

Recapturing Eden: Gardening Blogs as Ecological Communication Forums

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My study is part of a research project titled “Media, Communication, and the Social Performance of Environmentalism: Comparing Ecological Collectives on Two Sides of the Baltic Sea” financed by the Baltic Sea Foundation. We are interested in comparing how different communication forums package ecological messages, create collectives, and enculture members into environmentally-conscious roles. My colleagues study face-to-face communication: the activist group Klimax, and the imagined communities of newspapers, using the lens of ec-nationalism. Our research question is: How do these collectives’ discourses invite participants to a combined, on- and off-line performance of different social roles – ecologist, masculine, feminine, Swedish or German? My study concerns collectives created, and imagined, in computer-mediated communication, through a comparison of Swedish and German gardening blogs. Gardening blogs are topic-centered blogs, and the garden can be understood as online discursive field. My paper aims to address the following question: How do gardening bloggers invite participants, that is, readers to a combined performance of ecologist (or even non-ecologist) roles in the garden? Using certain topics that are taken up in relation to ecology, I want to show how these topics create social relations. I also make some comparisons between German and Swedish blogs.

SYSTEMS THEORY AND NETWORKS THEORY

I want to apply systems theory as developed by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998), who is for the most part unknown outside of the German-speaking world, and has been only sporadically translated into other languages. Briefly: In analysing social relations, Luhmann proposes thinking in terms of systems. A system here means a totality of mutual relations or an organized complexity, which consists of various elements that relate to each other. Systems are self-organized, and self-producing (Luhmann 1995). In the act of blogging, communities are created, which can be described in Luhmann's words as a virtual interactive communication system. For example, on the semantic level, gardening bloggers feed their blogs with concepts (including garden design), values (e.g. green gardening), norms (good/bad behaviors), emotions (e.g. digging for pleasure), and also services (e.g. sending weeds from a rare plant).

Luhmann's term of communication differs from traditional concepts: Communication is the union of three selections: information (what is selected to be communicated or what the message is about), utterance (the selection of a form of communication: how is the information to be communicated?) and understanding (about the meaning that is generated, is the/a meaning selected, and if yes, which one and how). Luhmann rejects the idea of the transmission of something, and focuses instead on the relationships between these three parts. In the case of blogs, understanding occurs "if a comment or trackback connects to an entry on a blog, or just every time one blog refers to another" (Taekke 2005, 14). Meaning "as a horizon of possibilities" (Luhmann 1995, 65) is constituted in the communication process of the blogs. Since we are examining computer-mediated communication, utterance and understanding are chronologically separated, in contrast to face-to-face communication. When persons engage in the act of blogging, they add 'posts' to their weblog, or in other words, publish their thoughts and pictures for others by allowing their audience to read these new entries and by providing feedback possibility through comment functions. Writing comments on other's entries is the direct way to "perform conversational interactivity" (Taekke 2005, 7), and strengthens the network character of the community. Often the blogger gets feedback from unexpected sources. Based on the technical infrastructure, this form of virtual interactive communication system fosters a reciprocal relationship in which people often add others' weblogs to their own 'blogroll', creating a network of links to other weblogs, and can also subscribe to a blog as a reader/follower. As a result, new relationships and communication contexts emerge. Since the technical infrastructure enables the storage and retrieving of blog entries and comments, and therefore provides an interaction history, the blog entries can also be used as a database and can be referred to at any time by the owner and the audience (Taekke 2005, 3). Hence, a blog is created by the owner as well as by the audience. According to Luhmann, a blogosphere is a communication system based on the selection of 'what' information is selected, 'how' it is communicated, and at least understood in form of comments, and references in the blog entries. We can summarize that blogs support the interpersonal meaning production by producing space and opportunities for communication through circulating and discussing topics (Schmidt 2006, 136).

The technical infrastructure makes it possible for 'publishing' to take place outside the professional publishing industry, that is, requiring an editor, publisher and distributor. However, the bloggers are encouraged to see themselves as writers, and publish their thoughts for a broader audience. The gardening bloggers, for instance, upload pictures (or even films and film clips) of flowers and well-designed gardens, ask for advice, share their experiences, and publish their thoughts on gardening in particular, and on nature in general. We can classify blogging as a special genre that creates a social space, attracting a specific type of community, which is based on similar interests rather than different ones (Rak 2005, 176). Thinking in terms of genre allows us to place the blog entries in relation to the genre as a frame which

regulates or even identifies the form of communication according to behavior, expectation, attitude and also emotions (Schmidt 1996, 195). Somehow simplified, this determines which kind of entries are possible (and which not), if one wants to be a part of the blogging community, and what can one expect from them. Genres fulfill, therefore, a function on two levels: the individual and social (Schmidt 1996, 196). The individual receives a frame, and knows (and also learns) how to behave in the blogosphere and can specify one's own expectations. This is the precondition for social communication, and enables connecting communication. In regard to the blogosphere, there are implicitly some normative participating rules in order to regulate communication, such as being authentic (e.g. no advertising language), linking to the source of information, and following certain linguistic and argumentative rules, such as minimizing harm done to others etc. (Schmidt 2006). This can also be described as a form of relationship management, where the frame is constructed, and expectation structures are set up.

