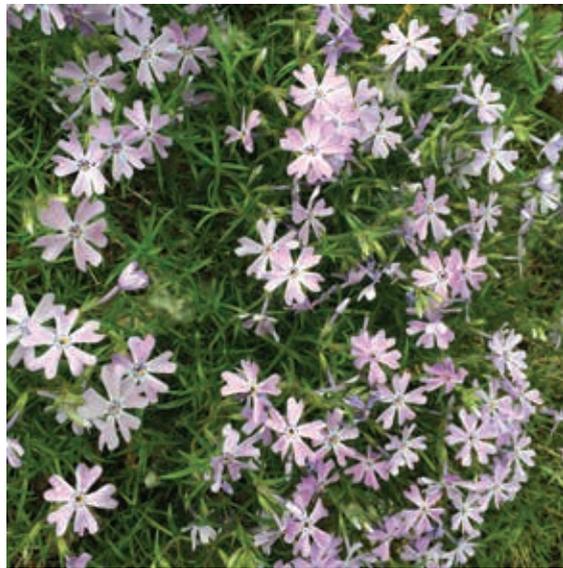


# MY PLOT OF EARTH

Christine Brooks Cote

*There is no instant gratification in gardening; you have to love the process. And that, I think, is the secret.*



**D**URING THE YEARS I WAS GROWING up, my father had a vegetable garden in a fenced-in back corner of our yard—tomatoes, cukes, green onions, radishes—and my mother planted and cared for the flowers that grew on all sides of the house. I have pleasant memories of working alongside my parents during those years while they tended to their garden beds. But true to my independent nature, I was only about eight or nine years old when I first

walked up to the store by myself to buy seed packets—carnations, bachelor buttons, zinnias, and others I’ve forgotten. Some of those seeds actually sprouted and grew—or at least that’s how I remember it. But vegetables and flowers were not the only things growing in our yard; we also had a cactus garden alongside our patio that held a number of different varieties, of different sizes, shapes, and colors. And behind the cacti were a few banana trees that actually produced bananas from time to time. Cacti? Banana trees? My childhood home was in San Diego.

Years later when I was living in northern Indiana and had my own house, I kept an enormous vegetable garden. I canned tomatoes. I froze chard, broccoli, beans, and peppers. I made a few different kinds of pickles and chutneys. It was a huge amount of work that occupied me during much of July, August, and September, but it was well worth it. I also continued my experimentation with flowers—impatiens, begonias, sweet William, morning glories, sunflowers. Gradually, as my confidence and knowledge grew, I added perennials and shrubs—irises, lilies, hostas,

roses, lilacs. With a combination of shade and sun in my yard, I was able to grow many varieties and fill my yard with color and scent all season long.

When I moved to Maine, I soon realized that the rules of gardening I had learned in Indiana didn’t apply. I bought a house on a very large wooded lot. I loved the trees—white pine, hemlock, spruce, oak, maple, beech, birch—the ferns, ground covers, and wildflowers. My first year in the house, I set out to clear some space and start growing vegetables. I knew that lettuce and radishes and spinach did well in cool parts of the garden, so I thought they’d do well in my shaded yard. But the ground in Maine, especially on a wooded lot, takes a long time to warm up in the spring. The soil in Maine is also very rocky and some parts of the state hold massive areas of ledge covered by only an inch or two of soil. In addition, the presence of lots of evergreen trees tends to make the soil acidic. All of this presented challenges I never encountered while working with the black, fertile, loamy soil of the Midwest. That first year in Maine, some of those lettuce and spinach seeds sprouted, but nothing ever came close to growing to maturity. After that first disappointing year, I tried tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers in a couple of small areas that got several hours of sun each day, but the harvest was hardly worth the effort.

Lots of perennials love shade, so I gave up on vegetables and moved on to flowers. A wonderful friend who had a massive garden invited me over one evening, and as we walked through her gardens holding glasses of Chardonnay, she pulled up pieces of nearly everything she had that would thrive in shade.

She placed them in a big box, and I took them home to get them in soil. That really was the beginning.

Over time I carved out garden space all over my property—a quarter-circle bed next to the deck, a long and wide curved bed along the front of the house, stepped beds built with rocks on hills on the east and west sides of the house. Most of my beds were bordered in some way by rocks that I found on the back of my property where many years ago there was a quarry. And every spring I had someone drop an enormous pile of loam in my driveway; I can’t imagine how many times I filled up the wheelbarrow and pushed it to whatever bed I was building that year. I planted shrubs—rhododendron, azalea, hydrangea. I planted perennials—astilbe, bleeding heart, violets, lungwort, bee balm, gooseneck loosestrife, and hosta. Everything grew, blossomed, and spread.

