

Introduction

*A little garden in which to walk, and immensity in which
to dream. At one's feet that which can be cultivated and
plucked; overhead that which one can study and meditate
on: some herbs on earth, and all the stars in the sky.*

—Victor Hugo

FOR MANY YEARS I've been intrigued by why we garden and what becomes of us when we're smitten with the love of plants. For me, gardening began innocently enough. Soon after I moved to Portland, Oregon from New York City in 1972, I bought a home that came with a yard. Suddenly there were roses to prune so that the mailman could navigate to the letter slot without getting stabbed, and huge hulking rhododendrons to dig up and give away so that sunlight would once more shine through the living room windows.

Before long I was feasting on homegrown tomatoes and cucumbers thanks to my next door neighbor Frank, who brought me seeds and showed me how to sow them. I thought I'd moved to Portland to earn my M.S.W. and become a better social worker, but life had other plans for me. The garden seduced me, and what started out as a flirtation became a lifelong passion.

Some friends worried about my sanity, and voiced concern about my obsession with plants. "If you're always gardening, how will there ever be room for a man in your life?" they asked, trying to shake me back to reality. After all, I was divorced, and not getting any younger. Not that I didn't date—it was just that often the garden was more compelling, and my efforts there were so much more fruitful. In fact love for gardening made me a writer,

brought me wonderful new friends, and gave me purpose. And eventually, the best man in the world showed up at an event directly related to the garden. Tom fell for me when he heard me speaking at a book signing for my fifth book, *Garden Retreats: Creating an Outdoor Sanctuary*, which just goes to show you that if you follow your heart, love will find you even in the midst of work.

For many years learning the plants and their botanical names, how they grew and how to plant them artistically, took all my attention. Then as I became more immersed, and the garden changed me into a more patient, attentive, reflective person, I became more interested in why we fall in love with gardening and how that connection transforms us.

I wrote these short essays over a period of two decades, as the spirit moved me. Earlier versions of some pieces were published in The Hardy Plant Society of Oregon's *Bulletin*, *The Gardener's Almanac* and *The Woman's Journal*. But many more essays remained in the files, waiting for a home.

Then early in 2001 I got a phone call from my friend, writer Nancy Woods, who had organized The Funny Ladies, a group of women who write for a living, and also for fun. She invited me to read with them at Broadway Books, an independent bookstore here in Portland. I read "Just a Fool in Love" and "Removing the Rose-Colored Glasses" to an audience of readers who were not necessarily gardeners, and they loved it. What a revelation—even nongardeners wanted to hear stories about the adventures and misadventures of a besotted gardener. But it shouldn't have come as such a surprise. Gardening surely is one of life's most absurdly addictive undertakings, and we can all relate to the hopelessly obsessive folly of it all. Turning a slice of wilderness into a garden while Mother Nature is laughing her head

off, sprinkling weed seeds, commandeering moles and launching hurricanes is not that different from sustaining a romance after five years of marriage.

I had such a good time with the Funny Ladies—reading with them reminded me of the pleasure I'd taken in writing in the early days, before I became a nationally known author, before deadlines, marketing, and promotion of book after book turned creativity into such serious work. I became nostalgic for lighter-hearted times when I'd written a column called "Samurai Gardener" just for fun, when I'd wake up with a poem in my heart, or tiptoe out to the dewy garden in my slippers to see if the poppies had opened yet.

Early in 2002 Funny Ladies went to press with *Assorted Nuts and Chews: Short Writings to Feed the Funny Bone*. Our little chap books with the sparkling red covers sold like hotcakes—people would flip through a copy, laugh, buy one for themselves and another for a gift.

Soon the seed for *Married to My Garden* sprouted. I would follow in the footsteps of Funny Ladies and publish my own collection of essays, just for fun. It wouldn't have to become a blockbuster, or go through the hoops of a publishing house—it would simply be a way to give my short pieces a home, to gather them together under one roof for readers to enjoy. It would be like planting all those perennials growing in containers on the patio in the garden beds at long last, and allowing them to settle into a more spacious landscape.

