



Stages of Gardening

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Most people's attitudes towards gardening change a lot over their lifetimes. I am a fairly old guy and I probably have experienced or seen most of the ways people approach gardening as they grow older. Of course, who knows. I'm not finished yet, but I can give you the insight I have so far.

Children sometimes plant seeds in class projects or perhaps they watch grandma or grandpa work in their garden. I vaguely remember being in my grandparents' garden. My grandfather was a gardener with a small greenhouse and a large lot full of plants. I cannot remember what most of them were, and it is a bit sad that I cannot ask him about them, but I still have his gardening reference book. At the time when I could have asked, I had little interest.

The only contact most children have with the garden is when they are made to cut the lawn. Perhaps they even cut the neighbour's lawn for pocket change. They probably don't even care about the lawn being cut. Children's attitudes seem to be a little different in the UK. There you see children in the gardens that appear to be engaged in the process. Here children are sometimes taken along or sent on a bus trip to a garden but they do not seem to enjoy it.

Unless you are one of those rare young people that is studying horticulture to go into the trades, or you live on a farm, or your family is in the business, you probably took a hiatus from any thoughts about gardening from your early teens to at least into your late twenties. You had more exciting things to do like learning about how to be a person, how to earn a living, not to mention sex and rock and roll.

It is when you actually are responsible for a garden of your own that most people end up coming back to it in one way or another. A few of us find it soothing to escape to the garden. But most find it a chore, and escape from the garden to do whatever other task we can. We often have many distractions like taking kids to soccer, and attending teacher interviews. But the garden demands attention. Grass needs to be maintained. Shade trees and foundation shrubs need to be planted. This is the period of our gardening life when we make many mistakes. For example, we place a cute little blue spruce in front of the front door that in the next 15 years will eclipse the sun and cover the drive. And we put foundation shrubs in a neat little line to soften the hard edges of our new starter home without realizing that they will hide the windows. And we see nothing wrong with planting Norway Maples for shade!

Through the middle of a gardener's life, interest may grow until it reaches a peak. This is usually because more time becomes available due to retirement, or the emptying of a nest, or when we realize how challenging gardening is as a pastime. We start asking probing questions of the people at the

garden centres. We join a horticultural society and begin to learn more. Perhaps we go on the society's bus tours and see what other gardeners do. We start to incorporate things we like from these gardens into our own space.

Many people begin to reduce the number of annuals replacing them with perennials. Some of us begin to collect one of every plant known to man and try to wedge them in. We also try to get something to bloom at all times of the season and end up with an interesting hodge-podge.

As the gardener's views mature, they often will use more foliage colour and texture rather than flowers. Partly because their plants have been growing all these years, they start planting in drifts of more than one of the same plant. They begin to simplify and focus on the whole garden rather than its individual plants. They may even find ways to pass on what they learned to others.

Many people continue to garden until they are in their 90s but for some, there comes a time when their garden becomes a bit too much to handle. Even though they now know what needs to be done, the physical effort becomes a challenge. The knees don't bend like they used to and the fingers are not as able to move. It is also difficult to get help. There are surprisingly few people in the industry that actually know how to care for perennials and shrubs properly. I cringe when I see a young person from a lawn care company take a hedge trimmer to a beauty bush. So rather than give up gardening totally, we simplify. Some gardens go back to being lawn. Ponds get filled in. Plants that take a lot of care are given away to friends and relatives, or go to the plant sale. The garden gradually retreats or grows over.

In the end, the act of gardening is more important than the garden being created. Very few gardens outlive their gardeners and those that do continue to be modified. A garden is performance art – a beautiful slow dance that has a beginning and an end. Enjoy it while it happens.

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