



## The Inner Philosophy of Gardening: How to Grow a Gardener

*It is the state that counts. Always it is your state that the natural world responds to, not what you say, not what you do, but what you are.*

—*The Findhorn Garden*

The inner philosophy of gardening is a subject often overlooked in our society's obsession with matter rather than spirit. Ask any gardener what he or she loves about gardening and they will say, "It's how it makes me feel." If pressed, they say they forget cares and worries, "stop thinking" and get lost in the process. This deep concentration in Eastern thought is called "becoming one with" whatever we are doing. It brings deep peace.

Gardening is a natural and refreshing way to enhance sensitivity to life, to become aware of the mysterious spiritual transmission that takes place between nature and humans. With this sensitivity, trees take on a unique per-

sonality, flowers alert you to their essential being, animals and bugs show you their private lives, and birds include you in their play.

In *The Secret Life of Plants*, the authors recount a story about the Indian yogi Ramana Maharshi at his ashram in Southern India. It seems that in the evenings when he went out for his walk, cows from a neighboring village would break from their ropes and run to join him. Local dogs trotted alongside, and young children followed behind. The story goes that even wild animals would emerge from the jungle to accompany him, including various kinds of snakes. Thousands of birds flew low in the sky, hovering over this diverse crew like flying squadrons of protective escorts. When he finished his walk and returned to his room, all his friends disappeared.

Ramana Maharshi had a force field of love that all life gravitated toward instinctively and returned in kind. Growing this kind of love is what spirituality is all about. Every human being has this potential. It is not something that is unattainable. It can become a part of daily life.

The great German poet and literary figure Johann Wolfgang von Goethe fell in love with plants midcareer and devoted himself to watching them grow so he could understand their true essence. He shifted his focus from the literary scene to bringing poetry back into science through his metaphysical understanding of plants.

His first essay on the subject was entitled "On the Metamorphosis of Plants." In it, he brought to bear on the life cycle of a plant the traditional ancient principles of polarity: yin and yang, expansion and contraction, inspiration

and expiration, and diastole and systole. For this work Goethe was ignored and ridiculed, rebuked by the scientific community and contemporary society. What he said of the experience was interesting:

The public demands that every man remain in his own field. Nowhere would anyone grant that science and poetry can be united. People forgot that science had developed from poetry and they failed to take into consideration that a swing of the pendulum might beneficially reunite the two, at a higher level and to mutual advantage.



Many people have moving experiences with trees or while they work in their gardens, but they don't discuss them for fear of sounding silly to relatives and friends. Rarely do people remark on the spiritual aspects of gardening. Instead, gardening often consists of a purely material emphasis, such as adding color to the landscape, accenting the living room with just the right plant, or researching new methods of hybridization and propagation. It is only when someone else broaches the subject of how gardening "feels" that others have the impetus to share their secrets. A personal experience, an epiphany, about the interconnect- edness and interdependence of all life as a living reality is a spiritual teaching. It is a gift that marks the beginning of a spiritual perspective, one that incorporates cooperation and communication between plants and humans.

So, the question remains, how does one do it in one's own life? When that question first hit me, twenty years ago, I was citybound and desperate to live in the country. I finally realized I couldn't wait to get "there." I would have to do it "here." I would have to do it now. I needed to begin.

Not everyone has an outdoor garden or lives in the wild. It is a relief to know that the connection can be made anywhere. Take time to make the connection in your own home, even on the smallest scale. Start sensitizing yourself to yourself. Find out who you are. Watch less television. Stay home from the mall. Read and study subjects of interest to you. Talk more deeply to the people who mean something to you. Pay attention to how you feel. Consider those around you and the impact you have on them and your environment.

How can you be sensitive to nature and what is happening in the interplay between you and a tree if you are hardened to your own feelings and those of the people you live and work with every day? If you deny your own inner life, your own inner landscape?

We cover our pain and mask our fear with television, drugs, alcohol, coffee, work, sex, and food. The Zen master Charlotte Joko Beck suggests that our suffering comes from avoiding our real pain. If we allowed ourselves to feel our pain completely in the present moment—by facing it, admitting it, and dealing with it, instead of pushing it away and relegating it to the shadows—we would experience less suffering. Much of the suffering we feel, we add on to our own experience. By refraining from adding self-blame

and self-hatred (as well as the other myriad adverse reactions) to the pain, we can change our mental relationship to it. The actual pain itself simply is what it is. It is our negative judgment of it that causes more suffering.

So, you are asking yourself, what does this have to do with relating to nature? We all live here. Making friends with ourselves provides fertile ground for making friends with the world. That means being able to be alone with yourself in the quiet, and listen and feel.

