINN
University of Edinburgh