



Stags Leap

THE MOON GARDEN AND COYOTE HILL

A moon garden is an altar to the night, and a coyote a mystical dog who tumbles the moon in his throat, anodyne for the tremulous nature of the wild. Coyotes are keepers of the spirit. They are major players on this property, where three or four living groups range down out of the hills and negotiate territory in the vineyards on a regular basis. They are sometimes seen and heard during the day, but it is at night that they make full use of the bowl of the sky as acoustical ceiling and divide the night hours into a succession of vertical shivers, gathering down the stars.

On nights when the human element comes into play and the manor house windows are lit up, the sound of laughter spills out over the porch and lawns. These vivid gatherings become a contrasting note to the quiet radiance of a nearby garden which only comes alive in reflected light and sound.

India, China, and Japan first evolved the night, or moon garden, as a direct extension of the dwelling place, an acknowledgement that in warm climates, the evening and the out of doors are the most pleasant time and place for existence. Where a Moorish courtyard would provide the delights of a silvery fountain on ornately tiled surfaces, a Japanese moon garden relies on the amount of moisture in the air itself to drape the evening landscape and its lunar planet in mystery and subtlety.

This ideal aesthetic called for natural flashlights, beacons for the human footed sandal to navigate. White and silvery blossoms were classic in night gardens throughout parts of Asia, along with the use of pale rock, white sand, and pools of still water to reflect available light. This concept eventually leaked over to England via the colonial umbilical. The white garden at Sissinghurst Castle became an image of purity prowled by cats, fertilized with sensual dung and scandal in true Victorian style.



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The moon garden at Stags' Leap is inspired by nights spent on an estate dominated by its wildlands, and aside from the vineyards, retaining many native plants and trees, even among the more formal plantings around the manor house. Living here means being serenaded by the coyote chorus, and the occasional chance to witness their dancing on Coyote Hill up behind the guest cottages. The estate, laid out on the lower slope of the palisades with looping paths and roads, is conducive to walks in the moonlight, meandering through zones of fragrance through stands of bay laurel, oak duff, and the aromatic tarweed and pennyroyal hidden among native grasses.

So it came to pass without surprise that white and silvery plants, including the delicate white iris and the robust alyssum, insinuated themselves into pots in a rocky area around the stone fountain and its companion stone sundial table. These are the oldest garden features on the estate and can be traced to the founding Chase family through contemporaneous photographs, in particular the baptismal of Ysabel Chase in the late nineteenth century.

It was clear that soil would need to be brought over from the vineyards and beds started. The existing flowers began to suggest their own successors and companions, offering the opportunity to compose in the key of white. Recently renovated, with upgraded paths and increased bed sizes, the garden can now accommodate an abundant variety of plant species, with ample representation in each season for a continuously blooming display—a truly California version of the moon garden.

All this fuss over blooms by night adds to the diversity of the local gene pool. There are flowers which only care to be pollinated at night and have genetically adopted a pale color in order to be invisible to day-roving insects while attracting the attention of nocturnal moths. Certain species of artists, lovers, wine writers, and wine marketing professionals, all lunatic by nature, have found inspiration and solace in the intimate space between the manor house porch and the croquet lawn. On sweet nights of early fall, with the fragrant torch of fermenting grapes in the nostrils, when the sounds of



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human festivities become wearying to the nerves, the doorway of the manor house becomes an escape hatch into the gentler tonalities of twilight.

From behind the Vaca Range in the east, the full moon slides along its conveyor belt of stars. The head of the coyote raises and turns south, toward the shoulder of the mountain where impending moonlight is softening and blooming against the foil of rock. Perhaps it is a harvest dinner party just gearing up with appetizers and glinting glasses and smiles and best dresses, and there is a moment when a cricket sings a small song, intended only for its mate, and outside on the stone steps, a set of shoes pauses under the wisteria, and ponders.

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