



# Gardening, Grace, & Gratitude

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As a child I wandered freely in my grandmother's garden while she weeded, shoveled, and dug. There were lilies of the valley and peonies to smell, gooseberries and dangling clusters of red currants to pop into my mouth, crisp apples and juicy plums to savor. I observed ants hurry about hauling crumbs and kernels, chickadees hanging upside down on sunflower heads while they pecked out the seeds. I sat in the sun making mudpies and hid in secret camps beneath the giant rhubarb leaves. I fashioned houses of sticks and moss and decorated them with flower

petals and pretty stones for the fairies who kept me company. I watched for the four o'clock blossoms to open in late afternoon, knowing how quickly they'd fade. I noticed how the crinkly petals swelled inside drooping Oriental poppy buds and split them wide open with the irresistible force of nature.

At home and happy among the plants, I grew fascinated by their endless forms and began to learn their ways. Grace surrounded me in that garden. It worked through the silent lives of plants and creatures seen and unseen, making me aware of the cycles of the



seasons, of germination, maturity, and decay, and the interconnected web of life. It set me on the path to becoming a gardener and laid the foundation for a lifetime of garden-variety happiness.

Grace, very simply, means goodness. It can also be understood as blessings, benefits, favor, kindness; that which promotes well being. Any thing or person that delivers or facilitates goodness is an instrument of grace. Gardening has shaped me, showered me with benefits and blessings, and taught me profound life lessons.

Just out of university, I dug out grass, rocks, bricks, and broken glass from a sunny patch behind my rental house in Seattle. Then I planted my first very own garden. Despite the unpromising start, I imagined a lush,

mini Eden, bursting with gorgeous flowers and tasty vegetables. Alas, the tomato plants barely survived, the few corn seeds spared by crows and squirrels produced straggly cornstalks with vestigial ears, and the sole pumpkin grew to the size of a pingpong ball. My only successes were straight, sweet carrots the neighbors made off with the day they moved out, and colorful strawflowers and statice I enjoyed all winter in dried bouquets.

Time went on, and I met and married an English gardener. Full of dreams of living simply in harmony with Nature (with a capital N), becoming relatively self-sufficient, and raising a family, we started a market garden. Our farm had good soil, full sun, and ample water, far better prospects and larger

horizons than that backyard Seattle lot. Sod grew thick where German and Japanese immigrants and their families had once grown prizewinning vegetables, and the fruit trees they'd planted, though gnarled, still bore fruit.

Seeds are miracles. Each viable seed contains the potential and future of its species; to plant seeds is to plant hope. Hoping and dreaming, we delved into mail order seed catalogs in search of the most promising varieties, learned to read between the lines of those enticing catalog descriptions, and experimented with various crops. In the sun-heated greenhouse and in the garden, I sowed hundreds upon hundreds of seeds in all their marvelous variety. I provided soil, water, and warmth to facilitate plant growth, then waited. Oh, miracle! The seeds germinated! Or they didn't. I could not bring them to life. If I missed a planting window, the vegetables failed to mature or the harvest would be curtailed. Nothing was guaranteed. Slugs mowed down our baby lettuces, crows jerked out our seedling beans. An unseasonal June hailstorm shredded row upon row of tender basil. One rainy September every single tomato plant drooped and turned black overnight, victims of late blight. Clearly, I was not in charge. I could only play my part, awed and humbled by the mysterious power of nature, its processes and laws.

Out in the garden, digging, planting, weeding among green, growing plants, I experienced a sense of attunement, as though they communicated their pure energy and I received it. Their silence calmed me. Their impartiality blessed me. Stress melted away. Flowers, in particular, nourished and restored my spirit with their gifts of beauty

and fragrance. Their perfection, in contrast to the complications, conflicts, and betrayals of humans, gave me joy. I found refuge, even from my own thoughts.

