

GARDENING IN CRISIS

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Section 1 - March

I have been receiving e-mails through Joe Lamp'I who has a gardening show on public television. According to Joe, interest in growing vegetables at home has increased since the pandemic. One video was all about straw bale gardening. It was fascinating and looks so easy. You can find out more by just putting his name in the search bar of your device.

Garden Mystery

What creeps into my garden at night and knocks over a newly planted variegated holly? Or munches away at my one and only delightful, cucumber-flavored salad burnet? Someone explores the garden looking for tasty bits - but really prickly holly leaves? It would be such fun to set up a camera in my backyard to solve the mystery.

The front yard holds no mystery – the tunnels throughout the ground tell their own story. The latest attempt to rid the destructive voles sends beeps echoing throughout the yard. Previous efforts at installing wire fencing were expensive and time-consuming and get in the way when cultivating. After five years of having their way with my newly planted delights when I first moved in, the hope is that they will tire of me and move on and that the constant beeping will drive them crazy.

Of Weeds

The top Virginia weeds are: henbit, dandelion, clover, chickweed, hairy bittercress, violet, spotted spurge, plaintain and crabgrass.

There are excellent identifying tools on line. The delightfully-named henbit is prominent in my yard now and boasts a purple flower with a three inch or so square stem – a sure sign it is a member of the mint family though not very tasty. Chickweed is everywhere but fortunately gives itself up with just a little tug. Violets are wonderful weeds in the garden. Why are they listed as weeds? I suspect it is because we don't want to be bothered with a plant that has adapted in different ways to so many different locations. I would love to find the bird's foot violet, or the lovely yellow ones.

Of Birds

Why is the female cardinal pulling the bark from my river birch? She is very fussy selecting only the fifth or sixth sample. At this rate she will surely de-nude the tree. She seems to be testing its weight with her beak and now is on the ground surrounded by her shards selecting just the right one before flying off. There must be a nest nearby because she is not gone long before she is back once again.

In General

The peonies are just now sending up shoots. The fragrant glorious blooms will soon be looking around for some support for their big heads.

This is such an exciting time in the garden when you can actually see what is promised. The Solomon's seal, dwarf iris, tree peony, and another may be false indigo.

Like most of us, I am trying to plant a variety of native species and because of vole concerns chose to put the plants in pots. Amongst them are goldenrod, ruellia humilis (wild petunia), Robert Poore phlox, Pycnanthemum muticum (mountain mint), and baptisia australis (blue false indigo). It is exciting to see them coming up. The mountain mint is most vigorous, though not as invasive as culinary mints.

Hope and promise is what we all find now in our gardens and in this crisis. And sometimes in our distant neighbors – a caravan of about 20 cars just drove by waving and tooting horns with signs saying, “We love you! “We miss you.” Even though I was on my front porch at the time waving back to the cars, I surmised later that these people were not there for me, they were teachers at our local elementary school trying to cheer up their students. What a wonderful thing to do. So what is happening in your garden?

Section 2 – May

PESTS IN THE GARDEN

Moving the Herb Box

The standing 4 x 2 foot cedar box in which I have my herbs growing needed to be revived and moved. Even though herbs are not particular about rich loam, I knew that three years of water draining through the structure would leave the soil devoid of any plant nourishment. I removed the sage, parsley, basil, chives, salad burnet, thyme and a small patio tomato plant. I next dumped the old dirt into my compost pile and set about hoisting the cedar box into the wheelbarrow to move it from the north side of my house to the south side, refreshing the soil. The plants seem to like the new location. Snails had crept up the 4 ½' tall legs of the box and were residing in the corners. I had not noticed earlier the telltale signs of silvery slime along the legs of the planter. After disposing of the creatures, I put cups under each of the 4 legs to make it a little more difficult for the slithery creatures to attack my plants again.

Beavers in the Garden

What appears to be beaver's teeth marks are along the bark of my three year old potted Japanese maple. To protect the tender bark of small shrubs and trees from rodents, I cut wide drainage tubing down the side and as long as need be and wrapped it around the trunk. This thwarts rodents of all kinds on smaller trees.

Other Unwanted guests

Chives are one of the delights of the herb garden. Their soft pink pom-pom-type flowers and spiky chive greenery are especially nice when used as a border for the herb garden. One day I noticed that my chives were not looking very well. Normally, they just grow along without any help. As I dug down

in the soil around them, what should present itself but a mass of white wriggly maggots – ugh, the larvae of the *Delia Antigua* fly which attacks onion-type plants. The best way to avoid their visiting your garden is to rotate plants, separate the bulbs yearly, and remove dead stems and other debris from around the plant. Many horticulturists recommend chemical treatments but following good management practices usually works best.

