



Applying Inner Gardening

Never go to a doctor whose office plants have died.

—Erma Bombeck

By applying an inner perspective to gardening, you can add a new dimension to seemingly mundane gardening tasks such as watering, pruning, transplanting, and feeding. Perceiving gardening chores from a more sensitive point of view may change how you perform them. One of the greatest virtues of gardening is that the gardener is always learning. Discussing failures is an acceptable parlance among gardeners. Failure is part of the game. Once you see that the fun of gardening is doing, and then watching what happens, the pressure of goal-oriented gardening disappears.

Gardening forces you to be in the moment, to deal with what is happening in the here and now. Plants can't fake it like human beings can. They don't tell you everything is

fine if it isn't. That's why observation is the single most useful talent to cultivate. Plants can sit neglected for long periods of time and neither die nor grow, but rather stagnate, through a gardener's lack of observation. I see plants, for example, that are plunked down in someone's dark hallway to cheer it up but instead make you want to cry, they look so pathetic. Being sensitive and observant means really looking at your plants. How do they make you feel? If you feel good when you look at them, it is likely they are healthy. If you feel sorry, your heart sinks, or you are repulsed, it is a good indication the plant is not happy.

By observation, I mean *feeling* as well as seeing. With patience, you can begin to *feel* your plants. At first, this may sound foreign, but think about how you use this function with people. We often talk about first impressions, and how we *feel* about a man or a woman upon meeting them. We derive that feeling from something coming to us from them. When people are angry, you can feel it, even if they have a smile plastered on their face or they say there is nothing wrong. Apply this ability to *feel* beyond surface appearances when you relate to your plants.

The bottom line assumption here is that you *want* to take care of plants. Plants will not stay looking like the day you bought them by themselves. They must be cared for. They are living beings that need the same things we do: food, air, water, and love. They need grooming such as cleaning, cutting back, and the removal of dead leaves. Plants thrive on attention and nurturance, just as any adult, child, mammal, bird, fish, rodent, or reptile. Plants just happen to be the lowest on the food chain, and we are not

used to treating them with the same respect we give other sentient beings. Changing the attitude is vital, but it is only half the story. If you want plants, *you have to take care of them.*

This care does not mean you have to become a slave to your plants unless, of course, you become a slave of love. Be advised, gardening can become addictive. After that first charge of watching your plants grow in direct response to your care, usually you will want to grow more. It is possible, though, to maintain an indoor or outdoor garden that gives you great pleasure and is manageable, too, in terms of time and labor.

Start small and expand slowly so you are not overwhelmed in the beginning and then give up out of frustration and failure. Before you load up on houseplants, or clear the way for a huge outdoor garden, see if you enjoy doing it first. Start playing with one or two plants. Be realistic about how much time and effort you want to devote to helping them grow. The more energy you give them, the more abundant the reward. This axiom is the secret to successful gardening.

The truth is, a little water and a lot of attention go a long way. You don't even have to know that much to enjoy a flourishing garden. A garden gives. That is its nature. Once you begin to garden, you will be pleasantly surprised to see the many ways in which this happens. Plants provide unconditional love. The enchantment of plants, in all their myriad forms, is the hook of gardening: Plants have dignity and presence. Every time I see a huge palm tree transported on a flatbed truck, I notice its dignity. It lies

there, out of its element, bouncing up and down, yet it still emanates a distinct and intelligent existence.

People who are sensitive to the interconnectedness of all life are often driven to despair by the callous way plants are treated. I have seen bougainvilleas blooming magnificently on my morning walk, and the next day the owner will have clipped it to shreds with an electric trimmer, all in the name of pruning it. Part of this prune-happy problem is financial. When I talk to park managers and homeowners who hire gardening help, they say it's cheaper to pay for one drastic pruning than a few minor ones. But, a hack prune job lacks sensitivity and respect. Besides, it's ugly.

Plants have beauty in every stage of the life cycle. Try watching a plant unfold naturally throughout its entire cycle of growth. We are so used to expecting everything to look "good" all the time. Instead of pulling out plants as soon as they look a little bit past their peak, try to develop a new aesthetic. Let the lettuce go to seed and see its flowers bloom. The personality of the plant manifests itself differently in each of its forms: roots, leaves, buds, flowers, fruit, seeds, and all the gradations in between.

Recently, I planted a bundle of mixed sunflower seeds that my gardening friend Jennifer gave me. I planted them in a circle around my tiny garden plot in front and alongside the entrance to my house. About eighty sunflowers came up. Some of them grew to be more than seven feet high. Most had giant faces, some with dark flat centers, others with domed yellow centers, and many had auxiliary flowers that jutted out in different directions off the main stem.

Until I grew my own, I had no idea that a heavenly scent emitted from their core. The smell was so sweet I could imagine what it did for the bees that came and got drunk in their yellow pollen. Every morning, I couldn't wait to go out and inhale the fresh sugar from the sunflower faces and let them brush pollen all over my nose.

A cheerful sight, these bumper-to-bumper sunflowers attracted bravos from motorists, joggers, and walkers. They made everyone happy. People drove by smiling, waving, and honking, pointing at the sunflowers. The flowers peaked for about a month and then they hung their heads, huge yellow petals rippled like wavy hair, each flower displaying its own personality and attitude. The flowers projected the same dignity in their bearing as trees. They posed like beautiful women in various stages of maturity, with a different kind of beauty from the perfection of their peak, but a beauty nonetheless.

I read an article once that suggested in American culture, we have come to expect life to unfold as one peak experience after another, just as in commercials where people are ecstatic—laughing and thrilling to their cars, their love lives, and their breakfast cereals—all the time. On the whole, commercials depict only peak experiences. The younger generation has come to expect life to be this way. Young people compare their lives to commercials and, naturally, they fall short. They become depressed and frustrated by their "lack of success" and assume everyone else has a life of uninterrupted bliss except them.

The same expectation and attitude permeate our thinking about plants and gardens. I come across people all the

time who think their garden should always be blooming perfectly, and if it's not there is something wrong. But there is satisfaction and comfort in watching a plant go full circle.