As an example of relation management, one female German blogger self-reflectively informs her readers about the circumstances, for instance, why she is writing an entry about insect hotel habitats. Additional relations are activated by informing the readers about having received some promotional gifts in order to advertise these products. To preserve her credibility, she puts the post in this context in order to make her role clear. Accompanied by a picture with an opened packet and the products, she posts:

As a gardening blogger, sometimes I get various parcels, samples and products sent to me to write about it. This is something, I only do if it makes sense to me (and I have the time and desire!). Just now, I received an unusually voluminous package - but with very useful content, namely, a butterfly and a bee hotel.¹

June 30, 2011 (www.das-wilde-gartenblog.de/2011/06/30/hausgarten-net-wirbt-fuer-insektenschutz/).

She expresses clearly her own decision on whether to review a product or not. This is necessary for her in order to maintain authenticity. Not all gardening bloggers act like this, and in the course of my research I found several entries on insect hotel habitats (without mentioning promotion, if this was the case). As a reader, one can assume that all the others have also received promotional gifts; otherwise, the appearance of this topic in German blogs seems to be inexplicable.

As mentioned above, social networks (such as the blogosphere) are based on communication (Rasmussen 2008, 11). Communication itself is, according to Luhmann, characterized by patterns of relations (information, utterance, and understanding). Hence, actors in a social network are "positioned in relation to a given array of ties" (Mische & White 1998, 703) as, for example, the above mentioned entry on promotional gifts shows explicitly. So, we can state that the defining characteristic of networks is its focus on relation / connectivity instead of on behavior and attributes of individuals (behaviors and attributes often make different kinds of relations apparent). In the case of blogging, the blogger can be described as a self-accomplished network of relations.

Blogging topics can be directly related to oneself, to the environment (i. e. topics on garden/nature/society), and to other selves in the network. However, from a phenomenological point of view, blogging is always the result of selection, or more simplified, of a choice,

¹ In orig.: "Ab und an werden mir in meiner Eigenschaft als Gartenbloggerin diverse Päckchen, Proben und Produkte zugesendet, auf dass ich drüber schreibe. Was ich nur dann auch mache, wenn mir das Anliegen sinnvoll erscheint (und ich grade Zeit und Lust habe!). Soeben erreichte mich ein ungewöhnlich voluminöses Paket – allerdings mit ganz nützlichem Inhalt, nämlich einem Schmetterlingshotel und einem Bienenhaus."

whether it be conscious or unconscious. As selves, the blogger defines his/her identity. It begins with the name of the blog, for example “The compost philosopher” (www.kompostfilosofen.blogspot.com) or “wall flowers” (www.mauerblumen.blogspot.com). They could have chosen other names. Then, this selection process continues with the way the blogs look. One can choose between different templates from the blogger service and edit the template to be just the way one wants it. Goffman (1959) would have described the layout as the “scenery and stage props”, and as part of the (blogging) performance (Goffman 1959, 22). Almost all blogs are decorated with images from one’s own garden.

There are also links to the “about me” pages where the blogger describes her/himself and posts a picture. Some have chosen to specify their identity by giving the name and place of residence / garden, others are more reticent and only mention the gender and the region where they live. Often, the blog has a motto used to describe its specific identity, such as “For an unhappy person, every flower is a weed, for a happy one, each weed is a flower”² as found in a German blog titled “The wild gardening blog” (www.das-wilde-gartenblog.de) expressing in a few words a deep relationship to nature in one’s garden. The mentioned features are identity markers that the blogger has chosen for publication. Put another way, identity is not given, but instead constructed in one way or another.

In White’s phenomenological network theory (White 2008), he argues that identity in a network can only be maintained via the control of one’s own identity to all other identities, meaning all kinds of expression of identities. In the case of the gardening bloggers, control can refer to how to design the page, what topics and pictures to display in one way or another, or even whether to edit comments. Identity, and control, are mutual and embedded in a “net-dom”. According to White net refers here to pattern of ties, and dom stands for the domain that “comprises stories, symbols, and expectations, and together they co-constitute a net-dom” (White 2008, cit. in Fuchs 2009, 346). As a result, meaning production can only be in a relational context and, simultaneously, relations create meaning (Mützel 2009, 875). By telling stories, posting pictures, and comments, and through linking to other web-sites and blogs, or to one’s own earlier entries, polymorphous relations are established in which other involved bloggers attribute meaning through connecting communication by posting their own narratives, comments, and/or links. These entries make network ties explicit. In other words, net-doms stand for arenas of interrelations. Other network theories (such as actor network theory, ANT) have included non-human actors such as concepts, narratives and animals in the analysis, but according to White only human actors can ascribe meaning to them.