Make time today to slow down. Stop. Be still. Be quiet. Be with yourself and your plants. No experience is required. You can do it either indoors or outdoors. Nature and the plant world will reveal themselves to you in stillness. Your stillness. Your quiet. Your observation. Your concentration. Your aesthetic sense.

Many of us are so used to running, with our bodies and our minds, that we forget nature is happening before our very eyes and within earshot. We just need to slow down to see it and hear it. Even five minutes is worthwhile. Set for yourself an achievable goal and be still with your plants. Be still in your garden. Be still in your heart. Let it unfold. Let nature show herself to you. Then notice how your heart responds. That's it. Very simple. You are a part of it. You are interacting. Nature is noticing you, too.

Once, when I was still living in Manhattan, I met a friend at a sidewalk café on the Upper West Side, near Columbia. We were sitting outside at a table near the only tree on the block. It was a newly planted Ginkgo that looked naked and vulnerable to the elements, as well as to the roaring traffic zooming by.

About a dozen tiny brown sparrows hopped around on its pathetic branches. Tender green buds were just beginning to open. I remember feeling lucky that there in concrete and traffic, I was having lunch by a tree with birds in it. I remarked to my friend how grateful I was to be near nature, paltry as it might seem in the midst of the city. I pointed to the birds, in particular. She said, "Did it ever occur to you that they are here because of you?"

Of course, it hadn't. But that comment opened my eyes. From that moment on, my perspective of the natural world changed. I became an integral part of life around me. The birds got as much from me as I got from them. And, I wanted to be sure what they got was good.

I began to slow myself down and just sit with my plants, sit with myself. I wanted to be able to think and see and feel and hear better. I became enlivened. Being with myself and my plants in stillness revealed another way of touching and being touched.

Take your growing awareness with you wherever you go. Use it on walks, in other people's homes and gardens, or while you are in the car. You will start noticing things you might have walked by or taken for granted before. Try not to compare your experiences with mine. These stories are only guideposts along the way, possibly corroborating experiences you have already had or alerting you to new possibilities.

Before I started this practice, I was afraid of nature. I had lived in the city so long, anywhere truly wild overwhelmed me. One year, on vacation, my husband and I went to Tobago, a tiny island off the coast of Trinidad. We decided

to travel without hotel reservations so we could peruse the island and stay spontaneously wherever we were drawn.

With luck, we discovered a beautiful beach at the far tip of the island, where they rented cottages right on the sand. Being on the lower portion of an old coconut plantation, we could see the owner's house poised high above our bungalow, sheltered mysteriously within a lush overgrowth of tropical palms, shrubs, flowers, and vines. One evening, toward the end of our stay, the British owners invited us up for a visit. Taking out a worn leather guest book for us to sign, he asked me directly if I felt comfortable here in the wild. He definitely struck a chord. I smiled and lied that I did, thank you.

In fact, during our entire stay, as darkness descended, I became nervous upon hearing the animals and bugs talking to each other and the wind rustling eerily through the palm trees. Unused to the natural stirring of life teeming within a tropical paradise, I stayed awake nights holding my breath. Too much city asphalt and suburban tract living and not enough exposure to greenery and growing gardens, and what do you get? Disconnection from the earth, from the planet, from others, and from yourself. Far-fetched you say? But it's true. From my perspective, nature had an ominous quality. I sensed its wildness and felt fear.

Maybe that is why we, as postindustrial exiles from nature, like to control it. We want everything neat and clean, perfect and tidy. Picture AstroTurf, fake plants, and the unnecessary destruction of mature trees, shrubs, and vines to make way for how *we* want it to look.

A live garden can't look perfect for long if it's allowed to

be a natural, growing entity. A garden is a theater in which we can observe plants in the various stages of their life cycle. There's a Zen teaching parable that illustrates the idea that perfection in a garden may not be what we think it is.

Apparently, one of the Zen master's new students had the job of taking care of the garden. One day the Master came out to find that the garden had been severely pruned, immaculately swept, every brown and yellow leaf picked away, and any flower beyond its peak cut off. Instead of being pleased, the teacher moved gently and silently around the garden, delicately spreading a few leaves here and there to give it a windswept look. He said that this was the way to make the garden look perfect, touched by nature's hand rather than overly manipulated by a human one.

People tell me all the time that someone has given them a plant as a gift, or they bought one at the nursery, and it's dying. I've seen enough "dying" plants by now to know that many people's mistaken view of "dying" is actually a natural part of the life cycle. Lower leaves turn brown and die to balance the greening of new growth at the top. I point out that the new growth is green. Yet, because of lack of exposure to the natural processes of life in nature, they have jumped to the conclusion that the plant is dying because it isn't "perfect."