READING

A collection of gardening books and catalogs is a great source of comfort and pleasure during this time of social confinement. Herb books are my favorite because they include not only the growing and care of herbs but also history, lore, recipes and crafts, as well as garden plans and designs. Many of the old herbals can now be read on line.

Emelie Tolley and Chris Mead's book *Herbs, Gardens, Decorations, and Recipes* is a celebration of the many uses of herbs with more than 450 photographs of herbs in formal gardens, cottage gardens and containers, recipes included.

The Herb Book by Arabella Boxer and Philippa Back includes sections on history, growing and uses of herbs with scrumptious recipes.

Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs is a good source for reference.

Maria Polushkin Robbins has an extraordinary collection of poetry and prose in her book *A Gardener's Bouquet of Quotations*. A sample includes these gems:

*First a howling blizzard woke us,
Then the rain came down to soak us,
And now before the eye can focus-
Crocus*

-Lila Rogers

Or how about this one:

*Horticulturally, the month of May is
opening night, Homecoming, and
Graduation Day all rolled into one.*

-Tom Mossman

And we probably all need to give some thought to this:

*I often thought the whole world
would not sleep o'nights if it
knew by what perilous margin
the food supply was wangled
out of the stubborn earth.*

-Katherine Anne Porter

The Herbalist's Kitchen, Cooking and Healing with Herbs by Pat Crocker is an amazing book that connects the health of our bodies and minds with food preparation.

In the midst of the pandemic it is difficult to keep our bearings. Most of us rely on the experts for gardening advice, but the world seems unsure about how to face Covid 19. Economists don't like health experts telling them what to do and vice versa; politicians have different solutions; government entities proceed with a wide range of tactics; truth and our moral compass seem to have been checked at the door and the world is generally in chaos.

Our gardens await and seem to be saying to us, "You can get through this as long as there is a little green shoot to pin your hopes to." Gardens sustain us in so many ways - their predictability and surprises, their forgiveness and generosity and their many teaching moments. May you find solace in your garden and find ways to share its bounty.

Section 3 - June

2020 is a year none of us will forget. Many businesses have been temporarily closed during the pandemic. For the first time in their 100 year history Virginia Garden Week was canceled as was Maymont Garden's Herbs Galore, just two examples of the many events canceled this year. Our local garden center and nursery here in Ashland has permanently closed. Ready or not to move on to other pursuits, the pandemic has pushed many into permanent retirement. The financial impact of the closures and cancellations will not be known for some time.

As part of the garden community, it is important for us to support local garden centers and farms and keep lines of communication open so that we can know how they are adjusting to the new ways of doing business. Most businesses have web sites where plants and supplies may be ordered. Some will do home delivery.

The Virginia Museum of History & Culture which has just reopened has two exhibits which might appeal to gardeners: *Landscapes of Virginia* includes 21 landscapes from our five distinct regions – Coastal Plain (Tidewater), The Piedmont, Blue Ridge Mountains, The Valley & Ridge and Appalachian Plateau. The other exhibit is entitled: *A Landscape Saved: the Garden Club of Virginia at 100*.

Section 4 - July

I sew lavender sprigs on pale violet table napkins and later iron them while wondering if I will ever see another can of spray starch and why it should matter. The tea party of the future springs to mind with a table laden with garden herbs and flowers, special silver and china, and little delicacies - cucumber sandwiches, strawberry jam, scones and clotted cream with guests all wearing face masks and sitting six feet apart – outside of course. Last year I purchased new linen table napkins and peony napkin rings which all seem so ridiculous now. One of my favorite sites during the pandemic is Replacements, Limited where I check out china patterns from the past. Old habits – what is it that is said about them?

The pandemic has caused us to rethink our lives – what truly matters.

Our friend Jim who served as a Methodist minister for more than 50 years married my daughters and christened the grandchildren, also performing the nuptials of his daughter when he was a minister in a little country church in Virginia.

It is often said about a wedding that the more elaborate it is, the less likely the marriage is to last. This reception was in the nearby church hall with the ladies of the church having made the food and all preparations. The sky opened up just when the celebration began and the wedding party and all the guests were soaked, as they congratulated one another on pulling the whole thing off.

Jim died last week in a nursing home from the corona virus. His daughter and son-in-law were miles away serving in the Navy in Hawaii. The family got to say good-bye to Jim long distanced the evening before he died, a man who had performed the last rites of many of his parishioners died without his family.