The life cycles of plants taught me lessons of impermanence and change. I witnessed birth, growth, fruition, senescence, decay, and death follow the cycles of the seasons. One slim cosmos seed produced a spreading bush that towered over our heads, but when the growing season ended, a sharp frost reduced it to a pile of hollow stems we hauled to the compost pile. Daylily blossoms lasted a single day, only to wither, fall to the ground, and vanish. In late autumn, the plants died to the ground and their leaves and stems rotted away, but the following spring they returned to life. Worms, centipedes, sow bugs and countless other organisms went to work on plant debris in the garden and compost bin, breaking them down, transforming them into crumbly, rich compost that fed plants and renewed the soil.

Experience taught me many of the gardening skills I needed, but I also joined the master gardener program and met generous, enthusiastic gardeners who shared their plant knowledge and starts, life advice, wisdom, and hearts. Selling extra plant starts and produce at a burgeoning farmer's market nearby brought more blessings: customers whose loyalty and kindness sustained our fledgling business and my conviction that people are good at heart.

Children arrived, first one girl, then another. From infancy, they grew up immersed in a garden, surrounded by its life and beauty, as I had been. I showed them how to stroke the beards of irises and backs of honeybees, how to braid a daisy chain, how to recognize licorice-flavored sweet cicely,

and when to collect squiggly calendula seeds. They watched swallowtail butterflies fan their wings, snakes wriggle out of their skins, flocks of little brown birds swoop in to feast on ripe brassica seeds. They observed trees bud out in spring; produce pears, apples, and plums; and drop their leaves in autumn. Gradually, without even noticing, they sensed that something constant, ever changing, and unending connected them to everything around them.

Meanwhile, I developed a fascination with herbs and researched their lore and legends. A lovely gardener named Adeline, who embodied kindness and grace, gave me seeds and starts of hard-to-find herbs like lovage, betony, santolina, and rue. I added potted herbs to our market product line, then fragrant tussie mussies, or nosegays, popular in Elizabethan England. As I read old herbals, I realized I was carrying on ancient tradition, passed from one generation to the next. A new dimension of grace opened up to me.

Eventually my marriage fell apart, but I stayed on the farm with my children. My passion for herbs inspired me to re-imagine the market gardens as an herb farm and open it to the public. Once again, gardening acted as an instrument of grace that poured into our lives, bringing loyal customers and dedicated employees who formed a base of support. I shared my love and knowledge of herbs with countless people so they too could experience the joy and satisfaction of growing their own fresh herbs. Eventually, my herb farm earned a special place in the community, where visitors and employees alike could enjoy peacefulness, solace, and beauty. Together we created precious memories that linger in my heart.



As an elder, those times are behind me, as are the dozen eventful years I worked as an urban parks department gardener. Once again, I garden in a sunny patch of Seattle, an urban backyard that brings me untold happiness. Spring is upon us, and even on the days it rains, the garden beckons. Seedling leaves of radishes, peas, spinach and other greens poke through the soil. My daughters are grown now, both gardeners with children of their own. When my grandchildren climb our bountiful plum tree and harvest its luscious purple fruits, or one holds out a handful of squiggly calendula seeds to me, I feel a rush of tenderness so piercing that my heart cracks open like an acorn sprouting. I hope my children’s children’s children will be also part of the chain of gardeners who take pleasure and satisfaction in working and caring for the soil.

I am grateful that I followed the path of the gardener and reaped such grace and abundance. Gardening has given me perspective, humility, meaning, and purpose, enriching my life. If twinges of loneliness or the melancholy of aging strike, I have only to walk among plants, and their pure energies restore me.

Because I am a gardener, I do not fear death. My small life is aligned, parallel with the great cycles of the garden. “Death?” Chief Seattle is said to have asked in his legendary address to Isaac Stevens, first governor of the Washington Territory. “There is no death,” he continued. “Only a change of worlds.” Life springs eternal in a garden. Brittle, tender shoots, breathtaking in their vulnerability, manifest a force as powerful as water, an irresistible process. Grace. Life. It is never finished. It is eternal. 🌱



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