We have come to depend on glossy magazine layouts to give us a yardstick by which to judge nature. Since I began to shift my perspective from the sterile perfection of glamorous magazine photo shoots to the reality of my own garden situation, life has become richer—and simpler. After

all, a weed is simply a plant that is growing where you don't want it.

How manicured you keep your garden is surely a matter of taste. I, myself, enjoy a little disarray. It feels more natural and soothing to me to see some flowers on the wane, while others are on the rise. Indoors, I like to keep my plants well groomed. Instead of comparing my garden to an artificial image of how a garden is supposed to look, I stay present with my plants.

The concept of being present, simply being with whatever one is doing, is the quickest and surest way into the natural world. If your mind is elsewhere, pre-occupied with the next thing on your agenda, you will miss subtle things.

Once I went to my friend Joan's house. Her husband, Larry, had planted prize sweet peas. Everyone agreed they were the biggest, best, and sweetest-smelling sweet peas they had ever seen. They lasted a few months and then, while they were on the wane, they lost their original vitality and scent.

The sweet peas had climbed their deck and had completely covered one side of the wooden fence. It was hard to believe one package of sweet peas could go so far. I absentmindedly touched a few of the flowers, observing they had lost their delicious fragrance. I called out to Joan, inside the house, "Hey, Joan, the sweet peas don't smell anymore."

Later in the afternoon, after visiting with Joan for a while, I went into the kitchen and was suddenly overwhelmed by the strong scent of sweet peas. I wheeled

around and stared out the doorway to the deck, feeling the insistent presence of the flowers. They pitched me a whiff that almost knocked me down.

Their attitude proclaimed, "So there, Miss Handelsman. You thought we didn't smell anymore. Smarty pants. We showed you. We still have it in us."

I find that many people have stories to recount that persuade them of the possibility of communication with their plants or trees. Now that I am in a position to hear these stories at my workshops and lectures, I can vouch for the frequency of their occurrence in the population and the power of their meaning for the people who tell them.

My cousin Mimi told me that after her husband, George, died a wonderful thing happened. George had been an avid gardener. They both enjoyed their time in the garden more than anything they did. They gave Larry, one of George's oldest friends, a gardenia plant from their own greenhouse as a gift. This plant had always bloomed for them.

For three years, Larry couldn't get this gardenia to bloom. He lived in Florida, where gardenias usually bloom twice a year. He did all the right things for it and even had a weekly gardener who fertilized it as part of his garden regimen, but to no avail.

When George died, Mimi called Larry in Florida a few days later to give him the news. Larry said the gardenia had bloomed for the first time the day before. When he heard George died, he was convinced George was saying good-bye to him through the plant.

Indigenous peoples around the world who are in touch

with their native traditions know how to feel this kinship with the natural world. They live this truth daily. It is as integral to their lives as food, shelter, sex, religion, healing, and well-being. In ancient times, most people were more easily in touch with their connection to all sentient beings. We've lost contact with this knowledge in modern society. For many people, it takes a trip to the wilderness or a Sunday jaunt to a botanical garden to put them in touch with that connection once again. The point is, you do not necessarily have to *go* anywhere. You can create this feeling wherever you are.

Seventeenth-century Japanese Zen poet Basho gave this advice to his disciples: "Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so, you must let go of your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the object and don't learn. Your poetry arises by itself when you and the object have become one, when you have plunged deep enough into the object to see something like a hidden light glimmering there."

So, if you want to delve more deeply into plants, practice concentrating on them, even for just a few moments. Practice non-doing. How do you feel when you sit quietly with them? How do they put out new growth? Under what circumstances do they bloom? What external stimuli do they positively or negatively respond to? How are they responding to your care? Start asking yourself these types of questions so you can better understand your plants' behavior. Ask the plant to help you. If you do this sincerely, you will be surprised at the results.

I met a woman who had been sharing her house with a roommate for six years. They purchased houseplants together, but the plants never did well and the flowering plants never bloomed. This woman told me she could never understand why. She took care of them properly, giving them the appropriate light, food, soil, and water. She liked them. But they always seemed droopy and stagnant.

Then after six years the roommate moved out, and immediately all the flowering plants bloomed and the houseplants started to grow significantly. She realized that the plants didn't like the roommate. There had been an external stimulus the plants responded to negatively.

Observe your plants, quietly pay attention to them, feel them. Allow contact to occur. It will start with little things, minute details. You will notice these miracles in quiet moments, in stillness. They will take you by surprise. When it happens, don't push it away by telling yourself it is silly or that the plants cannot understand. The idea is to relate to all living things as if they can understand . . . because they can. Acknowledge this truth. It becomes a reality if you allow it to be so.