Depending on the type and intensity of the prevailing network, Schmidt distinguishes between “strong and weak ties”. Strong ties are characterized by manifold relationships, for instance, not only knowing someone from virtual life but also from ‘real’ life, being a friend and/or relative of someone. Looking at the comments on the entries, it is often obvious that relatives and/or close friends follow the entries. These ties make it easier to activate solidarity and to give emotional support within virtual network communication. In contrast, weak ties mainly serve as information exchange, and in some way establish mutual influence. According to Schmidt, those actors who are heavily involved in networks and their participants are also connected to each other, and have a “bonding social capital” (Schmidt 2006, 52).

Which communicative forms increase the likelihood of connecting communication? As I mentioned earlier, gardening blogs are topic-centered, meaning that topics or themes around garden/gardening are expected and communicated in the form of narratives, comments, and especially pictures. The topic ‘garden, gardening’ can be seen as a code that creates the topical frame for the selection of communication within the community of gardening bloggers.

² In orig.: “Dem Traurigen ist jede Blume ein Unkraut, dem Glücklichen jedes Unkraut eine Blume”

THE GARDEN OF THE GARDENING BLOGGERS

In Western culture, the garden is rich in symbols as well as norms, involving both a spiritual and a physical dimension. It is a vital symbol “of a moral society living in ‘natural’ social and environmental harmony” (Olwig 1995, 384). According to Merchant, the “Garden of Eden” trope is one of the most powerful Western narratives. It tells us that we can regain it if we work for it, do something for it (2003, 39). Nadel-Klein concludes that all modern gardeners are “engaged in recapturing Eden, if only in a limited way, and some more explicitly than others” (Nadel-Klein 2010, 167).

The gardening bloggers I have studied cover a wide range of recurring topics such as

- Gardening as spiritual place: astonishment at cycles of nature
- Gardening as an arena for self-fulfillment: to replenish both soul and body
- Gardening as therapy, healing
- Gardening as beneficial and enjoyable
- Gardening gives a face to beauty (and sometimes also to evil, such as pests and extreme weather conditions)

GARDENING BLOGGERS

According to a study (Global Garden report 2010), gardening blogging is popular in Scandinavia (as well as in the USA, UK, and China), but less popular in the German-speaking countries (the study mentioned Austria and Switzerland, and I guess it applies to Germany). Swedish gardening bloggers are largely women. The blogs show how “(f)rom their thirties to their sixties, female Swedish gardeners orchestrate their partners, who help them by doing manly things in the garden” (Global Garden report 2010, 54). There are no figures on German gardening bloggers, but also here I would guess that most of the bloggers are women.

I have studied approximately 50 gardening blogs (half Swedish, half German), which were regularly updated. The oldest blog started in 2003, and most of them started in 2005. My examined blogs have a different amount of frequent readers, varying between 20 to 270 readers, and often have over 1000 visitors a month. 50% of the bloggers are female, 30% men, and 20% of the blogs are created by couples. I have remained outside of this blogosphere as a ‘lurker’, that is, as a passive audience. However, I had access to the comments to the extent they were openly published.

My bloggers are ordinary people who possess a small or large garden or, in one case, a balcony to cultivate vegetables, fruits, trees and flowers. It is their hobby and they do gardening mostly for pleasure or even passion (there is only one exception, a professional farmer). They are for the most part not especially subscribed to permaculture sites (some have links to them) or to sustainable gardening but often exhibit some type of ecological consciousness. I have not read a single post on the use of pesticides or chemical fertilizers for a better harvest or even something positive on mono-culture (with one exception of a lawn which is not seen as monoculture). If they were using chemicals they would not write about it, I guess. This seems to belong to the unwritten rules of the network communication of gardening bloggers undertaking green gardening.

OPINION POSTS IN RELATION TO ECOLOGY

Relations in a network are created by posts/entries that can cover several topics, and can narrate observations, events, and feelings. Topics as opinion posts have a concrete/factual aspect on the one hand and a temporal one on the other. Here, we can according to Luhmann distinguish between topics and posts. Posts refer to topics, whereas topics or themes live longer than the individual posts do, and combine the different posts into a long-term or short-term nexus of meaning. Some posts provoke new contributions or at least comments. However,

other topics are exhausted quickly. Schmidt (2006) differs between topics that are “spikes”, “spiky chatters”, and “mostly chatters”. The first are topics with a relatively short attention, the second are wave-like, as they are discussed over a longer period, and the last are discussed on a stable and low level (Schmidt 2006, 58). In the last category, one can include topics such as weather conditions, seasons, cultivation issues, and the beauty of flowers; in the second category questions of pest control, wild life, green gardening, and not least, consumption issues.

