

A Gardener of Sorts
July & August 2022

I talk to my plants, both indoor and out. Some would say that the practice is beneficial as I am breathing carbon dioxide onto the leaves. I say that it is beneficial because plants need interaction. My dogs provide a type of interaction. They shake, and a fine mist of dog hair of the Labrador kind, sprays skyward and then settles down on leaf and bloom. Or, having a grand time chasing each other through the house, they jostle the pots, causing both large and small plants to quiver. And of course, there is first the sniffing nose, and then the trickling drool. They mean well, those dogs, but theirs is not the best of fauna-flora interaction.

My plants—and I lay money that we are talking about all plants—develop personalities, even as they seem to just sit and stare that green look. “It’s just a plant,” some say. Oh no, as far as I am concerned, they have little hearts, little brains, big feelings. Laugh, but has my theory been disproved? No, I am not talking about the root of the mandrake, a root shaped like a tiny human, which, lore has it, screams when it is ripped from the ground. Those who hear the scream die. No, I’m not going that far. But I do believe that plants are sentient beings. They perk up after a cool drink. Substantial green leaves shrivel or turn yellow in anger if I stick them up against the glass in the hot sun. My cactus buddies refuse growth if I place them, because I think they will look nicer, in a cold, dark corner. Never do the inadvertently mistreated abruptly die; they emit a type of fist shake, so grand that I take notice and turn to my plant care library.

Their language is color, texture, and stance. Their weapon is guilt bestowed. Their gift is beauty. They are friends, and yes, some have names.

Through the winter, the house plants keep me thriving. I enjoy the weekly watering, where each careful cascade of water is governed by a count, no more and no less, lest we get mold or a puddle of water on the floor or shelf. Through the cold months, I embrace the green and feel cozy in the care I give and the settling calm they give back. A bit like time in a forest on a summer’s day.

In late spring, last year’s vegetable garden failures a dim memory, I raise my trowel and make a vow to fill our small plot of well churned soil with tray-grown seedlings. The notion of vast legions of little sprouts fills me with joy. With a shake of my head, I dismiss memories of last summer’s strange leaf growth, withered stems, and insect perseverance. I believe that this season, I can strike a bargain with Mother Nature, she who is both friend and nemesis: “Look, Ma’am, I’m not asking for a whole lot here.” I just want a strong and healthy bounty, even a teensy one.

I like the early days of the gardening season, when every green thumber in town gets excited about the prospects of summer in Laramie. We have every strike against us: a very short growing season, and very high chances of wind and drought. Yet, we are determined. We persevere. We are hopeful. We plant, and we pray. We amateurs believe there is safety in numbers. We talk to one another, offer advice and share myths, which actually seem to work around here. We share accomplishments, and we lament over the hailstorms or frosts that strike

on June 9, the day we are told that it's safe to plant. We share war stories, and we send cell phone pictures of the handful of green beans just plucked.

My son reminds me to be realistic. He instructs me in the proper mindset: A garden doesn't have to be pretty, and it really is okay if some plants die. I pretend I am not measuring distance as I set out the seedlings and furtively glance from my scrunched position to make sure the lines are lovely straight. Pretty is as pretty does, I think. Perhaps their obedient formations will earn them points with the harsh sun, dry days, and the incessant wind. "Grow, my little soldiers," I whisper. "Let the grand experiment begin!" I am so proud of them. I bury those that don't make it.

Thinning is a practice that I do not like. I wish the packets didn't include the warning to thin to four or six inches. In a few weeks, I know that elbow-bumping goes on. I know that the slightly larger plant has stepped on the shorter guy's roots. I know that two plants are arguing over whose leaves are whose. "Gimme a break," I think I hear, and I slouch toward my vegetable plot to do the awful deed: to kill. It seems so judgmental. I talk myself out of it. Using an old soup spoon, I rearrange. Or I just, in the words of John Lennon, "let it be." That seems to work all right with the beans, but the carrots—harvested in the fall by a not-so-happy husband who had to use the mighty shovel to wedge out the hefty, shoulder to shoulder edible roots—looked like fat worms that had writhed, and bulged, and twisted, and danced their way through the soil. They tasted good, but they certainly were ugly. If I do mature to a seedling-thinning gardener, I will resort to decency. I will bury what I pull out. But I don't see any maturation occurring.

I also can't throw out the leftover seeds in the packet. Because my plot is small, I always have quite a few seeds remaining. What to do? Throwing them in the trash is such a waste. But there really is no room in the garden. I change my mind; there is always room for one more. I pour the seeds into my hand and with a flourish that would make Julie Andrews proud, I fling the teensy objects of much potential. Over the kale, over the flowers! Voilà! Et bon!

I also have a little problem with earthworms. Many years ago, I had been told that if you cut an earthworm in half, it will grow into two earthworms. Years after, I discovered that I had been lied to. All those cute and curling little guys had been guillotined by my trowel and were writhing in death. They're so good for the soil, and they really are fascinating to watch. And I was murdering them. Now, I do my best to shovel slowly. When I see the worms, I relocate them far from the digging site. I chat with them as I dig new little holes for them to slide into from my trowel. I perhaps spend more time transporting these soil repair workers to safer ground than I do actually planting what needs to be planted. But who is in a hurry? And, if I can save just one earthworm, the world will be a better place.

I don't think I could ever make it as a commercial farmer.

Oh, my little garden is but a drop in the bucket, as is its yield. I spend more time in silly fussing than I do in reaping treasures. But what I reap, however meager, is a treasure in the harvest basket. I set my sights high on this high plains prairie plot, and I pray as much as I water, which is quite a lot. And with tenderness, I carry my little mound of produce into the kitchen, wash it, and eat it, raw or cooked, and I say thank you.