I recently collected seed from my sweet pea flowers. For almost four months, they straddled the side wall of my deck in a curly mass of color, from violet, magenta, and lavender to reds, pinks, whites, and fuchsia. Their abundance and distinctive haunting fragrance gave me so much pleasure, I decided to let the vines die off and go to seed, even though part of me wanted to cut down the finished flowers so I wouldn't have to look at a mess. I still had the voice that said I should keep everything looking perfect. It's better not to have any plant, than one that is not perfect. But I really wanted to collect the seeds so I could reproduce the same event next season, and give the seeds to friends so they could enjoy them, too. I spent at least a month watching the vines turn brown.

After a while, the brown vines and seed pods grew on me. I began to understand in my gut what is meant by the integrity of the plant. The wholeness of its agenda became apparent. When I opened my first pods, the peas shone like black sapphires, luminous, with such a profound concentration of life. In the simple act of saving seeds for the following year, I connected with the earth and completed one entire cycle with a plant I loved. I took part in an ancient spiritual ritual commemorating life/death/rebirth. While picking the pods, removing the seeds, and placing them in a jar for storage, I felt the sweet pea oil rub off on my fingertips. When I plant them

next year and the flowers come up, we will be old friends. On the day I cut down the vines and shelled the last pod, I actually found myself saying to the sweet peas, "Now I know you. I really know you."

Once you begin to care for plants, magic happens on its own. If you extend yourself to the invisible world, it will give back to you tenfold. Every time you make something beautiful, you are being invisibly helped. Once you become interesting to the spiritual world, it will show you more and more of itself. Clarifying your intent to the plants is the most helpful way to make contact. Once you have acknowledged you want to have a relationship with them, they will respond and show you their gratitude. You will build cooperation and trust. It doesn't happen right away. It takes time, just as it does with people.

A friend rescued a Christmas poinsettia from the garbage at her work. Never having even considered taking care of plants before, this act was a big step for her, especially since the plant had been reduced to a brown, woody stem. But, she watered it and cared for it and let it know through her actions that she wanted it to live. Many new gardeners think the plant is dead when it looks like that, but actually there is tremendous dormant power lying in wait for the right touch. With just a tiny bit of care, a plant that looks terrible can end up flourishing. The plant grew bushy and green, much to my friend's surprise.

Inspired, she went on to plant a whole package of basil seed in a tiny pot. The entire time she kept thinking, these will never come up. She found herself excited when green sprouts emerged from the soil. The first time you see it

happen, you experience the miracle that it really is. Now she wants to try something else. This woman didn't have any idea what she was doing, but she experimented to see what would happen and she was rewarded. Now she is ready for more. Which brings me to the best advice I can offer. Just do it. The learning is in the doing. A garden is a very loving and thorough teacher.

Water

Watering a garden is probably the best way to come down to earth. Plants need water. It is an inescapable fact. You cannot forget to water your plants and have them miraculously not droop. There is a point of no return beyond which they will not come back. I planted a mallow in a large terra-cotta pot on my deck. It liked frequent watering; otherwise it went limp. As the weather grew hotter, I didn't keep up with its needs. One day I came home to find it hunched over, hanging over the edge of the pot like a Raggedy Ann doll.

I talked to it, touching it gently, apologizing for my carelessness and lack of attention and asked it to please come back. I soaked the plant thoroughly and moved it into the shade. In a matter of minutes, the mallow began to raise itself to its full height again. I picked off the leaves that hadn't recouped, trimmed the tip growth that had turned brown, and the mallow looked healthy again.

Watering properly takes mindfulness. If you swing out of balance, you can be either a smothering parent or an irresponsible one. The smothering kind is worse. Overwa-

tering is actually more of a problem than underwatering. When you overwater repeatedly, the roots will rot, destroying the foundation. Roots should be white. If you check the roots and they are orange or brown or soggy, they are not healthy. The plant takes in water and stores food through its roots. Once the roots decay, there is no chance of recovery. It is also true that if your roots are in good shape, but there is no sign of foliage, you can bring back the plant from nothing.

Keep in mind that you can never overwater by watering too much at one time. You can only overwater by watering too often. When you water plants that live in containers, make sure you do so until you see water coming out the bottom of the pot. Think you are putting water in a bank account which the plant can draw upon at its own pace. If you send water through a few times, it will insure a good soaking, and leave no dry pockets.

How much water a plant needs depends upon the amount of light it receives. If it gets a lot of sun, a plant needs a lot of water. If a plant sits in the shade, in a north window, or one with filtered light, it will not need as much water as the plant that sits in bright light. If the weather is very hot, the soil will dry out rapidly. Then, even though you think you've watered a plant, it will not receive all you gave it. Take these factors into consideration when you water.

Don't wait until the plant wilts before you water it. Wilting constitutes a trauma and exhausts the plant. You have fingers. They are your barometer. Touch the soil. Dig down a couple of inches to see if the plant is dry. If it is,

soak it well and wait. Feel the soil in a few days and see if it's dry again. If it is, water. If not, wait. Be sure to stick your fingers down a few inches. The soil at the top can dry out, but if you go down a little farther, the soil can be wet.

Most plants prefer to dry out between waterings but ferns like to be kept moist all the time. It takes a while to get to know your plants. You will get a sense of their watering needs after caring for them for a few weeks. You can reach a point of intimacy with a plant when you won't even have to touch the soil to know if it needs water. You will feel it. You will sense it by its color and turgidity, or how robust or how drained it looks.

Do not allow your plants to sit in water. Their roots will rot. If there is still water in the dish when you have finished watering, spill it out. This can be tricky if you have a plant in a pot sitting within another pot, basket, or decorative container. Check these plants often to see their condition. I have seen many a plant become waterlogged because its feet are always wet.

One way to ameliorate the situation is to place pebbles or stones in the dish and rest the pot on top of them. You will still have to check to see that the water doesn't rise above the stones. The humidity that is created by the evaporation of the water in the rocks will lend moisture to the air around the plant. Particularly in centrally heated apartment houses or those heated by radiator, moisture is always welcome.

