

I Come to the Garden Alone

I am an incongruous gardener: afraid of worms, highly allergic to fragrant, flowering plants, and enamored of a perfect manicure. Despite these challenges, I am drawn to gardening. The roots of my love for it reach back into my childhood. The first four years of my life were spent with my beloved Aunt Susie who nurtured me physically, and spiritually. I dogged her footsteps as she also nurtured grass, and a border of rose bushes in the postage-stamp-sized yard behind her Philadelphia row house. When those bushes were in full bloom, we mostly admired them from the kitchen window because their aroma made us sneeze. “Why do you grow roses if you’re allergic to them?” I asked.

“I don’t care whether they make me sneeze,” she said. “They’re pretty enough to suffer for.”

When I was five, my mother ordered me back to her South Carolina home. It felt like I was being taken from Eden. “But I’m a city girl, like you,” I said clutching my aunt tightly. “I want to stay here.”

“I want you to stay, too, but your Mama wants you back. You’ll like it down south,” she said. “You know how you love to help me in the garden? Well, you’ll be able to have your own garden and because it doesn’t get real cold down there, you can grow all kinds of things.”

She was wrong. I hated Sumter, South Carolina. My father, who abandoned his family’s farm for a position as a schoolteacher long before my birth, had recently abandoned our family as well. My mother, burdened with sole responsibility for five children, had no desire to garden. She kept only one plant — a tall, spiky aloe called Mother-in-law’s tongue. It is known to thrive in spite of neglect. My sisters were all older and interested mostly in school and boys; so, I was left on my own. No grass grew in our back yard, only pecan trees and smelly weeds that made me sneeze. But the neighborhood around our house was rife with oak trees, magnolias, grape arbors, and mulberry bushes whose juicy black berries stained everything they touched.

“Stay away from the grape arbor,” my mother warned each day as I left the house. “Snakes hide in there. They love grapes.” Having never seen a snake, I had no reason to fear them; so, I regularly defied her warning. I vividly remember that summer day when, as I searched for yellowish-green scuppernongs on a neighbor’s grape arbor, I heard a rustle beneath the leaves near the ground. For the first time in my life, I sensed danger and instinctively backed out toward the driveway. A long, black snake slithered out — toward me. Paralyzed with fear, I screamed. The neighbor ran out of his house, grabbed a hoe and chopped at the snake’s head. Transfixed, I watched blood spurt everywhere while its headless body writhed.

Shortly thereafter, I began to have the dream that haunted my childhood. In it, I stand alone in our grassy back yard. Suddenly, every blade of grass turns into a snake’s head, and I start screaming. With each scream, the snake-like blades grow taller, and the house moves further away. For years, that nightmare drove me to my mother’s bed for comfort. My list of fears grew to include worms, which — I was certain — grew up to be snakes. Though I know that’s not true, I still endure skin-crawling panic whenever I see a worm.

The summer I was eight, after enjoying a particularly juicy slice of watermelon, I carefully planted a handful of black seeds in a sunny spot along a backyard fence. I watered the area daily and watched as sprouts slowly emerged from the soil. At first, the little row of green soldiers seemed to thrive. Then, before reaching the height of my hands, they withered and died. After several similar attempts, I assumed my thumb wasn’t green like Aunt Susie’s. Back then, I didn’t know that the reason nothing thrived around our house was because the soil was too poor to nurture life.

My first horticultural success came via an eighth grade Science project. After planting one batch of tomato seedlings in water and another in soil, I kept records of their growth, while giving them equal amounts of sunlight, and food. I was overjoyed when both groups grew tall and strong. It wasn’t my fault after all that the watermelon seeds never survived. I did have a green thumb!

My mother's sudden death, just before my high school graduation, left me bereft of nurture and parental support. I moved north again, and after earning a college degree, landed a job in Baltimore. Isolated, I needed to connect my past to my present; so, I filled my apartment with easy- to-care-for greenery: philodendron, spider plants, prayer plants, and Spaeth lilies. Each morning, I tended them, then set off for my job at a college library. With my care, and the afternoon light that flooded my western windows, they all flourished. I gave cuttings to friends and neighbors whenever they admired my success with plants. That Christmas, all my gifts from friends and family pertained to plants: a copper watering can, ceramic pots in various sizes and shapes, gardening gloves, miniature gardening tools, woven plant hangers, books on plants and their care. Slowly, I began to learn more about the plants I loved, and soon developed an interest in ones more challenging to cultivate.

