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# Grand Valley Gardeners

*Sharon Whitehill*

Be a gardener.  
Dig a ditch,  
toil and sweat,  
and turn the earth upside down  
and seek the deepness  
and water the plants in time.  
—Julian of Norwich (1343-1413)

I walked through the sliding doors at Lee Copenhaver's house onto the deck to be greeted by a picture-book vista: a sweeping expanse of lawn with a pond at the center surrounded by rocks and full of waterlilies, cattails, goldfish, and frogs. Close by was an artfully structured grape arbor smothered in vines and laden with fruit. In a raised bed built on the foundations of an old shed, garden vegetables flourished: potatoes, zucchini, broccoli, cabbage, and dill. At the other side of the lawn tall rows of corn dwarfed the saplings of apple and pear that grew between the corn and the vegetable bed. And among all of these, in large beds of their own, was a rainbow profusion of flowers.

This past summer I interviewed Lee and eight other faculty gardeners who cultivate perennials, vines, shrubs, grasses, or trees in addition to fruits and vegetables. As well as contemplating my own eclectic garden, I observed the promising first-year plots of Wendy Wenner and Kathleen Blumreich-Moore, the established and burgeoning beds at the homes of Roz Mayberry and Richard Joannis, the tree- and flower-filled spaces designed by Milt Ford, the newly-landscaped front and back yards at Patricia Clark's, and the gracefully sculpted enclaves created by Dale Schriemer, Tony Travis, and of course Lee. What, I wondered, did each of these gardens mean to its designer? There is no one answer to this, I learned, any more than there is a single personality among the gardeners, yet as each person spoke about his or her garden, some recurrent themes struck my ear. Different as all of us are, I've concluded, we all find in our gardens some form of connection with earth that serves as both antidote and balm to our highly cerebral existence. As well, our gardens are a reminder of the larger rhythms and cycles of human history and the natural world. And not least of all, they satisfy in us a need to create something of beauty, regardless of practical worth.

Every Grand Valley gardener I talked to referred in some way to the physical contact with earth and with dirt as something especially needful. Wendy Wenner believes that we yearn for the touch of the ground as a way of contacting the ground of our beings. "I love the connection with the earth," Wendy reflects. "I sometimes throw myself down on the grass and lie there just to feel it. A lot of what we do as

academics isn't really grounded." Indeed, at the end of a school year spent largely indoors, just being outside is a treat—and gardening becomes a more purposeful way to enjoy a beautiful day. "In my garden I get this tremendous sense of release and freedom," says Patricia Clark. "I think it's very symbolic: after our Michigan winter, which is far too long and too cold, we can leave the house, leave the telephone, leave our work, go outside." In fact in a very real way gardening functions, as Tony Travis puts it, as a much-needed "alternative to academia"—an alternative, that is, to "stressful situations or scholarly work where you're dealing with books and libraries and writing." In contrast, the garden is "earthy, material: you get your hands dirty." And you get tired in a physical way "that doesn't happen in teaching or grading papers." Dale Schriemer makes much the same point: "gardening means being able to get dirty," he says, "wear old clothes, be totally different from our usual professional lives." As Richard Joanisse sums it up, gardening "is the antithesis of everything else that I do. It's about hands, it's about dirt. It's *not* about thinking." To be sure, as academics we work so much with our heads that we sometimes need to escape. "I read too much, I think too much, and it drives me crazy sometimes," Richard goes on. "But I can go into the garden, spend two or three hours with my hands in the ground, and not think of anything else." Roz Mayberry observes that "when I garden I'm not focusing my thoughts or planning my teaching or remembering what I've read. Instead there's the kind of focus that empties the mind." She takes advantage of the Shakespeare Garden she created on campus in just this way. "What with reading and thinking and classes and students going in and out, my brain gets knotted and clotted. I like to go out there for an hour to get rid of all that clotting."

At the same time that gardening serves as an antidote to mental fatigue, however, it can also help us to think. "I like to do manual things," Wendy remarks, "as a way to facilitate thinking. So I like to garden because my mind turns things over while I'm doing it." John Steinbeck's widow recalled that she asked him one day what he was doing down there by Joyous Garde, the little house where he wrote. "I'm making a playpen for baby lettuces," Steinbeck replied. According to Mrs. Steinbeck, "he wanted to write, but as he was thinking, he wanted something very close by to do with his hands."

