

# Gardening: An Instrument of Grace

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To this day, the aroma of geraniums will send me back in time, back to San Diego, to the house of my youth. Along the back fence of our yard were large geranium plants that produced big red flowers. I remember trimming off the dead blooms, that strong scent settling on my hands and clothes. My father had a small spot off in a corner where he planted a few vegetables every year—tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, radishes. My mother tossed out flower seeds—zinnia, carnation, alyssum, bachelor's button. But the truly spectacular part of the yard was the cactus garden next to the patio. It had several varieties, all quite nicely arranged, as I recall. I studied their curious and unusual patterns and angles and sharp points. Behind them were several tall banana trees—which actually gave us bananas from time to time—their long smooth leaves serving as a nice contrast to the spiky plants below.

image info

*"Everything that slows us down and forces patience, everything that sets us back into the slow circles of nature, is a help. Gardening is an instrument of grace."*

—May Sarton

After college I moved to northern Indiana where the rich, dark, well-textured soil, summer sun, and regular rainfall made it a gardener's paradise. I focused on growing vegetables then, studying seed catalogues in the winter, plantings seeds under lights in early spring, and moving the tiny plants outside at the end of May. Tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, carrots, parsnips, radishes, onions, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, chard, spinach, leaf lettuce—I tried my hand at just about everything. What I didn't grow could be found at the farmer's market a few blocks away—strawberries, blueberries, peaches, plums, apples, apricots, and cherries (oh, those Michigan cherries). I also developed an interest in perennials and spent every spring ripping out more lawn to plant more flowers. In that climate, with that soil, everything grew.







Ten years later, I moved to Maine, bought a house on a five-acre lot with trees—both softwood and hardwood—and ledge—a term for the massive plates of rock that are literally the foundation upon which the state is built. Constantly assaulted by winds and waves, the ledge along the coast has been laid bare and is famous for its rugged beauty; the same is true for the massive rocks carved out by the state's many rivers and magnificent waterfalls. In most parts of Maine, you cannot stick a shovel in the ground anywhere without hitting rock; it's just a

question of whether it's covered with an inch of dirt or a foot, and whether the rock is a massive piece of ledge or something smaller that, with brute force, can be dug up and tossed aside.

The first year in my house, I planted a few vegetables that like cool temperatures—spinach, chard, lettuce, radishes. Most seeds never germinated, and those that did never matured. Along with being rocky and acidic, the soil is cold well into June. The next year I tried tomatoes and peppers that I purchased from a nursery, but the lack of direct sunlight was a problem. I had no desire to take down trees, so I gave up on vegetables and moved on to shade-loving perennials and shrubs that thrive in acid soil—hosta, astilbe, bleeding heart, rhododendron,

azalea, laurel, and viburnum. Over the years I added hydrangea and mock orange shrubs and groundcovers like periwinkle, baby's breath, anemone, and sweet woodruff. I also started to make use of the rocks I dug up to create borders for my gardens, dragging them in an old sled with a rope tied to it from one spot to another.

One day I looked at the woods on my property and realized it would all look much better if I cleared out the limbs and branches littering the ground, removed dead limbs from trees, and took down some of the dead trees; I left a few dead hardwoods for the woodpeckers. A lot of work ensued, and it was a few years before I really saw much of a difference. But

it was well worth the effort. Not only did the forest floor look cleaner and more open, but wildflowers began popping up in more places, starting with large swaths of trout lily in early May, patches of red trillium, anemone, lily-of-the-valley, wild violets, bluets, star flower, and my favorite—jack-in-the-pulpit. I had seen a few jack-in-the-pulpits in the woods around the house, and I transplanted some to random spots in my yard. Wildflowers do not always tolerate being moved, but to my great surprise, these plants handled the move very well and after just a few years began to show up just about everywhere. Then there are the ferns. My property has many different kinds, and there are massive fields of ferns in a few spots.





I also dug them up and planted them elsewhere to encourage spreading. Though ferns are extremely difficult to get out of the ground because of their dense root systems and they look like they've died after being transplanted, they come back the following year and look like they've been in that spot forever. I now have beautiful stands of cinnamon, interrupted, sensitive, New York, and Christmas ferns.

These days my gardening involves maintaining the shrubs and groundcovers in my borders, but a lot of my time is spent on "forest gardening." I like to think I'm helping the natural forest look its best by removing dead and broken tree limbs, keeping the forest floor clear of fallen branches, and encouraging the spread of wildflowers and ferns. Not only are the woods lovely to look at, they are enjoyable to walk through.

The pleasure of gardening, though, is not limited to the outcome. The daily activity of gardening has become a significant part of my life. I enjoy the physical labor—the lifting, carrying, stretching, and pulling; I enjoy the opportunity to be outside, breathing clean air, feeling the cool breeze or warm sunshine on my skin, inhaling the scent of grass and soil and flowers; and I enjoy being close to the cycle of nature—the budding of trees and shrubs, the flowering of plants, the withering of the ferns and dropping of leaves, and the impact of the first major frost.

If we are attentive and stay with it, gardening has much to teach us; it is indeed *an instrument of grace*. One thing I've learned from a devoted practice of gardening is this: *our work is never finished, but that's OK*. Branches will always fall on windy days, limbs

will always break during storms, and leaves will fall to the ground every autumn. The work is never-ending, and so gardening has become an important part of my daily routine. As soon as the snow melts enough that bare ground can be seen and until the next year's snow arrives, I work outside nearly every day—raking, weeding, transplanting, pruning, clearing brush, removing dead limbs, and moving rocks. Gardening has joined other tasks in my life that need to be done over and over—making the bed, cleaning the house, shopping for groceries, doing my work, preparing meals, practicing yoga. These are things we never finish; they have to be done over and over again as part of the daily or weekly routine.

A devotion to gardening has taught me that at some point, when done with deliberate intention and careful attention, the daily routine becomes a kind of ritual. Rituals are activities that have significance beyond the practical; they provide sustenance for the body, mind, and spirit. A daily routine that follows a pattern or rhythm makes us feel grounded, calm, and safe. We move through the day with a kind of muscle memory while our mind is focused and attentive. Research has shown that having a daily routine helps the unconscious mind to stay nimble and perceptive. It provides space in the mind for solving problems and being creative. Good habits become part of a routine, which can rise to the level of ritual. It is then that we realize that doing something over and over—like weeding, pruning, cleaning, or raking—isn't a burden or a chore—it's how life is best lived. And it's a joy. In my life, gardening, an instrument of grace, has helped me find joy. 🌿