For gardening bloggers, the topic of consumption behavior has become a general domain of reflection from different points of view. Gardeners cultivate, and therefore produce goods, which Marx explained as an act of consumption: According to him all production is simultaneously an act of consumption and vice versa. Consumer behavior (including a gardener’s) is a very complex phenomenon, and plays an important role in identity formation, as we will see later on.

From the angle of ecology, most of the entries circle around the main distinction between unfettered and sustainable consumption. In my paper, I distinguish between three themes that are subordinated to the main distinction of unfettered and sustainable consumption of “spiky chatters”, where content “spikes” topics which have a short-term nexus but are discussed occasionally.

1. Trendsetting / Following trends
2. Keeping it organic
3. Beauty: Aesthetisation of the garden

The next section aims at describing how these three topics are discussed in the community and how they function in order to create identity, and hence relations in the network communication.

Trendsetting / Following trends

Not enough that the fashion industry forces us to critically see over our closet year after year, now even the flower industry can give us a bad conscience. The potted plants trend is away from small-scale flowers, bustling flower windows, to huge soloists, the bigger the better....I have better things to do than following every trend according to potted plants.”³

Jan 28th 2011 (www.guenstigmaertnern.blogspot.com)

The female blogger refuses to apply an ideology of fashionability to house plants and therefore to adopt a lifestyle culture which demands a “rapid turnover of identity indicators” (Bonner 2008, 34). Looking at the 15 comments following her post, all agree with her, and they narrate different stories based on the topic and stress the incompatibility between sustainability and gardening trends as similar to fashion trends. The mentioned trends lead to throw-away-thinking, which in turn exhausts natural resources and causes ecological damage. Most of the comments claim the importance of having established a relationship to one’s own plants, which stands in contrast to a behavior of following every trend. Intimate relationship to plants, and also nature, is a recurring feature in the blogs, and I will come back to this. Another example is the ‘story’ of the olive tree.

³ In orig.: ”Nicht genug, dass uns die Mode jedes Jahr wieder zur kritischen Durchsicht des Kleiderschranks zwingt, jetzt macht uns auch noch die Blumenindustrie ein schlechtes Gewissen. Der Zimmerpflanzentrend geht nämlich weg vom kleinteiligen, wuseligen Blumenfenster, hin zu riesigen Solisten, je größer, desto besser... Letzten Endes gibt es doch auch Wichtigeres, als in Sachen Zimmerpflanzen jedem Trend hinterherzueilen.“

Last year I spontaneously bought one of those magnolias everyone raves about... I planted it next to the pool. Thought it would be nice, a little Mediterranean area and ... Mediterranean flair is this year's catchphrase in the garden world... and the shops follow suit. 129 kr for a 1.5 m tall olive tree at a discount store. Have not fallen for it yet. Olive trees will soon be in the home of every Svensson, worth her name, I guess. Like the new harangue: house, dog, and an olive tree⁴
May 12th 2011 (www.tradgards-tankar.blogspot.com)

Adopting trends means to this female blogger that they have to fit into the exterior design, that is, for example when planting an exotic magnolia tree, it fits best near the pool. Another symbol for the Mediterranean is the olive tree, available as a special offer at a discounter. But here, the blogger makes a distinction: once it becomes mass-lifestyle culture, because of the price, the blogger loses interest in buying an olive tree, since the desire to express an individualized vision of oneself cannot be accomplished. Bargains help to spread a sort of mass-culture of gardening, which this blogger rejects. There is only one comment on this post saying

Olive tree ... yes I have two and I'm getting sick of them, do not really believe it's my thing. They do not look so nice if I may say so.⁵ May 17th 2011, (www.blogger.com/comment.g?blogID=246658779628727907&postID=6726970233021335637)

Following garden trends implies changing with each year and season. Consequently, being tired of plants after a while produces a consumer attitude of constant renewal. However, in contrast to this blog, another female blogger appreciates bargain hunting, and writes:

This week I got a very good bargain. Was eating breakfast when I saw that they sold olive trees at City Gross. My dear colleague E was also excited so we set off with my van. We thought that they would already be sold since the ad had threatened that they had only a very limited number of trees⁶ May 5th 2011 (www.landetkrokus.se)

In comparison to the former blog with 37 readers (July 2011), this blog is relatively popular with 111 readers (July 2011), and she got also 11 comments agreeing with her excitement. This post (and the blog as a whole) emphasizes garden style issues to some extent without consideration of location or climate. Having an olive tree that seldom or never bears fruit in the Scandinavian climate has a symbolic power of being trendy in consumer society. Olive trees are associated with the Mediterranean, that is, with leisure time, relaxing and a feel-good atmosphere.