Lovers came and went in my life, but my plants remained and gave me solace. They also required something no one else asked for — my constancy. And I gladly gave it. As the years passed, I moved around a lot, but always took with me the plants that made wherever I lived feel like home.

Finally, I married — too late to have children of my own — but my husband's adult children welcomed me into their lives, as did his stepmother. While my new family provided new opportunities for nurturing, they did not affect my love of plants. In fact, my morning plant-rounds were like matins — morning prayers that centered me for the tumultuous days that greeted my mid-life marriage. I didn't exactly talk to my plants, but I did vocalize my joy at the sight of each new sprout or flower as I lovingly examined them. Years of experience taught me to discern, from a finger pressed to potting soil, which plants needed water. . . when yellowed leaves were normal, or a sign of problems, requiring research in one of my plant care books. . . when it was time for new soil, or a move to a larger pot.

Eight years into our marriage, my husband and I finally bought a house with a yard. The house was on property that had once been a nursery and I had visions of flowers blooming in the yard. I purchased flats of purple and white petunias and began to turn the soil at the edge of the patio. My vision became a nightmare when my second spade unearthed a squirming mass of worms. I threw down my shovel and ran inside. My husband Bob attempted to soothe me. "Earthworms make the soil rich and healthy," he said. I didn't care. There was no way I was going to dig in the yard, ever again. Instead, I'd grow all my flowers in containers. Off I went to Home Depot, where I purchased window boxes, terra cotta pots, and bags of Miracle Grow potting soil.

That first summer in our house, each morning I'd peek through the blinds of our bedroom window and marvel at the colorful backyard display. Then, I'd read the gardening column in the daily paper to glean tips. A columnist recommended "dead-heading" petunias to assure continued blossoming; so, each morning, I spent almost an hour plucking off spent blossoms. The plants rewarded my efforts by flowering profusely. A neighbor who lives behind me admired my yard. "Everything is always so beautiful," she said. She then suggested that since I had such a green thumb, I should grow something edible too. I declined her offer of cuttings from her tomatoes, squash, basil and other herbs. "I have no interest in growing food," I said. "Green leaves, buds and occasional flowers satisfy my needs."

When my husband's stepmother died, I took solace from adopting the only living thing in her house — a variegated philodendron that had thrived under a lamp near her sofa. Certain that the bright sunlight in our house would make it grow even more beautiful, I placed it near a window. The drastic change nearly killed it. Less sunlight, full days under a growing lamp, food, water . . . nothing helped. Thinking the plant might be root-bound, I took it outside and excised it from its plastic pot. Sure enough, a thick maze of roots filled the bottom of the pot. As I unwound them and pruned the long coils of leaves that had been trained around the upper rim, I felt as if I were untangling the threads of my mother-in-law's existence. She too had been pot bound. Trapped in a self-imposed solitude, she had spent her last years like a hothouse plant, allowing only limited amounts of sunshine into her life. Perfect in surface appearance, she slowly suffocated at her core. I shook away the old soil and placed

the plant in a clay pot with new soil. Soon, it regained its vitality and sent out new leaves and runners. I began to wonder what my plants would one day tell others about me.

For three summers, I eyed a small area near our front door. It cried out for colorful annuals, but my fear of worms kept me from cultivating it — until this past spring when a trip to a nearby nursery seduced me into buying four flats of deep-purple Wave petunias. When I ran out of pots and still had a dozen petunias left, I put on thick, gardening gloves and began to dig a circular bed near the front door. Upon encountering my first worm, I threw down my trowel, and ran inside.