Leaves reveal how the plant is doing. If the leaves are crunchy, brittle, brown, or drop off, it is likely the plant is not getting enough water. But, these signs could also mean

the plant is getting too much sun or is pot-bound. This is where touching the soil comes in. If the soil is still moist, then water is not your problem. If it's dry, when did you water last? Check to see how much sun the plant gets. Sometimes plants burn or bleach out in hot sun, especially those shoved up against windowpanes. You will have to weigh all the factors. Be a sleuth. Only you and the plant know what is really happening.

Ask for watering advice when you buy an indoor or outdoor plant. Always read the directions that are attached. Nurseries are in the business to help. Use them as a resource, especially if the plant comes without any instructions. Usually plants carry directions on light preference and water needs. Do not disregard these. They are an essential part of inner gardening. Plants cannot live on good vibes alone.

Since every garden is unique in its needs and situation, whatever you do, don't maintain a rigid watering schedule. There are too many variables to have rules such as water your plants three times a week, come what may. Relate to each plant as an integral part of your environment. This interaction is essential in getting to know your garden.

Use water that is a moderate temperature. Indoors, room temperature is best. Do not water with very cold water. It will shock the plants. Let water stand in a watering can or be sure it is tepid when taking it from the tap. Once, at the end of a party, I saw a woman pour a bucket of ice water into a potted palm. I suggested to her that chilling the plant like that might shock it. She disregarded the notion, saying the man at the nursery told her to put ice

cubes on the soil when she went away for a few days. They would melt and provide water for the plants in her absence. Even though I am not crazy about this concept, there is a difference between a whole bucket of ice water and a few ice cubes. Use your discrimination. Ask yourself always, how would I feel if someone did this to me?

Although you may like hanging plants or those that cascade from high shelves, they can become the most difficult to keep alive. The air tends to be significantly hotter the higher up you go, especially in winter because of indoor heating and fires. When plants are hard to see and touch, checking them for dryness is difficult. A neglect syndrome develops when watering proves to be a messy business. Either you have to take down the plants every time you want to water them, or you must guess, and blindly water by hand. Often the water overflows onto the floor or carpet and you have to clean it up. This process becomes tedious very quickly, and you stop watering because it's just too much trouble. Then the plant suffers.

The plants that thrive are usually the ones that can be easily observed. Keep plants within your view and your touch. They need your attention, your glance, your rustle of their leaves, your feel of their soil. They love to be petted.

I recently moved a small rabbit's foot fern, just beginning to get on its paws again, into the house for rehabilitation. It was practically dead when I brought it home originally. I purchased it for fifty cents at the same fundraiser where I found the Medusa cactus. The fern loved the shade on my patio, but after I moved, the sun on my deck blasted it, draining its color and drying up its foliage. Fi-

nally, I decided to bring it indoors. I put the rabbit's foot on a bookshelf behind my maidenhair fern, thinking it would like the low light and a fellow fern. It just sat there doing nothing, looking stunted and graceless.

Theoretically, I put it in a good place, high atop the file cabinet in my office. Practically, I couldn't even touch the soil or see it up close without craning my neck and standing on my toes. At last it became apparent that I needed to place the fern in the plant clinic at the kitchen sink. There, the neediest plants receive my attention whenever I am in the kitchen, which is a lot.

I soaked the fern in the sink and primped its tiny fronds, silently welcoming it to the Baden-Baden of the plant set. By evening, the fern came alive again. I patted it whenever I passed by, and the rabbit's foot poufed accommodately in return. In one day, the entire demeanor of the fern changed. Such a noticeable response to a switch in care is always heartening. If something isn't working, try something else.

During the summer, plants dry out quickly, especially those in pots outside. And especially those in porous terracotta pots. When it is particularly hot, you may even have to water twice a day outdoors. After soaking the soil thoroughly, hose down the pot with water, as well as the area around the pot if it sits on anything other than earth or grass. Terraces, patios, and stairs, particularly those made of brick, concrete, or asphalt, can become like a hot skillet. This heat radiates to the plants unless you hose down the surfaces. You'll see when you do it, the water will sizzle and steam will rise.

In my opinion, drip systems do not adequately satiate

plants. They may conserve water and make it easier to care for your garden, but my experience with them has been unsatisfying. The feeling I get from most plants watered by the drip method is that they are deprived. They sort of maintain, but they don't thrive. If you do use a drip system, complete the watering process once in a while with thorough irrigation using automatically timed sprayers, or use your hands. You may have a positive experience with drip systems, but consider this. Hand watering is a tangible way to connect with your plants.

I understand many people think they don't have the time. I am suggesting that perhaps, if you are not watering by hand, there is a missing element to your gardening. Growers, producing on a mass scale, use automatic watering systems. But, if you have a small area, you might consider watering by hand as a sure way of bonding with your garden.

Light

Be aware of how you place your plants. They love to be together. The closeness of their foliage creates more humidity in the air around them. Plants seem to thrive when they are arranged in groups. If you watch them closely, you will see that they grow into one another, intertwining and closing ranks, so they can touch. After plants have been together for a while, they unite into a coherent whole, merging their individuality into the overall effect of the group. In your arrangement of plants, make sure each one is receiving the appropriate light.

Light is one of the most limiting factors in growing

plants. Often, you can fudge the requirements a little and grow full-sun plants in dappled light. But flowering plants usually need a few hours of sun a day or else they won't bloom. Without sun, sun-loving plants become weak and scraggly. Leaf loss and stagnation will follow. Remember what happened to the ficus?

Conversely, it is just as callous to place shade-loving plants in direct sun. When a plant overdoses from too much sun, it turns gray and limp or its leaves burn. Providing you haven't subjected it to such an assault for long, a plant's rich healthy color will return by moving it back into the shade. This may take a little time, but it will happen.

Gauge your light situation by identifying your exposure. Southern exposure means sun all day unless you have an obstruction like a tree or a building. Western exposure means afternoon sun. Afternoon sun is hotter than morning sun, the kind you receive from an eastern exposure. Plants that can't take too much sun will often wilt in afternoon sun but be very content in morning sun.