⁴ In orig.: "Förra året spontanshoppade jag en sån där Magnolia som alla pratar så gott om... Jag planterade den brevid poolen. Tänkte att det skulle vara snyggt, lite medelhavskänsla liksom... Medelhavskänsla är årets ord i trädgårdsvärlden. Jisses vad alla tjuvar... och butikerna hänger på. 129kr för ett 1,5m högt olivträd, på en lågprisaffär. Har inte slagit till än. Olivträd kommer stå hemma hos varje Svensson värd namnet den här sommaren gissar jag. Lixom nya harangen: villa, vovve och olivträd"

⁵ In orig.: "Olivträd.. ja jag har två och börjar hjärtligt tröttna på dem, tror inte riktigt det är min grej för de ser inte så fina ut om jag säger så."

⁶ In orig.: "I veckan gjorde jag ett riktigt fynd. Höll på att sätta frukosten i halsen när jag såg att de sålde olivträd på City Gross. Bästa kollegan E blev lika exalterad som jag så vi gav oss i väg med min kombi. Vi trodde nog att de redan skulle vara slut då annonsen hade hotat med ett ytterst begränsat antal träd."

STIMULATING CONSUMPTION/TRENDS

Personal bloggers also use targeted advertisements, and have sponsorships. Some aspire to commercialize their blogging activities. Some of the gardening bloggers also promote their own products and skills, from food to design (many gardening bloggers present and sell their handicrafts). Besides commercial interests, all are more or less inspired by posts presenting new produces, plants and/or garden tools. They can be ecologically motivated (increase insect life in the garden, for example, by presenting and reviewing different insect hotel habitats as I mentioned above) or just motivated by commercial products without any ecological purpose. The following quote shows how bloggers inspire each other which lead, in the following blogger's case, to an increased desire to acquire new plants.

I get so much inspiration from all your lovely blogs. Sometimes I find something I just must have.... ;) On this page I write down a number of plants that are on my wish list ...The list keeps growing, and has become very long.⁷

INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP VERSUS TRENDS

Gardening is the source of powerful feelings which are often described in the blogs. It gives the bloggers something to look forward to, and gives a lot of pleasure when digging, planting and particularly harvesting one's own vegetable and fruits. Therefore, an intimate relationship to one's own produce has been developed. A female blogger describes her feelings in the following words:

One of the most beautiful things for me is still harvesting my vegetables and fruits. I am always amazed that I can harvest something. ... Things I otherwise have to buy, I get them for free, self-made. I have a relationship to the things that grow there, I know what it means, how many conditions must be met for something to grow - such as my radishes.⁸ May, 14th, 2011
<http://mauerblumen.blogspot.com/>

She decorates her post with photos of her radishes like a 'family photo'. The radishes appear like a family. In the act of nurturing, the plants themselves become proxies for a kind of extended family. The author speaks sometimes of babies or children when describing her plants which belongs, according to Merchant, to romantic narratives where nature is similar to a human being (Merchant 2003, 134). This blogger is an urban gardener, and she only has a small plot in her backyard. Her blog has 59 registered readers (July 2011). She is marveling at all the life in her backyard, showing respect for nature in her backyard, including weeds and slugs. All of the following five comments share her amazement at growing produce and being self-sufficient (at least regarding radishes), and give positive feed-back.

Keeping it organic

A whole range of topics circle around humans' concrete contribution to improving the earth by planting trees, being sparing with natural resources such as water, and grow-

⁷ In orig.: "Jag får så mycket inspiration av alla era fina bloggar. I bland hittar jag något som jag bara måste ha. ;) På den här sidan skriver jag ned ett antal växter som finns med på önskelistan... Listan växer hela tiden och har blivit väl lång :)."

⁸ In orig.: "Eine der schönsten Sachen am Gärtnern ist für mich nach wie vor das Ernten meines Gemüses und Obstes. Ich höre einfach nicht auf zu Staunen, dass ich ernte. ... Dinge, die ich sonst kaufen muss, bekomme ich kostenlos, selbstgemacht. Ich habe eine Beziehung zu den Dingen, die dort wachsen, ich weiß, was es bedeutet, wieviele Voraussetzungen erfüllt sein müssen, bis etwas wächst - wie zum Beispiel meine Radieschen."

ing organically. This also means for the following male blogger that one has to buy organic food:

