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# S O U L

# T H E



# D E N

# G A R

Instead of aiming for ornamental perfection, try to form a relationship with the earth that connects you with the real soul of gardening

*Last September, my beloved cat of over 20 years passed away peacefully in my arms. I had subconsciously feared the moment for probably the last five years of her life, often waking in the morning or arriving home at the end of the day with a great sense of relief when her slightly cranky meow would greet my ears. Now that she was gone, it was necessary to decide how best to honour the importance she held in my life. Perhaps nostalgia arises simultaneously with the emotion of grief, but I knew with conviction that she should be laid to rest in the back garden under her favourite piece of fieldstone; the spot where she had often contemplated the passing birds and soaked up the warm sun. It was a simple act to nourish the soil with something that I cherished. At the time, I was unaware I was practising one of the tenets of a "soul garden". ... »*

Written By Christine Darragh

# THE SOUL GARDEN

There is definitely something very neurotic going on with ordinary citizens north of the 49th parallel. I start to notice a faint murmur around the beginning of March. By mid-March, the store flyers piled on my doorstep signal its return with a frenzied cry. Grab your bulbs and head for the potting shed! Gardening season is upon us! Now, it may be our deprivation of year-round horticulture in this country that gets everyone in a premature tizzy, or it might be a renewed sense of residential beautification that has Mrs. Smith strategizing the best placement for her new azalea just after Christmas; but the fact remains, we have become obsessed with gardening.

There is often an innate sense of being integral to the process, renewed, and connected to something far greater than ourselves. In combination, we also witness a life cycle in a garden that reflects and reconfirms our own progression through time. Through the seasons we see health and disease, seeding and maturing, thriving and dying. Birth, growth, death—it is a reality we acknowledge, and sometimes fight against. And yet, it would seem it is this basic aspect of gardening that we must engage with if we want to realize a fuller meaning.

In his essay *Gardening: Good for Our Soul*, Peter Cock explains

be content with that outcome. The garden can reunite us with these virtues. To enhance the experience, consciously focus on enjoying the process, and choose to let go of any anticipated results.

Granted, this concept might be difficult to grasp at the outset, since we must first be open and willing to receive what nourishment the garden can offer us. The clutter of the mind is only getting more difficult to clear with the constant infiltration of technology. E-mails, cell-phones, texts, iPods—we have become a culture that glorifies harmony with electronics, but disregards our discord with the natural world. Studies have also found that these gadgets are compromising our ability to really focus and simply “be still” in the moment. Although our minds are becoming conditioned to this way of life, there is still the power of choice in an “off” button, and the benefits of doing so can be enlightening if we make that effort.

Similarly, we should ask ourselves: has a garden become just one more thing to control in our lives? Most of us are in such a state of order in our daily lives—schedules, deadlines, meetings—it becomes normal to inflict this same rigidity on our other activities. By design, a seed does not drift exactly 30 centimetres away from its origin, it rides the wind until it randomly falls to earth. Often, our very intervention is in sharp contrast to the happy accidents that Mother Nature thrives on. We tend to manipulate things to how we suppose they should be, not see them for what they are. Instead of our human desire to dominate, meddle, and influence, we should aspire to surrender that control.

How liberating it would be if the garden was a place to release that tight grip.

Another obstacle is our lost connection to the earth for basic sustenance. There is a certain reverence for land and nature when you must depend on it for your very survival. Instead, the grocery store has become our collective garden where we buy produce and other goods from half a world away. We are told this disengagement is a preferred way of living and part of the privilege afforded to a western society. So it is commonplace that we now look to the garden largely as a show piece of ornamentation, not as a vital source of life.

Therefore, it is increasingly important to remember that imperfection is OK, and that it also has its own beauty. Permit border edges to be jagged, welcome a weed (such as clover) into the mix, even allow withered blooms to linger awhile before plucking them—not out of disregard, but rather out of reverence. There is profound beauty in following the natural process of birth through to death. Observing it in a garden habitat can teach us not to fear this, but to fully recognize and appreciate a life well lived.

To be good for the soul, yielding to these realizations can help us return to a real partnership with nature. This union can promote a more realistic, and reciprocal, environment of mutual dependence. What we bring to the garden can be serving its physical requirements (water, nutrition, pruning) and, likewise, the garden will return the favour by providing us with its harvest. It is a basic transaction; we serve its necessities and it meets our needs. However, in this act of service, we can be the partner in an even greater exchange. If we choose to make our serving attitude one of acceptance, gratitude, and respect, we are in a better position to allow nature to unfold its lessons of patience, humility and perseverance.

Gardening can be a tangible way of coming back into balance with ourselves and the natural world. UK eco-scientist Tony Jupiter calls it “a



I'm not entirely sure at what point this gardening preoccupation took root in the fertile soil of our society, for I too have a heightened awareness of it since I became a homeowner. But this year I started questioning whether this amped-up gardening culture is really a healthy mania to possess. To be clear, I certainly don't begrudge anyone a hobby that seeks to beautify their corner of the world. However, my concern is whether we are truly allowing the act of gardening to benefit us in a meaningful way. Are we missing the opportunity to realize a great value in the sacredness of nature because of recent expectations to compete, go overboard, or just “get it done?” How can we reconnect with the real soul of gardening?

