



Late Bloomer and the Praying Mantises

How little we know as yet of the life of plants—their hopes and fears, pains and enjoyments!

—John Muir, *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*, 1916

I am a late bloomer. The standard garden variety. My mother always told me this and I began to believe her as I reached my early forties and was still in the process of trying to figure it all out. But, you know how you know things and then *you know them*? This is what happened to me through the process of watching my garden.

For the sake of my story, I want to bring you up-to-date on my long-term relationship with cosmos. I have built a strong foundation with them over the years. I even plant them at friends' houses because I love them so much. I usually grow an extra flat and then take the seedlings to people I know will appreciate them. If there is a patch of dirt or a couple of big pots that are empty, in go a few cosmos.

The first time I ever saw cosmos was about eighteen years ago, at the house of friends in Cornwall, Connecticut. Being a city girl, I hardly knew anything back then about flowers, let alone how to grow them. The extent of my appreciation was going downstairs to the florist on the corner of 108th Street and Broadway in Manhattan and picking out the prettiest and freshest ones the owner had in the refrigerator. I would learn all the names of the flowers by asking what they were called and how much they cost. I was flabbergasted when I finally moved to Santa Monica and could actually pick Birds of Paradise on the street outside the food co-op where I shopped. I kept telling everyone, "These cost \$7.50 apiece in New York!"

The barn siding in Cornwall was gray and weathered. Everything not only looked old, it *was* old. About a half dozen of the white-petaled variety of cosmos were planted, bumper-to-bumper, in front of an antique artifact placed strategically on the lawn. I don't remember anymore what it was, perhaps an old carriage wheel or piece of farm equipment. The effect was eye-catching. I did a double-take.

The white flowers had golden yellow centers dotted with black. Their foliage was feathery and graceful. They were a cliché, for heaven's sake, swaying in the breeze creating a perfect foil for that museum piece. Later, I discovered cosmos also came in pink and magenta. There are true orange ones, too, whose configuration is much smaller. To my chagrin these days, I am only able to find seed packets with mixed colors. This year I am saving seed from the

white ones only, in what may be the vain hope I can recreate my friend's rustically elegant display.

The first year I ever planted cosmos, I had the garden in Venice. I planted three flats of cosmos and then transplanted the tiny seedlings adjacent to the fence. To my great surprise and delight, they came up. And they were huge! They filled in so densely that they created a four-foot hedge, convincing me of their beauty and dependability. I manicured them well, carefully snipping off the dead heads so the new buds would blossom, and I trimmed them often for bouquets.

The cosmos grew to be picture-postcard perfect. Cosmos are one of those flowers that, no matter where you plant them in profusion, they achieve that photogenic quality. They grow practically everywhere, from lush gardens to slivers of dust on the sides of asphalt. Their seeds spread easily and volunteer year after year. Even in poor soil, they hardly ever look bad.

When I moved away from Venice, and many years later, into a "mother-in-law's" apartment in the eastern Sierra of California, the people who rented to me gave me a small plot at the edge of their garden. From it I could see the snow-capped mountains of the Sierra range. Their peaks glistened all winter in the clear mountain light, and I never tired of how the light played off of them.

A weathered redwood fence surrounded the plot on three sides. I planted a mixed color packet of cosmos seeds along two sides of the fence to punctuate my double-dug bed of Japanese eggplants, sweet basil, curly parsley, and sweet 100 tomatoes.

As part of my effort to provide a meaningful, personal touch to the environment, I hung a prayer flag made out of gauze imprinted with a green medieval woodcut depicting the sun and the moon hanging in the sky, suspended like caricatures over a garden path winding into infinity.

I figured I needed both the sun and the moon, the masculine and the feminine, the creative and the receptive, the yin and the yang, to help this garden grow. So I decided these archetypes were appropriate images to hang on the fence. When the wind blew, the vibratory meaning of the symbols would spread throughout the garden in the same manner that they did in the mountain monasteries of Tibet, where they hung prayer flags with Tibetan mantras inscribed on them. It couldn't hurt, I thought.

During this time, I taught art history at the local community college. For her term project, a student gave me a rock she had painted to look like an ancient petroglyph. I placed it on the fence near the prayer flag, along with an old horseshoe someone had given me for good luck. These icons were my substituted version of other ritual garden statues I had known and loved before, such as St. Fiacre and St. Francis of Assisi.