Northern exposure, the kind artists love for painting, gives bright light that casts no shadow. Most plants, except some flowering plants, will do very well in this light. Even cactus and succulents, which we think of as desert plants that adore sun, can be overwhelmed by too much. Their serene blue and lavender colors fade or turn yellow, or their fleshy leaves redden like a sunburn. If you don't have direct sun but do have bright light, you are actually in good shape. Except for vegetables and many herbs and flowers, which need direct sun, you can grow almost anything else with success in north light.

Air

Plants and trees purify our air as they produce their own food. They take in the carbon dioxide we exhale and give off oxygen. Through the green in their leaves, plants utilize the light energy from the sun and transform it into sugars, which are sent to the roots and to the tips of stems. This process is called photosynthesis. It is how plants make their own food since they can't go out and get it themselves. They manage this miraculous feat with a little help from their friends, the soil, the water, and the air.

A woman in one of my workshops had a plant that was dying in her living room. After we went through all the possibilities, I asked her where it sat. She said it lived in a basket in front of the fireplace. It turned out to be a gas fireplace, and even though a small amount of gas escaped from the pilot, it was enough to cause harm to the plant.

The same sort of thing happens with air conditioners. Plants do not like to sit in drafts. How do you feel after being in a cold draft? Your shoulder freezes up or your neck tightens and becomes stiff. Plants can get chilled, too. Touch their leaves. If they are cold, the plant is cold.

Most indoor plants are happiest at fifty-five degrees. Anything below this temperature becomes difficult for them. Keep this in mind during cold winter nights or if a plant sits touching a windowpane. Conversely, when the temperature rises and gets really hot, plants wilt. Then air-conditioning helps, as long as it isn't blowing on the plant.

Plants like air. Open your windows. They like the wind. It's natural for them. Plants enjoy swaying in the breeze

and rustling in the wind. Air circulation is beneficial. Put your houseplants outside, once in a while, if you have a windowsill, stairway, fire escape, patio, terrace, or backyard. Plants will especially appreciate sitting out in the rain. Warm or cool rain is best. Hail and snow will shock your hothouse buddies.

In 1989, NASA issued a final report on a study conducted at the John Stennis Space Center in Mississippi. In their report—"Interior Landscape Plants for Indoor Air Pollution Abatement"—they found that one potted plant per hundred square feet of floor space can help clean the air in the average home or office. (This gives you some idea of how important trees and plants are in our environment.) According to NASA, almost every tropical indoor plant, and many flowering plants, actually remove harmful indoor air pollutants found in a variety of household products, as well as in clothes and furniture.

The following list, published by the *Foliage for Clean Air Council* in Falls Church, Virginia, may encourage you to use indoor plants as air purifiers.

Pollutant	Source	Solutions
Formaldehyde	foam insulation	philodendron
	plywood	spider plant
	clothes	golden pothos
	carpeting	bamboo palm
	furniture	corn plant
	paper goods	chrysanthemum
	household cleaners	mother-in-law's tongue

Benzene	tobacco smoke	English ivy
	gasoline	marginata
	synthetic fibers	Janet Craig
	plastics	chrysanthemum
	inks	gerbera daisy
	oils	warneckei
	detergents	peace lily
Trichloro-ethylene	dry cleaning	gerbera daisy
	inks	chrysanthemum
	paints	peace lily
	varnishes	warneckei
	lacquers	marginata

The critics of this study question whether the airtight chambers of NASA's experiments translate to the home or office environment. They emphasize there is no research yet proving plants can do the same thing there. I say, you can't go wrong with plants in the house. The more, the better, as long as they are happily cared for and healthy. They clean the air, add moisture, provide natural beauty, and offer a connection to the Earth.

Cleaning, Grooming, Cutting Back, Pinching

Just as we take showers and cut our hair, plants need grooming, too. One can take a neglected patio, terrace, or backyard and turn it into a showplace in a few hours by grooming the plants. Indoors, grooming is especially im-

portant, since plants can get pretty depressing-looking if left to their own devices.

Many new gardeners think a few brown leaves mean the plant is dead. Unless the whole plant is brown, death is an unlikely diagnosis. More likely, it just needs grooming. Pick off the yellow, brown, or shriveled leaves; cut back unhealthy parts of the plant, and trim tips that have turned brown or yellow. Hose down or spray the leaves with plain water. It is surprising how good plants can look with just a little work. We are not talking about anything difficult, fancy, or costly.

In the natural growth process, leaves decay. If a plant has green healthy-looking new growth, you usually have no worries. But, discolored leaf tips can be a signal that the plant needs repotting. If there are roots coming out the bottom of the pot or the soil has turned into a solid root ball, this certainly means that repotting is your next step. (See the section on repotting for more direction.) If repotting doesn't seem to be in order, use scissors and trim the leaves, following their natural shape and fluid lines. Be artistic. A blunt cut can make a plant look clumsy.

Cleaning plants with a diluted solution of a nondetergent soap and water will help perk up a plant. Almost everywhere you go these days, the air is dirty. Soot and dust settle on the leaves of plants and the grime inhibits their intake of light, as well as their respiration and transpiration (giving off moisture through the pores in their leaves).

Spraying them with a solution of a drop or two of mild liquid soap in a quart of water breaks up the grime. Plants

that are feathery or have tiny leaves will be happy with a good spray. Plants with broad leaves are easy to clean by wiping them with a sponge. You cannot do this too often. Only plants with furry or hairy leaves such as begonias, violets, and geraniums dislike water on their foliage.

Watch out for indoor plants sold at discount centers that sell things other than plants. My theory on these plants is that they have lost their soul. They are almost like plastic plants. They have been overbred in greenhouses and pumped up with growth hormones that make them look great when you buy them but don't last. After they are at your house for a while, they start to look sickly. It's not your fault. They have been treated artificially to grow.