That’s when I had to move on to the next lesson in gardening—divide and conquer. Many varieties of perennials spread and spread



---

CHRISTINE BROOKS COTE founded [Shanti Arts](http://ShantiArts.com) in 2011 to celebrate nature, art, and spirit. Cote edits and publishes *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, sponsors art competitions and exhibitions online at Still Point Art Gallery ([stillpointartgallery.com](http://stillpointartgallery.com)), and publishes beautiful and engaging books for adults and children. Cote was born in Wisconsin and raised in southern California, but now calls Maine her home. She enjoys the natural environment of Maine with her husband and friends, camera, and two playful and energetic Irish setters. • [www.christinecotephoto.com](http://www.christinecotephoto.com) • [alwaysbelikewater.blogspot.com](http://alwaysbelikewater.blogspot.com)



and spread, bumping into and taking over other weaker plants. So I had to learn to manage garden space by digging them up, cutting them into pieces, and replanting them. And shrubs need to be pruned, otherwise they lose all sense of shape and character, get spindly and stop blooming, or start to look unsightly when old branches die off. In recent years, my love for shrubs has led me to plant mock orange, laurel, viburnum, hydrangea, and more azalea and rhododendron. Some of the shrubs reproduce from seeds (viburnum), and some are very willing to produce a replica when I simply bury a low-growing branch in soil (rhododendron, azalea, laurel); in no time that branch generates roots, and I can cut it off and plant it elsewhere.

Today I have close to two dozen different garden beds filled with shrubs and select perennials. From the earliest days of spring to that day in fall or winter when snow covers the ground, I work in the yard every day—raking leaves, pruning shrubs, transplanting, repairing rock walls, and spreading compost

in the spring; deadheading and weeding in the summer; cleaning and making plans for next year in the fall. When work slows down in the gardens, I turn to the woods, cutting dead limbs and clearing unwanted brush and debris. Even in the winter with snow on the ground, I am known to slap on my snowshoes or cleats and go out to prune or cut dead limbs on the trees.

I am outside every day. I love being outside, walking among and enjoying the sights and smells of plants and earth, observing the changes that occur as the seasons progress. I watch as the tree buds swell, leaves pop out, and wildflowers spring from the ground. I watch the progression of trees and shrubs and flowers bloom, then fade. I take note of damage from storms and wind, picking up branches and sticks that have blown down. I watch as the leaves turn to orange or yellow or red, ferns dry up, the days grow shorter, and leaves fall to the ground; it's then that I pick dried wildflowers and hydrangea blooms for vases and baskets inside the house, and cut the long, looping vines of bittersweet to hang on the outside of my house. I love the cycle, the continuous rotation of time, the never-ending display of change. And I watch it all on my plot of earth.

As you will read in the articles and poems in this issue, gardening is a very important activity for many people. The reasons for that go beyond growing food and pretty flowers. There is no instant gratification in gardening; you have to love the process. And that, I think, is the secret.

Just like life, gardening is a journey. It's not about the goal or the destination; it's about the sights and sounds and experiences and

discoveries along the way—a mouse nest inside a hole in a tree, tracks of deer or turkeys that walked through the yard the night before, some old bottles found buried by the old stone wall by the road (someone's trash heap from years ago), or an old tennis ball that belonged to a dog that died many years ago found while shuffling through an area of thick ferns.

Gardening keeps us grounded—physically and emotionally. By walking on the earth, touching trees and plants and rocks, and breathing fresh air, by climbing, stretching, lifting, carrying, pushing, and pulling, we exercise the heart, lungs, and muscles. Working outdoors helps us stay physically strong and stable as well as emotionally strong, self-reliant, and secure. When strong winds and difficult times come, we know that gardening prepares us to stand up to them and overcome the obstacles. Maybe the world looks pretty bleak right now, but I never lose hope because I know that spring will come and my gardens will bloom again. The same is true with other parts of life. Remember—there's always next year.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to care deeply for a piece of the earth, feeling that it and I are connected in a meaningful way, that I am its steward. I know my trees and plants. I know where the oaks are, where the pines are, where the sugar maples are. I know which trees are showing signs of decay and stress. I know just where the masses of trout lily and anemone come up in the spring. I know where every rock is, every vernal pool, every patch of wildflowers and ferns, every shrub. I know my land, my garden.

This knowing is more than intellectual knowledge. It is a kind of spiritual knowledge—knowledge infused with love. It is a kind of knowledge that comes from being fully present, fully observant, fully engaged. Living a full and meaningful life involves accepting the invitations in life to experience this kind of knowledge. Some of us find it in our gardens. ❖