I planted my trusted cosmos in mid-May. By the end of June they were profuse. By August they were higher than the fence and radiated that postcard effect that I so much admired. The white ones were particularly showy. Crisp, clean, and simple.

I would cut a mixed bouquet every few days for the house. When I first got the cosmos inside, they would droop. Then, within a few minutes of being in water, they

would perk up in their vase and gracefully project the epitome of unified chaos.

By July I noticed there was one cosmos plant that was huge but had no buds. There was plenty of foliage but not one bud. In spite of myself, I had negative thoughts whenever I looked at it. I viewed it with disdain and thought to myself, "What a dud," or "Maybe, I'll dig you out and throw you away. You aren't doing anything!" It's hard for me to believe I thought those things in view of what transpired.

I just kept on silently bad-mouthing that one cosmos plant whenever I saw it. The others were models of expected behavior. They grew to be almost as tall as I and were randomly dotted with flowers and buds. The more I picked, the more they bloomed, a truism in the world of flowers.

Still, I wanted to get rid of the one that wasn't blooming. As I look back, I was full of doubt and gave it no encouragement. In fact, I mentally beat it down. I wanted to pull it out because it wasn't fitting into my idea of how the garden *should* be. There was a part of me that was saying, "If it doesn't do what I want, I'll just kill it."

Despite my negativity, something kept telling me to stop thinking in that way and let the cosmos plant just be. Maintaining this negative attitude certainly didn't fit into my garden credo. So time passed, and for a while I forgot about the plant, assuming it would always stay the way it was. I gave it no credit for growing at its own pace and in its own fashion. "Something major is wrong with it," I arrogantly decided. I figured it had just forgotten about bloom-

ing, particularly because it was already as tall and as full as the others and they were already full of flowers.

Then, one hot day in September, after ignoring the cosmos for a long time, I absentmindedly looked at it again. I was taken aback at what I saw. The entire cosmos plant was filled with buds. Within two weeks that plant was heavily laden with giant blooms. All of the other cosmos along the fence were on the wane by now.

The one I had demeaned was fuller than any of the others. If I stood on my tiptoes and stretched out my arms as far as I could, in either direction, it was still taller and wider than I. Its stem was as thick as the circle I made when I touched my thumbs and forefingers of both hands together around it.

I remembered my harsh judgments as the summer had progressed. All this time I had felt superior to the cosmos plant. In fact, we were *both* late bloomers. It was reminding me how late bloomers feel because some people (including themselves) think they aren't as big or strong or productive or beautiful as they "should" be. Then, in the end, when they bloom, they go beyond all comparisons. Late bloomers may take longer to develop and may look as if they will never amount to much, but, when they do bloom, they are special. They may even have *more* to offer.

This late bloomer grew taller, wider, thicker, and more profusely than any of the other cosmos along the fence. In fact, I've never seen one that big and I am a cosmos aficionado. They call out to me, even when they are hidden on hillsides, nestled in neighbors' backyards, or sticking up as volunteers between the concrete slabs on the street.

As a final tribute to the cosmos, three big-bellied pregnant praying mantises took up residence in its foliage. I would visit them every day and talk to them. They had that "E.T." look as they twisted their heads on those long, ringed necks, tilting them up at me and staring with bulging glass eyes. I blew them kisses and billed and cooed as if they were my babies. Their antennae would shift back and forth when I talked. If I brought other people to see them, they would hide. They were there just for me.

The mantises nested in the most significant plant in my garden, the one I had snickered at and castigated for failing to live up to my expectations. Now that plant was hostess to the mystical praying mantises. It was as if the cosmos were being sanctioned by these friendly beings, metaphorically crowned for its efforts to bloom.

The dictionary says that the root of *mantis* is Greek for prophet or seer. The root of *cosmos* is Greek for harmony and universe. What a pair, I mused, as I pondered the high roots that gripped my garden and admired how it all fit together so meaningfully.

By October, the cosmos was dying off and becoming brittle. The foliage turned brown and the dead flower heads dried out, so I was able to collect seed for the following year. One morning, as I made my daily trek to the back of the garden plot, I saw that the late bloomer had keeled over. The stem had broken off at its base. I lifted it gently, moaning as I did, wondering if the mantises had flown. I used a brick to prop up the plant, hoping I could preserve the mantis home intact.