To someone who is sensitive to plants, walking by these departments in discount stores is very sad. The plants feel as if they are from *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Compare them to plants at a good nursery. The discount ones are clones. This is not to say you shouldn't buy these plants, but if you do, you will have to transmute the effects. They almost always need repotting. Use your fingers to loosen the soil from the root ball, a term I use loosely in this situation. Often, the roots will be either immature or pot-bound. Sometimes they will be potted in a growing medium such as perlite and vermiculite or just plain peat moss, with no soil at all. Shake this off and surround the roots with fresh soil.

If the leaves are excessively shiny and waxy, this means they have been treated with a plant polish to make them look healthy. In fact, this substance clogs their pores, inhibiting respiration and transpiration. A healthy plant will

shine on its own. It does not have to be cosmetically enhanced to look beautiful. It's the old story; if you feel good, you look good. Remove the waxy buildup with a diluted solution of water and nondetergent soap. Use a sponge on the broad-leaved plants. Don't be afraid to rub.

Cutting back is a good practice when you notice a plant has become straggly or leggy. You know how good you feel when you get a haircut. It seems to revitalize your scalp and promote blood circulation in your head. The same thing happens with a plant. It sends the energy back down to the center of the plant and dormant buds become activated. Cutting back forces new growth all over and promotes bushiness.

At first it is hard to rationalize cutting back, particularly if there is new growth or flowers at the tips. But, a spindly plant will be grateful for a redirection of its energies. Be sure you give notice and discuss your intent.

When you cut back, always do so right above a node. Nodes are the bumps on the stems where the new growth forms. If you cut in between the nodes, naked stems will jut out and look unsightly. People often cut roses incorrectly. They don't cut back to a node and the naked stem turns brown above it and ruins the overall look of the plant. When you cut flowers, it is important to cut back just above a node. The same goes for all plants that branch.

Keep in mind that wherever you cut, the new growth will protrude from that point. Scan your plant carefully before you cut. Determine the shape you want your plant to have. Cutting back can give a whole new life to a sluggish plant.

Pinching is another way to redirect the growth of a plant. It does not work on plants that grow from a central core such as palms, dracaenas, and spiders. It does work wonders on vinelike plants and upright plants that have tip growth. The idea is to scoop out the newest growth at the tips, forcing the energy downward, to the parts of the plant closer to the soil. Pinching will create branching and new growth all over. You will get four new leaves for every two you pinch.

Use your thumb and forefinger to pinch out the tip growth. Do it before the new bud splits and becomes two, while the bud still appears to be one point. Sometimes if you pinch too late, the next generation of leaves will be slightly deformed. One may have a hole at the top or look as if something took a bite out of it. Don't think that you have ruined the plant. It will right itself in the next generation.

Pots, Potting, Repotting

If you are not planting in the ground, you need to use containers. Pots are the easiest containers to keep indoors. Outdoors you can use almost anything that will hold soil, such as wooden barrels, flower boxes, crates, metal artifacts, or decorative containers. Unless you are a seasoned gardener, it is best to use containers that have a hole at the bottom for proper drainage. Otherwise, you might have a hard time judging how much to water and end up with soggy soil and rotted roots. You can drill a hole if you are attached to a pot that lacks one. Or, you can use it as a decorative pot, placing a potted plant inside.

I have a spider plant that has been living for six years in a pot without a drainage hole and it flourishes. I really can't say how. As far as I am concerned, it's living on borrowed time. But I have grown accustomed to its habits, and a long time ago I asked it to adjust to its pot if it didn't want to come out. It wouldn't budge, but every time I share my concern about its health, it accelerates its growth.

The hole in the bottom of a pot needs to be covered with something, a piece of broken pot, or a stone or rock. This covering will prevent soil from running out the bottom when you water and regulate how fast the pot drains. If the pot has no drainage, build up a bottom layer with about an inch and a half of broken pot shards to create drainage space. The water that sits there will eventually evaporate. Include a few small pieces of charcoal. It will act as a filter or sterilizer so the stagnant water doesn't smell.

There are many pots to choose from, depending on your needs. My favorite are the porous terra-cotta pots that breathe, but many people prefer plastic ones. The soil in a clay pot will dry out faster, so watering more often is a must. But clay is made from the earth. It adds weightiness to container gardening. It's almost like putting a plant back into its own element. The Italian ones are more expensive and are of the highest quality. Some of the Mexican pots are sturdy and good looking, while other less expensive Mexican pots can disintegrate within a month. I've seen it happen. These pots can actually turn to dust before your very eyes. Even though they were cheap, I ended up spending more time and money replacing the pot and

cleaning up the mess than I would have if I'd bought a more expensive one in the beginning.

There are different kinds of plastic pots. I have had difficulty growing anything in the ones made of a rubbery, softer plastic that are fashioned to resemble terra-cotta. Even though these pots have holes in the bottom, something is amiss with the material and its drainage. I have tried to plant in every size and shape pot, all with disastrous results. Everything from seeds to sets to shrubs slowly stagnated and died. I won't use these pots anymore. You may have a different experience.

The benefit of a high quality, hard plastic pot is that it will retain water longer than a clay pot. There is one drawback, however, that requires vigilance. Sometimes, the soil in plastic pots hardens and shrinks away from the edges of the pot. When you water, be careful that it doesn't fall into the crevices down the sides and run out the bottom of the pot. Water slowly, making sure it sinks into the soil each time you water.

Repotting needs to be done when there is no more room for the roots to spread. Usually you can tell this is happening when hardly any soil remains and the root ball has become one solid mass of white roots. It is always instructive to see how pot-bound a plant has become when you remove it from its old pot. The roots are so strong, you get a real sense of their power to lift sidewalks and break pipes

If you can see roots growing out the hole in the bottom of the pot, it usually means you need to repot. Use your fingers to loosen the soil at the top. If you feel a solid mass

of roots, it's pot-bound. The sure way to tell is by tapping the root ball out of the pot so you can see the whole thing. Sometimes all that is left is a mass of roots in a tightly knit ball. Not a drop of soil falls from its grip.