A garden, by definition, can be plainly summarized as “the flowers, vegetables, fruits, or herbs that are cultivated therein.” Yet somehow describing its practical properties fails to express the intense emotions that most people feel when they spend time in their garden. Our physical senses are activated in high definition—we see vibrant colours, smell intoxicating fragrances, hear the interplay of nature, feel the richness of earth in our hands. Humans are wired to respond on a surface level to the beautiful and the sublime, and nature is often the pinnacle of this.

Instinctual effects aside, gardening resonates an even deeper famil-

the premise of engaging in a “soul garden.” He notes this is, “one where the forces of nature are more powerfully evident than our own power.” This soul, or vital core of the garden, would seem to emerge for us if we could only learn to, in essence, quit being so human. It is often our desire to position ourselves too prominently in the process of something—to exert dominance over its success or failure—that limits us in simply having respect for what is. How many times do we fail to admire the intricate details of a single flower and would rather plan the best way to garner even bigger and better results? Considering this, there are several factors that may hinder us from realizing an authentic connection.

Firstly, the pressure to achieve greatness is a sure way to extinguish any natural, heartfelt feelings. We are biologically programmed to share an affinity for nature. For instance, look at the awe and wonderment a child intrinsically has when tending to a vegetable garden. Children marvel at reaping any results, not disappointment in the quantity or quality of the harvest. Even so, somewhere along life's winding path, we sadly become immune to nature's mysteries and conditioned to the entitlement of instant gratification and big returns. It takes patience to see anything worthwhile come to fruition, and thankfulness to

## APPLY IT TO THE GARDEN:

Choose plants for a soul garden that:

- Honour and illustrate all our calendar seasons.
- Reflect the full cycle of life. For example, leave some dead branches and plants, don't rush to replace a sickly plant.
- Pre-date you and will outlive you if given half a chance. This helps to locate you in and through time and the cycles of life, adding a generational component.
- Honour the history of the bio-region and respond to climate, elements, and topography. A local tree or indigenous plants that don't require watering are great choices.
- Acknowledge your relationships by including well-loved plants of well-loved people both alive and passed on. And, of course, incorporate gifts from the gardens of significant others.

Referenced Excerpt from, *Gardening: Good for Our Soul*, by Peter Cock

## APPLY IT PERSONALLY:

- Escape a superficial perfection mentality—pretty garden, manicured lawn—and start to incorporate a functional, beneficial use for whatever amount of land you inhabit. Including a collection of medicinal herbs or a variety of your favourite vegetables will redevelop a personal, tangible reliance on the earth that we have lost in our society.
- Take time to simply “be present and still” in the garden, without the necessity of tending to it. Record your thoughts and observations in a journal or read aloud from something special to you, for example a favorite poem, to help you centre yourself in the moment.
- Recognize and apply all of the four natural elements to the garden: air (wind chimes, flag, weather vane), fire (garden candles, solar lighting, firepit feature), water (waterfall feature, bird bath), earth (wood chip mulch, pebble path).
- Nurture the soil by introducing elements (keeping it biodegradable of course) that are unique to you and will create a stronger connection with the garden. This can be realized in actions from the everyday to the sacred. Using compost from kitchen waste, scattering the remains of a bouquet or floral arrangement from an important occasion, or incorporating the ashes of a departed loved one all seek to promote a mindful attitude in the garden.
- Write out any positive/negative thoughts that you wish to convey or release. This may vary from statements of appreciation to feelings that you find difficult to disclose. Take the paper and choose a special “soul spot” in the garden to bury it. Experts note this symbolic act of releasing something important to you can be very liberating, and it allows for an acknowledgement and processing of the emotions.

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## THE SOUL GARDEN

return to the head/heart/hand way of living," where no one aspect is independent of the others. The three should be regarded equally to reconnect us with the earth, since they often intertwine each other. For example, it can be a physical component that leads us into greater attunement to the unconscious mind. Constant, repetitive tasks (weeding, watering, etc.), requiring minimal attention, can give the mind permission to go other places and perhaps uncover a newfound awareness. Stemming from this, we might discover things that are truly important to us and choose to make a positive difference in other areas of our life.

Collaboration with nature can also include a decision to not over-design the garden, but give it, as Peter Cock states, "the room to have wildness." This mindset honours the

Similar to parenting, our garden involvement should reinforce a deep foundation to empower the garden's own independence.

idea that plants should be allowed to flourish as they are able, without our decisions intervening and thwarting their progress. Likewise, he contends, our influence should be to help plants be self sufficient. Give them the minimum, tending to them as little as possible and watering sparingly. This way they can develop a strong root structure, hardiness, and can get along admirably without constant human intervention. This not only conserves labour and water resources, it can be compared to the old adage for raising children: "give two things—roots and wings."

Similar to parenting, our garden involvement should reinforce a deep foundation to empower the garden's own independence.

Beginning this season, don't take the act of gardening for granted. Choose not to approach any involvement in either a mindless or frenzied state. Rather, embrace a special opportunity to form a new relationship with the earth.

This is both a privilege and a great responsibility. A garden can be so much more than just a garden, and seeking to follow this garden path can lead directly to its soul. NM

*Christine Darragh is a Niagara based writer and researcher who contributes to various magazines and publications. With over 10 years of business/corporate writing experience, she is thankful the English degree proved worthwhile and now joyfully writes about what truly interests her.*

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