Several people I talked to likened their state of mind in the garden to meditation. "I think I've been practicing this form of meditation since I was a kid," Dale reflects. "I go out and look at my plants two or three times a day—I just look at them." The garden is calming, says Roz. "I've had friends who've tried to teach me how to meditate, and I'm too antsy for that, but gardening is meditating while keeping the body busy." Tony, who as a student used to study for his spring finals in his parents' garden, prefers a blend of physical work and mental contemplation modeled on "the enclosed mission gardens of California or Mexico, with a central fountain and grottos along the side and some vegetables—almost a sacred space, separate from the secular everyday world." In the garden, he adds, "you create a habitat for yourself, a kind of refuge." And Wendy, who used to struggle with vegetable gardens, says that now she simply craves peace. "I want a soul-garden," she adds. "Something

meditational. Now that I'm working harder, I want flowers, and I want them to be peaceful flowers. I need them for my soul."

There are other ways, too, that our gardens can be restorative. Patricia, among others, speaks of the need for a balance between our intellectual and physical lives. "All during the school year you live in your mind," she says, "and you get disoriented somehow. I think we're meant to be more physical beings. We are animals. We need light. We need to dig in the dirt." Lee Copenhaver speaks of achieving a balance between human aims and the laws of the natural world. "You impose your will and are often rewarded," he says, "but gardening shows you as well how far you can't go." And Richard Joannis, who admits that he "sometimes feels like a freak, in a way, because all I do is read—I can't fix a doorknob, I can't do anything else"—concludes that "you've got to get away from that. You don't give it up, but you have to do other things."

And indeed, gardening rejuvenates us—sometimes in quite an explicit way. Milt Ford's garden, for instance, feels to him like a place he can play. "See that path between the back row of trees and the bushes? That's very much like what we used to call 'trails' when I was a kid—we'd find vacant lots with some woods and the tiniest little stretch to walk through, and take blankets and have a fort or a picnic there." Years later while planning and clearing his rather large lot, he perceived the same kind of potential. "The path was almost visible already," he recalls. "When I realized that, it was really exciting."

Others, among them Dale Schriemer, Kathleen Blumreich-Moore, and Richard Joannis, see their gardens as a curative. "Just working in the dirt seems so healing," says Dale. "After a stressful school year, it's really therapeutic," Kathleen agrees. Richard is even more emphatic. "I've never gone to a therapist," he confides, "but for me the garden is better than that. If I can spend three or four hours turning over the dirt, it makes me feel whole. I'd have to spend tens of thousands of dollars on counseling to get what I get right here."

Along with this connection to earth, which calms and heals and restores, academic gardeners seem to find an increased awareness through gardening of the rhythms and cycles of nature. "Nature grows around you," Wendy points out, "and I find that comforting. It goes on despite the mistakes we make, despite how destructive we are. I kind of like that idea." Or as Milt Ford expresses it, "my garden keeps me aware of continuity and change—or rather, continuity in change." Most of us feel this especially in spring, when not only are our gardens renewed but also our spirits. My own favorite months are April and May, when everything's still in potential. I love the moment when I realize that pale green things have begun to unfurl in my garden under soggy leaves and patches of snow. Even driving down M-45 is good when red buds have appeared on the maples and pussy willows bloom in the ditch. I'm always thrilled—and more than a little surprised—that spring has happened again.

As a student away at college, Milt so missed not having a place to grow things in spring that he sprouted sweet potatoes in jars of water, entangling his roommate in a veritable jungle of vines. Declares Dale, "I yearn for spring. I love summer, and I

enjoy the mellowness and beauty of fall—but then I long for spring again." In winter Dale "used to walk through greenhouses, where the atmosphere is so moist and warm that it's like going to some tropical place." And for Patricia, spring brings a sense of hope "simply because things grow. The snow melts, everything's dead and dry or gone altogether, and yet here these perennials are," she exclaims. "By God!"