Unwilling to let the beautiful flowers die, I decided to face my fear, or at least try to understand it. Maybe my childhood nightmares about snakes had an interpretation other than temptation and evil as I had learned in Sunday school. I thumbed through the dream books that I consulted each morning to interpret my dreams. One said, “snakes represent physical, psychic and spiritual energy.” Another said, “snakes symbolize transformation and wisdom.” What wisdom was that snake from the grape arbor trying to bring to my five-year old self? Were the snakes in my childhood dreams trying to tell me something about the dangers of life in South Carolina? Perhaps they had simply dramatized my unexpressed anxiety and anger about being forced to exchange my privileged life in Philadelphia for the meager existence my mother offered in Sumter.

None of those thoughts eased my angst about worms. The next day, I returned to the flowerbed, took a deep breath, repeated Bob’s mantra, “worms make the soil rich,” and began to dig. Time and again, my spade lifted worm-laden soil. Each time, I cringed, apologized to the worms for invading their space and kept digging. After placing the petunias in the holes, I covered their roots with potting soil, watered them, then hurried inside.

A few days later, I noticed several plants were missing their flowers. Could the worms be eating them? When I mentioned my missing plants to a neighbor, she said that she too had lost plants in her yard — to a fat rabbit who used our gardens as a buffet table. As my garden flourished, I began to notice the appearance of other things: each morning, red breasted robins, bluebirds, and sparrows searched for worms in our grassy back yard; yellow butterflies floated from one plant to another; a chipmunk repeatedly scurried back and forth across our patio; a squad of honeybees even took up residence in the eaves of our garage door.

“You can’t complain,” Bob said when I grumbled about the bees. “What did you expect? You made a garden, so the animals came to enjoy it. It’s nature’s way.”

I hadn’t made my garden for animals to enjoy. I made it for my own pleasure. Was this harmony with nature the byproduct of my happiness? Was this what my unconscious was really seeking all these years?

By the dog days of August, my petunias began to shrivel, and stopped flowering. A note in the gardening column said that cutting spent petunias back would revive them, and they would offer another flowering. Skeptical, I trimmed away half of each plant. Sure enough, within two weeks, a new crop of purple flowers sprouted. Pruning had affected their growth. I realized that gardening was my way of fighting back against the helplessness I had felt as a child, when the world I lived in was a place over which I had no control.

Each fall, warnings of early frost send me scampering outside to bring indoors house plants that summer on my patio: a twenty year old Christmas cactus, a bushy hibiscus, a succulent star cactus, a pair of leafy poinsettias, spider plants with trailing offspring, a kalanchoe with wooly, brown-edged leaves, a red princess ferried from Baltimore in 1979. After a 24-hour-stay in my garage, under plastic bags saturated with insecticide, I strategically place the plants throughout my house — everywhere a ray of sunlight falls. They lounge on tables, bookshelves, stereo speakers, in front of the fireplace, on an old table near the back door in the laundry room, on a shelf beneath the skylight in one of the bathrooms. Last year, to accommodate the overflow, I built a shelf beneath a double window in my guestroom. This year, I reinforced the shelf to hold even more plants.

Some days as I perform my morning rounds, I think of my mother and how I had badgered her to move north, like the rest of her family had done. She said that Sumter was her home, and she'd never let anyone run her away from it. After graduating from high school, I stayed away from Sumter for 20 years. When I went back, and looked around with fresh eyes, I marveled at the profusion of plants. Walls of azaleas surrounded large properties. Magnolia trees with lush white blossoms towered above two-story houses. Pink, blue, and purple hydrangeas grew beside front porches. Wild roses— red and pink — languished on fences and trellises, or covered archways leading to side yards that seemed to beckon to me. It was like a Garden of Eden! I had always thought of Philadelphia as my paradise; maybe my mother had felt the same way about Sumter. Maybe that's why she had refused to leave, even though segregation and Jim Crow Laws made her life miserable. I still remember the words to one of her favorite songs:

“I come to the Garden alone,
while the dew is still on the roses,
and the voice I hear falling on my ear,
the Son of God discloses.
And He walks with me, and He talks with me
And He tells me I am his own,
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
none other has ever known.”

Mama stayed in her garden, despite its many disappointments. I'm still trying to create my garden, despite my challenges. A niece once said my plants are my children. I disagree. My plants are myself. I nourish them, see to it that they get sufficient light and water, and prune them when necessary. They reward my efforts by growing strong and beautiful. As I have.