In many ways my life as a gardener followed the stages of romance. At first I was obsessed, and could think of little else. I would fall asleep at night dreaming of plants and wake up daydreaming about how I would arrange them, turning over color combinations in my mind. Like a woman in love, I was possessed, and most everything else seemed trivial. Friends who didn't garden dropped

away, bored stiff, and new friends, similarly crazed, came along and became part of my life.

There came a point when too much of a good thing led to disenchantment—sore wrists, lower back pain and a losing battle with weeds and moles made me wonder about the whole affair. Yet all it took was a road trip or a vacation overseas to bring me to my senses. I couldn't live without the garden, even with all its faults. I was married to my garden for better or worse, but now in a more conscious way. It would never be perfect, but it's as good as it gets, a wonderful place to commune with plants, experience the wonder of life unfolding, and get to understand myself better.

If you're a gardener, I hope that these pieces will entertain and console you. You've already chosen a path that's endlessly intriguing—the garden opens the door to horticulture, agriculture, cooking, art, philosophy, spirituality, writing, carpentry, stonemasonry, sculpture, alchemy, you name it. If you haven't yet gardened, I hope that these essays will lure you into the back yard, and inspire you to get your hands dirty. May you allow the garden to cast its magic mantle upon you and bless you with all of its delicious fullness.



Obsession



Possessed

Let no one think that real gardening is a bucolic and meditative occupation. It is an insatiable passion, like everything else to which a man gives his heart.

—Karel Capek

WHEN I WAS FORTY-SOMETHING and had just moved to two-thirds of an acre, I was also dating Edward, who was determined to get married. One day we were out in the back yard, admiring the beginnings of flower borders, when he said with chagrin, “You’ll never marry me, you’re already married to your garden!”

At the time I laughed, and shrugged it off as the kind of remark that a disappointed suitor makes when he realizes he’s not being taken seriously. Still, years later, his comment echoes in my mind, and I have to admit that to some degree he was right. In many ways I am married to my garden, and the bond only gets stronger each year.

I spend more time with my garden than with any friend. I even bought a miner’s lamp to strap across my forehead so that I could garden at night. It’s especially useful in winter when darkness falls at 4:30, and always handy for evening slug hunting—just when the slimy little things think it’s safe to come out and graze on hosta leaves, I slip on surgical gloves and plop them into a coffee can filled with salty water.

Like a good wife, I protect the garden from an army of pests. I squash earwigs and snails, slice through cutworms, pinch leaf rollers, and wash away aphids. I tromp mole hills flat, chase away stray dogs and raccoons. I scan the borders for cress and thistle, dock and morning glory. Strapped to my belt is a holster housing a narrow

trowel that will lift the deepest-rooting dandelion, the most stubborn buttercup.

I feed the garden regularly, and fortunately this requires little imagination, few shopping expeditions, no kitchen duty or culinary skills. The simplest of diets satisfies it—horse manure, chicken manure, rabbit litter, mushroom compost. I'm not tied to a schedule of mealtimes—any time will do. As for fresh ingredients, *au contraire*, the older and riper the better.

When it comes to communication, the garden is a flawless companion. I can say anything and it takes no offense. I might ruminate about some work project that went amuck, or a friend that disappointed, yet never a grumble from the garden, just the quiet rustle of grasses and the song of birds. "Ah now, this too will pass," I can almost hear the lilies whisper. A little waft of their fragrance and I feel calmer already.

If anger should get the best of me, half an hour of digging will cure it, and does the garden resent my taking it out on the soil? Not a bit—if anything it seems to heave a grateful sigh, aerated and ready to drain better. I can almost hear it murmur "Thanks for turning me over."

Most days my work is a complete pleasure, and I feel fortunate to have a garden filled with fragrant butterfly bushes, sweet figs and juicy pears. But occasionally I feel like a slave to the goddess Flora, and wonder if I made a terrible mistake investing in such a big place. Whatever was I thinking—that I would stay young forever?