At first it was hard to find them. I searched the entire

bush. Suddenly, when I was ready to give up, there they were. Vaguely pink and chameleonlike on the dying plant, they were very still. It was then I knew our time together was almost up.

They had been my friends. They had magically let me get to know them. I would miss them and the late-blooming cosmos. Because of them, I had hope I wouldn't judge myself as harshly as I usually did, and learn to trust and respect my own time to bloom.

When I went to the garden the next day, the prophets and seers were gone. The following spring, while I was planting tomatoes, I found an empty praying mantis egg case on one of the circular tomato stakes. I took note of it and continued planting.

In the Bishop garden, I experimented with the Ruth Stout method of gardening. She advocated laying down single sheets of newspaper over prepared soil, eventually building the layers to three or four sheets. Then she advised watering the layers of paper thoroughly and poking holes in them to plant seeds and seedlings.

The wet paper should then be covered with straw and watered. The straw sinks, transforming itself into an aromatic carpet of mulch to keep weeds down and moisture in. Since I was living in the high desert, water conservation was an issue of the highest priority.

As with double-digging, the first steps were a lot of work, but after that weeds were minimal and the watering manageable. The day I finally finished all the planting, I relaxed in my usual fashion by watering the garden. In my view, watering after a day of planting is the ultimate plea-

sure. Everything washes clean in a matter of moments, and the garden shines with a fresh new identity.

I was patting myself on the back, surveying my kingdom, when I spied a neon-green spot standing out in bas relief on the wet fence. I squinted and moved closer, pointing the hose in the opposite direction. I peered at the green squiggle and, sure enough, inching up the wall was a baby praying mantis, the first of the season. I could have thought, "Ah, that's just a coincidence." Instead I chose to feel welcomed back to my garden by my friends, the praying mantises.

"Full circle," I smiled.

P.S. As I finished writing this book, the first batch of my white cosmos bloomed. I picked a bouquet and placed it on my desk. As their black and white and yellow faces stared up at me from their home in the vase, I remembered back to this story, the first chapter I ever wrote, seven years before. I would call that perfect timing, wouldn't you?



On Watering

The highest good is like water. Water gives life to the ten thousand things and does not strive. It flows in places men reject and so is like the Tao.

—Lao-Tzu, *Tao-te Ching*

What to say about the curative power of hoses on such cumbersome maladies as impatience, frustration, and anger? Dealing with the curse, or should I say challenge, of the hose is a lesson in equipoise. I can't say that I have mastered this feat even after twenty years of gardening practice. As a matter of fact, I have come to believe that the hose exists to try our characters. It tempers our distemper with humility and reminds us, I can't resist saying it, of the importance of going with the flow.

One of the most instructive lessons inherent in gardening is its quality of fluidity. Whether the garden lives in containers or grows in the ground, a garden is never done, never finished. There is no resolution. It is an ongoing organic entity. Just when you think you've got it how you want it, something needs repotting or transplanting and change has to occur. Just when you think it's perfect, you bring in something new and there's movement again. Even as a garden lies dormant in the winter, it is gathering power in the underworld to rise forth again in the spring. Persephone must serve her six months underground.

In the life cycle of a plant, we can see the interplay of past, present, and future. A look at gardening with this perspective teaches the constancy of change and offers a fulcrum around which we can maintain our equilibrium through life's transitions. The *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*, the ancient Chinese system of divination in which Taoism and Confucianism have their common roots, describes sixty-four changes, or oracles, that are represented by hexagrams and deal with understanding every permutation of how to live an exemplary life in a

practical spiritual sense. The last two hexagrams, "Before Completion" and "After Completion," are reversed chronologically so the book ends on a hopeful note. Before Completion becomes the last hexagram, illustrating how all life is cyclical, which is to say there is no beginning and no end. Remaining fluid, accepting change as the only absolute, is a key to becoming an exemplary being.

A fluid state of mind is the only remedy for the hose dilemma. No matter how careful I am to roll it up neatly or unroll it slowly, the hose puts up a fight. When I yank and get angry, it gets worse. The hose scrunches in a place I can't see or wraps itself around an obstacle, stopping its flow. The harder I pull, the tighter the constriction becomes. Is this beginning to sound like a metaphor?