By the way, today, it will be 100 % organic. It feels a little better each time I do so. I'm still not 100% in my life, but on the way ... If you think this is a hard task, it is because I am just a thorn in your side and you wish that you also can make this decision. Yep it is so!⁹ (May, 10th 2011, <http://hannu-s.blogspot.com/search/label/Ekologiskt>)

This blogger, who has a very popular blog with 281 subscribed readers (July 2011), commands his readers and visitors to make dinner (or lunch) from organic food. He, who can be described as having bonding social capital, tries to make them have bad consciences if they do not eat organic food. In this post, he aspires to involve and engage the whole network in thinking and acting ecologically. According to the comments (10 posts), he meets with approval: some want to do better, some tell him they already do this and so on. If I compare this post with German posts on this topic of the role of organic food, I cannot find similar posts on commanding readers to buy organic food. This has to do with the fact that organic food has a longer tradition in German supermarkets, and it is not a question of wanting or not, but more a question of prices, and, therefore, even a class issue. There are studies saying that people with higher education and higher incomes buy organic food on a regular basis in Germany. In Sweden, organic food has experienced a revival in the last 20 years; in Germany the first organic food stores date already from the seventies.

Growing organic food is also about working with the soil and preparing it for the next season. Using green manure is for the next blogger a successful combination of beauty and benefit:

Actually, one can be very happy from a clover crop. Its refined fragrant flowers are obviously simple and pretty sticking up, equally appealing to both the bumblebee and the grower. And the lush leaves, soon to be green fertilizer for the benefit of worms and every life in the soil, are preparing the soil for next year's vegetable growing. Clover plants are simply in their simplicity the most natural thing in a living, organic garden.¹⁰
(Sept. 9th 2010, <http://mandelmanns.blogspot.com/>)

The blogger (a couple) illustrates this entry with three pictures of clover meadow against the light, and with two different close-ups in order to show different flowering clover species in their beauty. This entry received five comments, and most of them refer to an earlier visit of this garden which is open for the public, and thanking the blogger for a beautiful garden experience (including the clover crop), and also for a worthwhile blog. Within a short period of 15 months this blog acquired 137 subscribed readers as of July 2011. Before they started the blog, the couple were also known from a Swedish TV gardening program, where they contributed with advice on organic gardening. This has probably contributed to the popularity of the blog.

⁹ In orig.: "I övrigt blir det 100% ekologiskt som gäller i dag, känns lite bättre varje gång det är så. Jag är ännu inte 100% i livet, men på väg... Om du tycker mitt eko är jobbigt beror det bara på att jag är en nagel i ögat och att du önskar att du orkade ta beslut du med. Japp så är det! ;)"

¹⁰ "Man kan faktiskt bli lycklig av en klöverodling. Så enkla o självklara o vackra sticker de upp sina raffinerat väldoftande blommor, lika lockande för såväl humlan som för odlaren. Och de frodiga bladen, som snart ska grüngödsla marken till gagn för maskar o allt jordlevande, förbereder jorden för nästa års grönsaksväxande.
Klöverväxterna är helt enkelt i sin enkelhet bara självklara i en levande, ekologisk, trädgård."

Aesthetization issues

One can state that all gardening bloggers are more or less occupied with sharing their experience of the beauty of garden life by celebrating it in their entries. For them, the garden is *per se* associated with beauty, and this beauty can be visualized in words and photographs. Therefore, all blogs are decorated by pictures of plants, flower beds, wild life etc, and most of them are presented as small ‘natural wonders’. The picture motives seem to be endless. These images function as symbolic identity markers of the blog. By contrast, one identity marker which differs somehow from the ‘mainstream’ of gardening bloggers is a Swedish blog called *Arboarticum* (with 46 subscribed readers in July 2011). Using photos of rotten apples, and a forgotten, frost-killed banana plant in the kitchen garden, the blogger (couple) writes:

These images are not only fuzzy and ugly. The subjects are also of a type *Sköna Hem* (an interior magazine - HG) would never dare to show. Welcome to reality, on a freezing cold Sunday in October!¹¹
Oct. 3rd 2010 (www.arboarticum.blogspot.com)

In the blog description, the authors (the blog is written from a ‘we’-perspective) explain their garden life as a constant fight against “cold, dryness, stiff clay and terrible beasts” in order to get “exotic” plants rooted. Contrary to glossy magazines, gardening is seen as hard work not only because of the unfriendly weather climate of Mid-Sweden but also because of an atmosphere of neighborly discord, as another entry relates. However, the blog is not about supplying the family with daily food but rather about planting exotic trees, bushes, flowers, and herbs in a cold climate, which the blogger expresses as a struggle against nature, that is, against climate, soil, pests, and wild animals. Here, identity markers are explicitly drawn as distinct from mainstream bloggers and magazine images by stressing the failures and difficulties of gardening (in addition to entries on successful harvests, the acquisition of new plants, and weeds). Seen from an ecological perspective, these entries dealing with struggle until a decisive result is obtained are to a great extent about conquering nature. The gardener is not seen as part of nature but rather as its rival who has to gain hand over a wild nature.