Browning or yellowing around the edges of leaves can be a telltale sign of a pot-bound plant. Or, if you find you are having to water a plant much more often than usual, otherwise it goes limp, it could be pot-bound. It may also be that the foliage part of the plant has become top-heavy, meaning the plant looks out of proportion to the size of its pot. Sometimes plants become so top-heavy, they can't even stand up anymore. Then they keel over, pot and all. Obviously, you will be able to tell when this happens.

Before shifting to a larger pot, you may be able to buy time, perhaps even six months, by *shouldering* a plant, instead. This means you can "tickle" the root ball with your fingers and remove the soil, then trim the roots with a scissor, pruner, or sharp knife. This process is a reverse cutting back. Repot in the same container, adding fresh potting mix in the bottom and around the edges. Pack it down well and then water thoroughly.

Once you have decided to repot to a larger container, here are some basic guidelines. When you graduate to a new size pot, go up only one or two inches larger. If you repot a plant into too big a pot, the plant will spend all its energy filling up the soil with roots. You end up with a huge root ball and no top growth. Many plants like to be squeezed. That means if you contain their root ball in a smaller pot, the energy pushes upward, and the foliage fills out.

Measure the diameter across the top of the old pot before you buy a new one. If you have some extra pots lying around, experiment to see which one fits. Repotting is not difficult, although at first it may be scary trying to remove the pot-bound plant. Don't forget to give it notice and state your intent. Often, a plant is so ready, you can tug on it gently and it will lift right out of the pot. Other times, you may have to lay the pot on its side and tap around the sides to loosen the root ball. You can also use a knife to separate the root ball from the sides of the pot by sticking it down around the sides of the root ball as if you were cutting a circle into a cake. Whatever you have to do, be gentle and proceed slowly. Hold the plant with one hand so if it comes out of the pot suddenly, it won't fall on its foliage and break.

Prepare the new pot with soil *before* doing anything else. Have it ready. Use your eye to assess how high the plant needs to sit in the new pot. Fill the pot with soil less than halfway up. Tamp down the soil and let the plant rest on top. Judge how much higher or lower the plant needs to be. Center the plant in the pot so it sits comfortably and evenly. Fill in the leftover space with soil, holding on to the plant with one hand to keep it upright, if necessary.

The soil level will drop when you water. Be sure to tamp down the soil tightly in the pot. You may have to add soil after you water if the soil level drops too much. That's why tamping it down is important. Do not fill the pot all the way to the top. Leave a few inches so when you water there will be space, and the soil won't overflow.

Plants sometimes go into shock when their root ball has

been disturbed. You will know when your plant is in shock. It droops, goes limp, its color drains, and the leaves wilt. Giving notice will help prevent shock. Unless you have really butchered the root ball, most plants will come out of shock in a few hours or a few days, so don't throw it out! Bougainvilleas are notorious for being temperamental to repot or transplant. Their roots are extremely sensitive and the plant can die on the spot if the roots are disturbed. The best way to treat a plant in shock is to place it in the shade and water when it is dry. Don't demand anything of it. It needs time to gather its forces again. The same is true of any newly repotted plant. Keep it in the shade for about a week so it doesn't have to work so hard. Give it time to acclimate. Love and encourage it. Transitions are hard on everyone.

Support your plant. A problem can arise when a plant isn't doing well. You can grow to dislike it. Even hate it. Perturbed is the gardener who hates one of her plants. A scorned plant is a dead plant. The rare occasion does arise when benign neglect encourages a plant to thrive. But what I am describing is malignant neglect, disliking a plant to the point of mental cruelty. Then it is time for a divorce. Give away the plant to someone who wants it. Or change its appearance in some way so you can transcend your impasse with each other. Repot into a new container. Place it in another location that gives it a new look.

I did this with a large pot of nasturtiums on my deck. I love nasturtiums. That's why I planted them. But every time I looked at them, I got an ache in my chest. I didn't like the way they looked. Even though they overflowed

the sides of the pot and cascaded wildly, which I liked, they grew in such profusion, brown and shriveled leaves multiplied amply each day. I picked off as many as I could, so the plant still looked reasonably healthy, but something was wrong and I couldn't figure out what. It certainly wasn't time to take them out. Maybe it was their color. They didn't fit in.

Finally, I decided to move the nasturtiums off by themselves against a white wall. Immediately, these orange nasturtiums assumed a whole new look. Juxtaposed to the white wall in the late afternoon sun, they could have been growing on the side of a barn in the country. After showing them off to a better advantage, I liked them again. A change of scene is even good for plants.

Feeding

Fertilizing is a touchy subject. There is a wide variety of opinion on the merits of feeding, as well as on the kind of food to give. As with everything else in gardening, if you read five books on the subject, you will have five schools of thought. Eventually you have to make all the advice your own and decide what works best for you.

Some people feed often and others almost never. The people who feed a lot say you need a regular and consistent feeding schedule to add nutrients to the soil. As long as you are moderate and regular in your feeding, it works. Unfortunately, many people have a "give me a pill" mentality when it comes to plant care. They assume there is a magic potion they can feed their plants and miraculously

everything will be beautiful. Needless to say, this is fantasy. Plants need consistent watering, grooming, and feeding. If you do these three things, your garden will be beautiful.

I view chemical fertilizers as something akin to steroids. They pump up the plants and then they let them down. Similar to a hit of caffeine, chemical fertilizers give plants lots of grow power at first and then they crash. Excessive chemical fertilizing weakens plants and eventually causes their susceptibility to pests and diseases. Only compromised plants succumb to blight.

Severe root burn can occur easily from over-fertilizing. Cut the amount in half that they tell you to use on the package. Off the main roots there are tiny tender root hairs through which plants take in water and nutrients. It is easy to burn these hairs with too much fertilizer, particularly if the plant is dry when you dump in the food. To avoid root burn, soak the plant first with plain water and then fertilize.

If you grow plants in a rich potting soil mix that contains organic matter and then add a little bonemeal, your plants shouldn't need much fertilizing. Liquid organic fish emulsion is a good alternate choice to chemical fertilizers. Be sure you dilute it with water according to the directions on the bottle. If you have a fish tank, use the water. You'll be amazed at the boost it gives your plants.