Some people say the only answer is a drip system. This eliminates having to deal with the hose and is a more efficient way to water, both in terms of delivery and water supply. However that may be, I am an old-fashioned girl. I think watering is the most satisfying ritual of gardening. I don't want a drip system. I anticipate watering at the end of a planting as I would a special dessert at the end of a meal. A drip system would rob me of the tranquility I receive when I am experiencing the pleasure of quenching my garden's thirst.

I imagine the hose to be my umbilical cord to the earth. It is through the hose I feel something coming back to me from the plants. I am receiving nourishment, too. It is another one of those times in my garden that I disappear. My gray matter relaxes, watching the leaves brighten in the same way I do after a nice hot

shower, after having removed the residue of the day before. I breathe in the woody smell as the water soaks deep into the soil. Watering refreshes like a walk in the woods or a swim in a mountain lake. I recommend watering to anyone with a sensitive nervous system, and these days I'm sure that includes a good number of us.

Modern life is jarring, to say the least. We all need an outlet, a way to relax, recharge, and restore our equilibrium. The *New York Times* ran an article recently about a nationwide architectural association that advocates building hospitals with attached gardens so that patients have a green landscape to look out on instead of an urban canyon. Studies have shown that Alzheimer's patients who are placed in a garden all day are no longer violent. This statement is remarkable in its simplicity and power. In the not too distant past, the healing power of gardens was a matter of course. European sanitoriums incorporated time in their gardens as an essential part of the cure. It is only with modern medicine's dependence on taking a pill that we have lost the belief in healing through osmosis by basking in the presence of nature.

I use watering as an excuse to meditate. Instead of viewing watering as a time-consuming hassle that I must rush through, I consider it to be the indulgence of a sensual pleasure. I visualize the water as it percolates downward below the surface. I sense a sigh of relief from the plants and the dry earth as the water permeates every corner and crevice, indiscriminately flowing wherever it is accepted.

All this focusing contributes spirit to the garden. Before the onslaught of modern civilization, people didn't have to do meditations to bring them close to the earth and the

cosmic rhythms. Some Native Americans, for example, made love in the cornfields to generate fertility, both for the corn and for themselves. The umbilical cord to Mother Nature had not yet been severed. Oneness with the earth constituted a rich part of everyone's life and was associated with food, sex, love, ritual, religion, soul, and health.

Today we need to rehabilitate ourselves to see the earth not as an abstract concept, but as an intrinsic part of our own selves. The most magical aspect of having this awareness is that it can be nurtured in the privacy of your own home and by merely caring for houseplants. One does not need to have an outdoor garden to develop a feeling of oneness with the earth. Caring for a plant and watching it grow contains within it all the intricate possibilities and paradoxes of the entire universe.

When I water my garden, I water myself. It is a nurturing, cleansing, relaxing experience. The plants come clean, build moisture around themselves, and absorb a part of me. I learn to respect the lubricative quality of water and work on cultivating a fluid mind. As the opening passage from the *Tao-te Ching* states, water is flexible and has no resistance. It flows everywhere. Not a bad example to follow as we make our way in the world.

Lao-Tzu, accredited by most to be the author of the *Tao-te Ching*, taught extremely ancient principles in this book of wisdom that was written circa 550 B.C. The *Tao-te Ching* offers a way to clarify who we are and how to deal with life.

If you want to shrink something, you must first allow it to expand.

If you want to get rid of something, you must first allow it to flourish.

If you want to take something, you must first allow it to be given.

This is called the subtle perception of the way things are.

The soft overcomes the hard.

The slow overcomes the fast.

Let your working remain a mystery.

Just show people the results.

Allowing yourself to be yourself, the natural you without pretense and "shoulds," is the freedom that the garden bestows. Empathy for the plants develops naturally. Empathy is the vessel through which I water my garden. I know whether a plant needs water without even touching the soil. From across a crowded room, I am drawn automatically to a plant that is thirsty. The leaves don't even have to be drooping. My body gets a sense of the plant's dryness and demands that I give water to the thirsty plant. I feel the pull and follow it.

Just as you learn to read a dog's message that he or she is thirsty, you can do the same with plants. After you spend some time observing and being with your plants in a focused way, you will gradually anticipate their needs. Connecting to your plants, even one plant in a pot, is a refinement of feeling your connection to "the earth." Plants in containers are not separate from the earth. They are a microcosm of the larger entity of the planet. It is all connected.