Yet I remain loyal, tending my garden in all weather, envisioning how it will come to life again each spring as it has for 14 years past. I have flirted with other loves, but in the end it's the garden I return to with great attention and interest. The seeds for my books dwell in the garden; metaphors for poetry arise from its fertile soil. The garden is simply at the heart of everything I do and love.

Enslaved

*He who cultivates a garden, and brings to perfection
flowers and fruits cultivates and advances
at the same time his own nature.*

—Ezra Weston

THERE MUST BE AN EASIER HOBBY than gardening. One that doesn't ask you to slog across squishy lawns and muddy paths to look for the first slug-nibbled daffodils. One that doesn't require you to plant newly divided lilacs from a friend's garden in the pouring rain, which has suddenly turned to stinging hail accompanied by booming thunder.

It takes a certain kind of madness to tend a garden. Devoted gardeners pull their coats on over their nighties on freezing winter nights and rush out to cover a beloved daphne with a quilt. On hot summer days they start weeding in the damp dawn and keep going as the sun beats down, ignoring a heat headache at noon to water all the pots for the second time that day. They rise at 5 a.m. in order to wander through the borders before going to work, looking for the first open poppy, the first unfurled iris. They even drive out to a spring plant sale at daybreak on a Saturday morning, and stand in line for hours like some rock band groupie.

If all this weren't evidence enough of obsession, get this. Gardeners actually buy dirt. Yes, they spend money on manure, compost, sewage sludge, and topsoil, and would be ecstatic to be given a gift of any of these materials. Imagine—they'd happily take good money that could buy a bottle of French perfume and spend it on stinky soil amendments. Some of us even recycle

our neighbors' garbage to make better soil, much to their disbelief.

My friend Mary still can't comprehend why I welcome her with a big smile whenever she brings me giant plastic bags bursting with spent straw and manure that she cleans out of her pet rabbits' hutches. "Are you sure you still want more?" she asks cautiously before she makes another delivery. My answer is always a loud "Yes!" With nearly an acre to tend, I never have enough compost for the beds and borders.

Right now I'm staring at a 20-foot-long bed piled three feet high with rabbit litter that's quietly decomposing. The worms are slithering through it, feasting and breaking it down, and a few robins are hopping across the top, pouncing on the worms and pulling them up like spaghetti. In a few months this bed will turn into lovely black soil, and I'll plant roses and perennials in the crumbly dirt. If there's one thing that's constant in the garden, it's change.

That's probably what keeps us fools slaving so hard, despite foul weather, voracious bugs and sore muscles. It's the one place in the world where we're sure to make a difference, where we're able to catalyze and witness change. Where prickly blackberries once sprawled, fragrant butterfly bushes bloom; where dock and dandelions bloomed, shrub roses and cranesbills flower. I can't improve the economy, but I can transform soil. I can't change the weather, but I can alter my mood. A whiff of 'Somerset' daphne or mock orange makes my spirits soar, even on the grayest day.

The garden changes us as much as we change it. Watching its nature, we are bound to learn by example. It shows us abundance—seedlings blanket the spring floor, whether cress or cosmos. It's a living example of patience. Trees stand quietly through the seasons, waiting it out

through winter's cold and ice, bending their branches in the wind, and leafing out when spring's sun warms their branches. Peonies push up through the wet earth every spring, pulsing to the beat of a new season.

Best of all the garden turns us into florists. Right now on a March afternoon, a big bouquet brimming over with forsythia, flowering plum, camellia, flowering quince, daffodils and Lenten roses makes a splash of pink and yellow on my dining room table, thanks to my neighbor, Gavin Younie, who made it for me, and to all the other neighbors, who contributed branches whether they wanted to or not. Gardening may be hard work, but it gives as good as it takes.



Just a Fool in Love

Earth's crammed with Heaven.