There are many good organic fertilizers on the market now. Use them in the spring and summer, when plants appreciate fertilizers. Plant growth slows down in winter because of lower temperatures and less light. In winter, your tendency might be to pump up your plants, but think about it first. Winter is rest time in the plant kingdom.

Don't expect much new growth in winter. Fertilize less. Give your plants a break.

Pest Control

If you are giving your plants what they need, balanced and regular watering, correct light, and a good soil mix, it is unlikely you will have a pest problem. In a way, plants are like people. If you maintain them properly, the likelihood of disease lessens. Just as the body heals itself when given the proper conditions, plants will resist any onslaught of pests or diseases if their needs are being met.

The most common way gardens become infested is when a new plant is introduced into their midst. For the sake of your garden, check thoroughly for bugs and diseases before you bring home a new plant. Look on the undersides of leaves, along the stems, in the crotches between stem and leaves, and inside the tip growth. Pests love those tender new shoots.

In your home, if you notice bugs or disease, isolate the plant immediately. Pests can travel from plant to plant, particularly whitefly. Sometimes you may notice these teeny white specks fly up from a plant when you touch the leaves or brush up against them. Otherwise, you may not even notice whitefly. They sit on the rims of pots or skim the top of the soil, too. Moisture and mildew, results of overwatering, are a favorite breeding ground.

Other pests such as mealy bugs, tiny white cottony-looking things on leaves or in stem crotches, seem to be drawn to plants that are weakened by overwatering.

Aphids and scale may not be noticeable at first, but their sticky deposit glistens on leaves and stems, and may be your first indication of infestation. Aphids come in different colors. White and green are most common. Scale is brown and crispy. If you catch scale early enough, it will be easier to eradicate simply by wiping with a soapy sponge. You may need to use your fingers to scrape them off, but when they are young, they are easy to remove. The ones on my ficus tree had camped out on its branches for so long, their mature hard shells looked like minuscule turtles. When they are adult, they attach to the leaves and are virtually impossible to remove.

If you are an attentive gardener, you will be checking your plants often to see how they are doing. This care will insure prompt identification of pests or disease. When you do notice something unusual, don't ignore it and hope it will go away. This is wishful thinking. Do something practical as soon as possible. All that may be needed is a good washing with nondetergent soap and warm water. This process is easier and more fun if you can carry the plant to the kitchen sink or bathtub. You will see an immediate relief exude from the plant. The leaves will be brighter, bouncier, and greener.

You can use cotton dipped in alcohol to dab off mealy bugs. Alcohol dessicates the aphids and breaks down their waxy cuticle. In this instance, it's fine to use alcohol. But you know how drying alcohol can be to your skin? Plant leaves react to it in the same way.

Plants that are too lacy or delicate to wipe will need to be sprayed. There are nontoxic home remedies you can make into sprays. In one quart of water, add one to two drops of

nondetergent soap and shake. Spray liberally on plants. Whatever home remedy you use, repeat every day for three or four days or until you see results. If nothing looks different after a few days, another remedy may be in order.

Nicotine tea is good to eradicate unwanted bugs in soil. Soak a handful of pipe tobacco in a quart of water. When the tea looks strong, pour it through your plant. It will kill the pests but not the roots. For pests on foliage, cayenne pepper spray often works wonders. You can use fresh hot peppers, too. Blend a half cup of hot peppers with two cups of water and strain liquid for spray. Dilute with extra water, at first, so you can test for potency. Be careful of your skin and eyes. It will burn you, too. Garlic juice and water also works as a spray for bugs and pests, as does straight garlic juice right on the affected areas.

With any of these remedies, repeat the treatment often to be sure the critters don't multiply. Again, the best pest control is attentive care and maintenance of your plants. If a plant is strong and healthy, it will not be hospitable to pests and disease. Keep in mind the ficus tree story. Sometimes plants will surprise you and coexist with critters, and everything turns out all right. So don't be in a hurry to throw away a plant. You never know what can happen if you are part of the negotiations.

On a very direct level, we can broaden our perspective and see plants in relationship to the whole environment in which they live. For example, I know a woman who has a very stunted-looking yard. The plants don't die but they don't grow and flourish either. When I walk on the path to her front door, I get a pained feeling in my heart.

One day she asked me why I thought her bougainvillea wasn't blooming. We walked outside to look at it together and I realized they had a bird feeder staked into the ground right in front of the plant. The birds would alight on the bougainvillea and leave droppings all over it. Covered with white, this ten-year-old vine with thick, strong intertwining stems rested against a lattice neither dying nor growing. This bougainvillea was mature and should have grown up and over the roof of the house, enveloping it with brilliant color.

I told the woman my theory, and at first she couldn't believe it. She wondered why bird poop should keep it from growing. When I asked her how she would feel if she was being dumped on all the time, she laughed and admitted I might have a point. I suggested she move the bird feeder, hose down the leaves, clean them up as best she could and prune back the bougainvillea so it could start fresh. It worked, and she was amazed that the solution was so simple. Then she admitted to me her gardener was a "hacker." He didn't know anything about pruning and just came in and hacked the plants. I told her I could tell by how I felt when I walked through the garden. She began to trust her instincts and see life from the plants' point of view.

Laying the Groundwork

Each region of the United States has different growing conditions and therefore different gardening needs. But, there are general hints that will help you in your garden and complement your inner philosophy. Observe, have patience, and learn to sense when to intervene and when not

to. In order to be a sensitive gardener, the more you look, feel, listen, touch, smell, and poke around, the more you will know what is going on. Open yourself so you can feel what is coming to you from the plants. Have patience with them and with yourself. Gardening does not necessarily bestow instant gratification. Besides zeroing in on individual plants, see if you can scan your garden and get an overview. Be both expansive and focused. By having both viewpoints, you will better know when to intervene and when not to. Most of the time, it is best not to. Your garden has a better chance of being balanced if you have a broad spectrum of plants, as in nature, than if you plant a lot of one thing.