But if spring means plant life reborn from the ground, it links human to human as well. At Roz Mayberry's, for instance, the bleeding hearts come from her mother's "Grace Garden," a memorial to a dead friend, while the wild ginger, sweet woodruff, and columbine come from a garden made by her father as a Mother's Day gift. "I have things from [retired Grand Valley English professor] Loretta Wasserman here, too," says Roz. "I've put some of those plants into the Shakespeare Garden—and I'll give some to you—and we'll just keep passing them on." Similarly, Milt points out that "almost everything in my garden was either a present or a memento. One of his favorite maple trees was a gift from [retired Grand Valley professor of education] Don Edinger, who believed Milt should raise at least one from a sapling. His tulip poplar came from Kentucky, from the home of one of his cousins. And a row of forty-foot spruce trees was bequeathed by a neighbor who was dying of cancer and loath to let them grow wild. As Roz so eloquently puts it, "we keep our friends who have retired or died alive in the garden."

Gardens also connect us to our forebears and our sense of family tradition: nearly every gardener I talked to had some kind of family story.

Gardening goes back through at least three generations of Wenners. "My great-grandfather bought 100 acres on a lake for \$4 an acre," Wendy reports, "and my great-grandmother ran a communal vegetable garden where everyone helped. Now my father grows fruits and vegetables for the Food Bank—his response to world hunger." Kathleen's parents grew vegetables, too. And on her great-grandparents' Tennessee farm she remembers digging potatoes; once she picked cotton.

"Gardening is in my heredity," Lee remarks. "My parents made me work in their garden, which I hated doing at first, but later my father gave me a small plot of my own, and that made me proud. Now I've given a plot to my son; perhaps he'll carry it on." All the men in Milt's family were gardeners, and his father, like Lee's, gave him a corner to work with. "As early as fourth or fifth grade," Milt recalls, "I raised my own snapdragons and zinnias."

Patricia went to a Catholic school and recalls the armloads of lilacs, camellias, and hydrangeas she gathered for the altar from her mother's garden. Dale, as a boy, used to take care of the neighbors' yards when they went away on vacation; later, in college, he put in a garden for his parents, scavenging things like forsythia from a neighboring farm house that had just been torn down, and bringing columbine, bloodroot, and trillium in from the woods. And Roz, whose graduate-student father was also the keeper of the university greenhouse, quite literally grew up in the garden. "When I was born," she announces, "my parents were living in the potting shed."

Quite apart from being reminded of natural cycles that link us to others, living and dead, we experience our gardens as forms of creative expression. "Gardening is

another venue for expression," Dale observes, "that's different from my performances, or your writing, or Patricia's poems. When Patricia made her new garden she was expressing something in herself that wanted a beauty physically manifested—something she can look at." And Roz likes to use the word cultivate: "We cultivate friendships, ideas, our own lives," she points out, "just as we cultivate gardens. We work at all of these things to achieve an aesthetic harmony in both our outer and inner landscapes." Or, as Annie Dillard puts it in *The Writing Life*, when you write or create something beautiful, "you walk along the rows; you weed bits, move bits, and dig out bits, bent over the rows with full hands, like a gardener." Indeed, there does seem to be a connection between the magic of things that grow and other forms of artistic expression—as if the beauty of one could inspire the springing forth of the other.

Clearly, aesthetics are paramount in any discussion of gardens. When I ask what she gets from her garden, Kathleen's response is immediate. "It's pretty to look at," she smiles. Richard hopes to be able to harmonize "color and size and perhaps some spatial dimension" to achieve an aesthetic effect. And Dale rhapsodizes about the Eli Lilly estate in Indianapolis, "long vistas of lawn at the end of which will be a classical sculpture or fountain, and trees lining it all—not in a formal way, but along winding paths with little benches and stopping-places and various plantings." For all of these gardeners, beauty for beauty's sake seems ample reward.

As teachers we spend a great deal of our time pouring ourselves out for others, but our gardens give us that energy back and allow us to nurture ourselves. Most of us need to escape for a time to return to our teaching refreshed. But since we take our selves with us into the garden, the impulse to nurture remains. It is probably not just coincidence that I began my own garden at about the time that my children left home—and that now I watch over my flowers instead, on the lookout for damage or danger. For although the earth mothers us, in some senses at least, we gardeners mother the earth. "I feel a tenderness for the young seedlings that seem wispy and frail," says my sister Roxanne, an academic and mother herself. This is a sentiment Wendy confirms when she speaks of "tending" her flowers. "If you give them food and treat them right, they get happy. I think of plants as happy or not." Thus as gardeners (and parents and teachers, as well) we engage in a process of nurturing life. Proud when it thrives, angry or guilty or sad when it fails, we await its emergence, we watch it unfold, we guide and encourage the growth of our gardens.