—*Elizabeth Barrett Browning*

YOU CAN JUMP INTO GARDENING at any age, and without a lot of fuss. All you need is a patch of earth, a packet of seeds, and some water. A flower garden can be as natural as a wildflower meadow or as sophisticated as Sissinghurst—you decide.

You don't have to take classes or buy expensive tools, although it doesn't hurt to do either, if you like. You can dabble, putter, or pour your heart into gardening. You probably won't even know where that first step will take you until many years later.

If you're lucky, gardening will be like falling in love—you will lose all caution and become a fool in the best sense of the word. Webster's sixth definition is the one I like best: A fool is "a person with a talent or enthusiasm for a certain activity." When it comes to gardening, either talent or enthusiasm can carry you forward. If you have both, watch out! You'll be carried away, even swept away into a new life, one in which plants will occupy increasingly larger spaces in your imagination.

For example, when your partner looks deeply into your eyes early in the morning and asks what's on your mind, it may be hard to admit that you've been considering whether to take out all the grass in the parking strip to make a new perennial border, and that you've been turning over the idea of a hot versus cool color scheme. When you're standing out in the middle of the lawn staring, and your neighbor stops by to shoot the breeze, it will be all you can do to smile and be polite,

when you were right in the middle of visualizing the perfect combination of perennials to plant under the Japanese snowbell tree.

It will be almost impossible to jump up and greet your best friend when she comes upon you crouched between two stickery rose bushes, stretching as far as you can to dig out a thistle growing just beyond your reach. When you've pulled so hard on a stubborn root that you fall over backwards, you'll be thankful that you were in the furthest corner of the back yard, nowhere near the neighbor's deck.

Becoming a gardener calls for a very relaxed dress code. You'll wear baggy pants for crawling around in the dirt, waterproof boots for digging and slug stomping, layers of shirts, sweatshirts and vests to peel off as the day warms up, surgical gloves to keep your hands dry, and a fisherman's vest with dozens of pockets for labels, marking pens, seeds and Kleenex. Your hair will be mashed down under a sensible sunhat, or strewn with leaves, petals and seeds before the day is done. Forget about looking like Martha Stewart.

The best part of all is that you can be really stupid in the garden. No need for witty repartee when you're mindlessly turning the soil over and chopping it into crumbly bits with the edge of a spade. You can quietly concentrate on tracing the route of a buttercup through a bed of look-alike perennials, then dig it out with gusto. You can stare vacantly at an empty space in the garden and imagine how it will look filled with roses and lavender. Or cannas and sunflowers . . . or maybe a rock garden would be better.

You will be deeply upset by events that most adults would laugh about. A slug has bitten off a lily bud and you feel deep outrage. When moles lift your newly planted dahlias out of the ground your mind will boil

with murderous thoughts—you may even rush out and set a trap. When rabbits graze on your prize clematis, leaving a big hole where the roots once were, you will remember with keen interest a friend's offer to "take care of them."

You will foolishly believe that soon the garden will be completed, that by next year you will have finished that last bed, that the design will be done and you will lie back in a hammock with an iced tea and enjoy the results. Little do you know that your taste has already been gradually changing, that you will soon no longer be pleased by pastels, that as a matter of fact they will bore you stiff. Orange and red will call to you and the idea of a fiery garden will become irresistible. Not only that, but you begin to see that the shapes of the existing beds are terrible and need to be altered, completely. That the natural pond that you dug three years ago in hopes of attracting herons has drawn weeds instead and was a really bad idea, and maybe needs to be filled in, right away.

When you began making a garden, perhaps it was all open and sunny, and you planted trees for shade. Five years later you have the shade you wanted, but oddly enough, the sun loving perennials aren't doing so well anymore. Or perhaps a wind storm has blown down the one big tree that cast shade on all the hydrangeas and astilbes, and now they're shriveling up in the sun, begging to be moved.

If there's one thing you can count on in the garden, it's change. The garden will change, and so will you. Don't even try to resist, just let the surprises sweep you along in their wake. After all, if it all stayed put, what would you do with all your time, your energy, your love?