Visit other people's gardens. Take walks in your neighborhood. See what other people are doing. Inspiration is available everywhere you look. Windowboxes, postage stamp gardens, borders, front door landscaping, stairways, decks, terraces, and fire escapes are all sources for ideas. Look for opportunities to join community gardens, school gardens, seniors gardens, or start one yourself.

Read the basic information on seed packets and nursery plants. Placement of plants, planting seasons, heights of plants are all factors that cannot be ignored. For example, you shouldn't plant too close together unless you have dug intensive beds in which the soil, rich in organic matter and compost, is loose and friable at least one foot down. Then the roots can run deep. If you are planting conventionally, roots need side room to spread.

Plants need the proper light. Picking the right spot may take time. Spend quiet moments in your garden so you can feel what each place needs. Follow your thoughts and feel-

ings to help you choose the appropriate plant, shrub, flower, or tree. It takes at least two years to feel settled in a garden. When you find yourself rushing, try to slow down.

When moving indoor plants to the outdoors, do it gradually so they can acclimate in stages. Too much light can be harmful to protected indoor plants. Place plants in the shade first and then slowly increase the intensity of light. If you don't do this, the plants will go into shock, even if you tell them what you are doing and why. Cooperation and communication is a give-and-take proposition. You are helping the plants to do what they do naturally. The magic comes in subtle ways. A spiritual approach to gardening doesn't take you away from the earth and the here and now. It brings you closer to who you are, what you are doing, and your relationship with all living things.

The best time to water outdoors is early morning or late afternoon when the sun isn't too intense. Water on leaves in the heat of the day can burn plants and cause discoloration. If you water too late at night, after dark, it can lead to mildew and rot. If your plants have gone limp during the hottest part of the day, don't worry. They will return to normal in the coolness of evening, if you are watering properly. In summer, you may have to water vegetables and flowers more than once a day if there is a heat wave.

Honing your powers of observation will make it easier to detect pests. But the real issue is soil. Plants do not do well in depleted soil. Chemical fertilizers kill those red beneficial earthworms and deaden soil. Food grown in depleted soil will be empty of nutrients and lack flavor and plants will lack vitality. Healthy plants are *green*. Survey

your garden. Are the leaves upright and turgid? Are the surfaces glossy or shiny? Do you feel a sense of vibrance coming from the plants? If you don't feel it, it's not there. If you are watering regularly and the plants are receiving the right amount of light, there are no pests or disease, but they are still yellow, then the soil is the problem.

In conventional, nonorganic gardening, the way to get rid of aphids, for example, is to use toxic chemical bug sprays. This kills off their balancer, ladybugs. Aphids multiply faster than ladybugs, so the next infestation will be worse. It's kind of like taking antibiotics. Yes, antibiotics kill harmful bacteria, but they also kill friendly bacteria. The body's friendly flora needs to be replaced. If it is not, the lack of friendly bacteria leads to a greater susceptibility to immune-deficiency diseases and the need for another round or two of antibiotics, which leads to more depletion and the downward spiral continues.

Try natural alternative solutions to toxic chemical sprays and systemic solutions. Often, a simple strong hosing down of a plant with water will remove aphids and discourage their return. Nondetergent soap and water, a few drops per quart of water, can rid a plant of ants in one heavy dosage of spray. Repeat, if necessary. Insecticidal soaps, homemade pepper spray, and garlic spray will work. You do not want to eradicate the helpful bug and earthworm population. Use them as allies. Cooperate with them.

Which brings us back to soil. Healthy, rich soil guarantees healthy plants if water, light, and care are also in balance. Compost and natural organic matter are the key to healthy, alive soil, rich with helpful earthworms and a well-balanced nutrient content. If you are unable to make

your own compost, try to find some. Some towns have a community compost system.

Composting happens naturally in nature through partial decay of plant and animal matter. Look underneath the natural mulch of fallen leaves and see the crumbly dark humus that has been produced there. You can stimulate the process by building a compost pile. Combining fruit and vegetable scraps and yard trimmings in a variety of composting systems, will turn them into *humus*, a sweet-smelling crumbly black loam that is both a soil fertilizer and conditioner. It sounds like I'm describing a good shampoo, doesn't it?

A good compost looks almost like coffee grounds, gardeners call brown gold. Turn it into your soil, spread it across the topsoil, use it as a mulch, sprinkle it into your lawn, around plants, under trees, and add it to your houseplants. Compost helps the soil hold water better and you won't have to spend money on fertilizers because you have the best. Your plants will display a new vitality almost immediately.

Food from a composted garden tastes sweet, tender, and delicious. Compost returns minerals to the soil and it is the mineral content that sweetens the food. Once you eat food like this, you will have a hard time returning to store-bought fruits and vegetables that are overbred for good looks but lack in taste. When was the last time you tasted a really sweet and juicy tomato from the store?

Composting can be done in different ways, even indoors, depending on how much effort you want to make. There are rodent resistant bins for outdoors, open piles for yard trimmings only, holes in the ground that need to be dug each time you enter food scraps, manageable worm

bins for indoors and outdoors, and closed-air systems for both.

Composting is the philosophical backbone of an inner perspective on gardening and farming. Look at it as a transformational process. Vegetable scraps and plant trimmings are changed back into the substance from whence they came. Garbage becomes sweet smelling and useful once again.

Making compost is like cooking a divine soup. You add together various organic elements that heat up, decompose, and, in a good compost, mutually balance and regulate each other. As you turn the pile or add vegetable scraps, wet leaves, yard trimmings, and grass clippings, you are also adding yourself as an ingredient. As in any creative endeavor, integrating yourself with your creation is a vital part of making good compost. Composting cannot be a strictly mechanical process.

Composting teaches one of the fundamental lessons of gardening. Life is happening, even if you can't see it, everywhere and at all times, even in death. The never-ending process of life, death, and rebirth is enacted right before your eyes. Plants that you consider weeds because they don't fit into the scheme of your garden, vegetable and fruit scraps, green and brown trimmings, can all be utilized in another incarnation in the compost. There is no plainer demonstration of the oneness of all life than the composting of all these disparate elements into one. Everything becomes soil in the end. The earth literally is the mother of us all.