Aesthetization issues that play an important role as identity markers can also be combined with sustainability, as the following entry shows:

We don’t like to cut dead trees, if we can think of another use. Dead wood is good for small animals and can be an element to create structure in the garden.¹² Aug 9th 2010 (www.das-wilde-gartenblog.de/2010/08/09/baumskelett-als-rosenstaender)

Illustrated by one picture, the above-mentioned tree skeleton is envisioned as a flower stand, and all four comments praise this “great idea”. Retaining dead wood for another use means, in this case, finding ways to improve insect diversity in the garden. Emphasis here is placed on a multi-use tree, and the integration of insects in sustainable gardening. In a broader sense, we can interpret it as the relationship between humans and nature as “based on partnership rather than domination” (Merchant 2003, 206). This realization of being part of an interconnected set of relationships in a broader world means the blogger (a couple)¹³ does not see any contradiction to tasteful design in the garden. I have not seen such an example of reuse approach in

¹¹ In orig.: ”De här bilderna är inte bara oskarpa och fula. Motiven är också av ett slag som *Sköna Hem* aldrig skulle våga visa. Välkomna till verkligheten en svinkall söndag i oktober!”

¹² In orig.: “Tote Bäume fällen wir nicht gerne, wenn uns noch eine andere Verwendung einfällt. Totholz ist gut für Kleinlebewesen, zudem ist auch ein Skelett noch ein strukturierendes Element.“

¹³ There is no register over subscribed readers.

Swedish blogs, which are often more concentrated on design and appearance, and therefore tend to support a renewal approach.

A Swedish example of using a tree for decoration is the ‘makeover’ of a perhaps ‘ugly’ tree:

Cutting off the branches to the stem and leaving the crown can have an amazing effect on the garden. This elder tree was really an asset in the garden afterwards. The bare stems are incredibly beautiful. In addition, I make a lot of elderberry juice from the flowers in June, so it is both useful and decorative. Could it be more perfect? ”¹⁴

January 5th 2010: (www.lanningetradgard.blogspot.com/search?updated-max=2010-01-14T16%3A25%3A00Z&max-results=24)

This female Swedish blogger (with 113 subscribers, July 2011) illustrates her entry with five images of the tastefully trimmed elder tree from different angles in order to stress the beauty and elegance of her design. The tree has been given human help in order to delight all of the senses. Styling the garden allows her to express herself, as also does posting images to show her creations (in interaction with nature). The blogger received 13 comments praising the beauty of her garden design, which they felt was like a piece of art.

Another male Swedish blogger chooses the color of his flowers in accordance with the color of his cottage:

Black House, and black tulip. The black and red 'Queen of Night' has an interesting name, usually comes back and has a trendy color - a huge success¹⁵.

May 2nd 2011 (www.tantonorra.blogspot.com)

He got four comments (in connection with other posts) that all admire his beautifully designed garden, including his choice of tulips etc.

Gardening is often directed towards stylistic issues, and it is rather about cultivating taste than about cultivating food. Put another way, the garden is observed and created through the gaze of taste. The images make clear that this is a place of pure beauty: plants are carefully chosen, and colors and structures harmonize with each other. The blogger shows an image of a perfect garden created in a tasteful manner. In the latter blog, ecological considerations have a subordinate role. Combining beauty with ecological performance seems to be unimportant.

In comparison to German bloggers, Swedish gardening blogs are more focused on aesthetics, that is, garden design (and also trends). This is in line with the above-mentioned study “Global garden report 2010” claiming that German bloggers “are more into organic kitchen gardening than their counterparts in Scandinavia, where designed and wild gardens are hot themes” (14). The report is based on ca. 46700 Swedish bloggers writing about gardening, and traces the topic “The designed and artistic garden” out of the three top themes of Swedish gardening bloggers, in addition to the themes of “Re-creating wilderness, the feel-good garden” (Global 2010, 54). In German blogs, besides a pleasing appearance, good gardening often means green gardening, that is, producing vegetables and fruits in an ecological manner.

¹⁴ In orig.: ”Att stamma upp träd och buskar kan få en fantastisk effekt i trädgården. Den här flädern blev verkligen en tillgång i trädgården efter uppstamningen. De nakna stammarna är otroligt vackra. Dessutom kokar jag mycket flädersaft på blommorna i juni, så den är både till nytta och till prydnad, kan det vara mer perfekt?”

¹⁵ In orig.: ”Svart hus, svart tulpan. Den svartröda 'Queen of Night' har ett spännande namn, bra vilja att återkomma och trendig färg - en braksuccé.”

