

Why I Garden

by Barbara Blossom



Claude Monet, *Monet's Garden at Giverny*, 1895

Like the plants, I need to feel the sun and rain on my face, the wind in my hair, the soil running through my fingers. I need to breathe in the fresh air—no matter how cold or hot. I need to be out there as the seasons turn.

The other day I came in from the garden and caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Who was that woman in the muddy jacket, hair sticking up like a punk rocker, hands streaked with dirt with a deliriously happy grin on her face?

What made me so euphoric on that particular September day? It was probably the scent of *Agastache* 'Summer Breeze,' a blend of lemon, sugar, and mint, wafting through the garden, so enticing that I ran my hands through the stems to release more and more aroma. Morning and evening, hummingbirds flock to it, darting into the coral and pink tubular flowers for nectar.

It might have been the radiant pink flowers of *Colchicum autumnale*, blooming at the feet of hostas and epimediums, that lifted my spirits. Or the white flowers of *Cyclamen hederifolium* gleaming in front of dark green hellebore leaves, or the raindrops sparkling on the burgundy leaves of the purple smoke tree.

I garden to travel to the wonderland of sensory delights. Out there I'm a little kid digging in the dirt, abandoning all cares. I'm back in my wild childhood, before self-consciousness set in. Gardening sets me free.

Dressed in raggedy t-shirts and well-worn, stretched out pants that are soon splattered with mud, coated with compost, soil crumbs, seed pods, and grass clippings, I'm as much a part of the earth as a worm. A final layer of fuzzy fur comes courtesy of Blackjackie, the

cat who strayed into my garden two years ago and decided to stay. She meows like a siren until I pet her, so to turn off her plaintive yowls, I weed with my right hand and pet her with my left. The instant I stop she rubs up against my pants, shedding fine black hairs.

Blackjackie helps me slow down and notice what's happening in the garden. She jumps up on a garden bench and howls until I sit down beside her and stroke her coat, letting me know by head butts that she needs to have her head massaged endlessly. As we sit there together, I look up to see that *Heptacodium's* white flowers are dropping their petals to expose the red calyxes. The tree is a study in white and red. Just minutes earlier I'd walked right by without paying any attention. I would have missed it entirely if it weren't for the cat.

One warm autumn afternoon Blackjackie hurled herself onto the lawn, tummy side up to catch the sun. I thought she had a good idea, so I laid down beside her and stretched out, enjoying an upside-down view of the silver willow against a blue sky.

Every day the garden surprises me. After two days of drenching rain and winds so strong that I was sure the young Chinese elm would snap off at the trunk, the tree still stands strong, green leaves shining in today's welcome sunlight. The six-foot-tall castor bean plants went from vertical to horizontal, and as I trimmed the gorgeous red leaves to free the plants beneath them, I saved plenty of seed pods for next year.

It was close to dusk when I was watering the pots and a flicker of yellow caught my eye. There on the rim of the purple birdbath stood a tiny yellow bird. Hopping along, it circled the rim. Did it want a drink? A bath? Finally, it bobbed its small head down to the water and took a dainty sip. Scurried some more and bobbed again, dipping delicately into the water for another small sip. This went on repeatedly as I stood there spellbound, overwatering the pots.

My garden is a blend of yesterday and tomorrow, of this season, past and future ones. Stout grape vines planted fifty years ago continue to bear, along with apple trees whose trunks are reminders of the stalwart beauty of old age. The 'Desert King' fig tree began as a cutting rooted in sawdust beneath a greenhouse bench in my earliest horticulture class, and the thirty-foot-tall silver willow once grew in a gallon pot at Heronswood Nursery.

But beyond the pleasures of color and scent, of flowers and fruit, there's the great joy of tending, of caring for, of working with the soil, water, air, and sun to grow life. Like the plants, I need to feel the sun and rain on my face, the wind in my hair, the soil running through my fingers. I need to breathe in the fresh air—no matter how cold or hot. I need to be out there as the seasons turn.

When I give myself to the garden—digging, raking, planting, mulching,

pruning—all sense of linear time falls away. Worry and fear blow away with the clouds, and I'm left with a sense of ease and wonder. More and more lately, I stand before the vivid 'Magic Fire' dahlias, before the purple 'Enor' penstemon, and whisper, "You are so beautiful!"

In the garden, the line between work and play vanishes. When I'm moving the big pile of wood chips from the shoulder of the road to the paths, and passersby urge me not to work so hard, I just smile; only similarly smitten gardeners understand how much fun I'm having. If I were to give my garden a name, it would be Barbara's Playground.

Many years ago, long before I became a gardener, I drove along a meandering country road in Maine, right around that magical time when the sun is low in the late afternoon sky and the fields are bathed in golden light. I saw a scene that sank deeply into my consciousness. An old woman in faded clothing knelt in her garden, weeding. She looked so serene, so engrossed in her work that she never even once looked up at my car.

That would be the life, I thought to myself. And that small thought remained lodged somewhere inside me for a very long time, dormant as a nasturtium seed in winter. I am that woman now, and the garden is my true home, much more so than the rooms inside my house. 🌸



Claude Monet, *Corner of the Garden at Montgeron*, 1876