CONCLUSIONS

I want to come back to my questions on how gardening bloggers invite participants (readers) to a combined performance of an ecologist role in the garden, and which communicative forms and contents increase the likelihood of connecting communication.

In general, participants are invited by presenting relevant topics in the form of narrations, comments, and not least of all, images. The chance of getting a comment becomes higher with more reader subscriptions and blog visitors. Many of the bloggers are also hobby-photographers, and they decorate their blogs with impressive images of the garden. This attracts visitors who in turn post comments where they admire the images, among other things. Not all topics are successful with this meaning that they are commented on or responded to. I have observed that topics of general philosophical considerations on ecology, for example, questions of climate change, nuclear industry, and consequences of Fukushima do not get any comments. However, more personal entries describing, for example, the planting a chestnut tree against the hopelessness in Japan due to the earthquake provoke comments and further communication (www.kompostfilosofen.blogspot.com).

Describing daily garden life in an emotional way (with joy or sorrow), illustrated by one or more pictures, makes it more likely that readers feel affected, which eventually can stimulate communication. Comments are sent and/or new posts are written by referring to other entries, for example. In Luhmann's words, connecting communication occurs. In the community of gardening bloggers, those topics (information and utterance) are successful, which boil down major issues to daily experiences. By getting personal, and therefore being authentic, it becomes easier for the readers to connect/relate to entries and topics that deal with general issues of ecology by discussing it from the daily experience of e.g. changing house plants or bargains. Here, it shows clearly that the selected information (the content) and the selected utterance, 'how' to communicate the information, play a decisive role in establishing communication.

Topics related to ecology that are successful in creating relations appear in the studied material to involve the general distinction between sustainable and unfettered consumption from different angles, including the role of trends through the light of consumption. They are discussed from the angle of cheap/expensive (bargains), have/not have (various plants), familiar/unfamiliar (intimate relationship to plants), successful/unsuccessful (one's own harvest), beneficial/harmful (clover, organic food), before/after (trimmed tree), beautiful/ugly (black tulips, trimmed tree), trendy/unfashionable (olive tree, potted plant). Those distinctions which stress aspects of familiarity, benefit, success, remaking, or even beauty are related to sustainability, whereas the others of possession, of being trendy, advocate a unfettered consumption style. From the perspective of garden aesthetics, entries are also about the main distinctions of consumption, and more precisely, between reuse/alternative use and renewal /new acquisition. In relating taste to issues of sustainability, revaluations can take place by activating new ties and dropping other ties.

The links between the bloggers are characterized by emotional commonality, which is mainly expressed through a shared fascination with plants and wildlife on different levels. Unlike political bloggers, there is a very positive and friendly atmosphere among gardening bloggers on the Internet. The comments always express approval; the worst is perhaps not getting any comment. The following entry celebrates, for example, the "positive energy" the blogger gets from the community of gardening bloggers.

It was about the pleasure that all the beautiful, wonderful, creative garden blogs spread. I am, as the newbie of the blogosphere, overwhelmed by the positive energy that you, Charlotta, and all the others, are spreading.¹⁶

Nov, 18th 2010 (<http://www.landetkrokus.se/2010/11/karlek.html>)

Sociality in gardening blogs is also established by giving practical advice, sharing experiences, and especially emotions. Sociality is not only limited to virtual exchange, but can also include material exchange, for example, of seeds of wild perennials, as a female blogger relates:

I have collected the seeds for you. At the same time, a huge tick is running across my hand (what I do for you!). ...So, those, who want a wild perennial for shady areas that you likely will not get in the garden shop, write me a comment and you will get them sent home to you.¹⁷

<http://guenstiggaertnern.blogspot.com/2011/06/meinuberraschungsgast.html#comments>

She received 23 comments, and was forced to draw the names separately.

It is also a common practice that subscribers visit each other's garden. Some gardeners open their gardens for the public on specific days. They advertise their opening hours on their blog, and invite their readers to visit. Here, virtual communication can be transformed into face-to-face communication, which in turn can strengthen ties and open up for new relationships in the blogosphere and beyond.

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¹⁶ In orig.: "Det handlade om glädjen som sprids på alla vackra, underbara, kreativa trädgårdsbloggar. Jag som är nybörjare i bloggvärlden är helt överväldigad av den positiva energi som du Charlotta, och andra, sprider."

¹⁷ "Die Samen dort oben habe ich für euch gesammelt. Dabei lief mir eine riesige Zecke auf die Hand (was ich nicht alles für euch tue). ... Wer also diese mit großer Wahrscheinlichkeit nicht im Handel befindliche Wildstaude für schattige Bereiche in seinem Garten ziehen möchte, der schreibe mir das als Kommentar und bekommt die Samen zugeschickt."

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