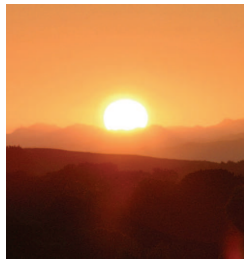


The Process Oriented Gardener



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Introduction

I can't remember a time that I didn't think of a garden as a way to produce food. Except for instances such as the occasional crisis, war or economic downturn (of which we currently find ourselves) most people look at gardening as a hobby or simply a habit. For myself and many other children of rural areas, my family relied as much on a garden for sustenance as they did the work off the farm that my father did to earn money. We planted a variety of foods and it wasn't until I combed my memories later that I came to realization that we never used a tiller or fertilizer.

The modern gardener has a bevy of tools and resources at his or her disposal. There are machines to till the soil, chemicals to boost yields or kill pests. The Internet provides all the information that a gardener would ever need to practice their art.

It doesn't need to be said again that it wasn't always the case. But it does need to be said that it might not always be the case going forward either. A lot of modern gardens work only because of the tools and information currently available. We take for granted that those tools will always be at hand or as close as the local mega-mart. Tillers run on gas and oil, which are finite resources and most are subject to frequent breakdowns that only experienced mechanics are capable of correcting. And most of us begin to pull our hair out when the Internet service lapses for even an hour.

I don't talk from a position of power or knowledge. I am subject to many of the same conditions but I've set myself on a course to remedy that situation and I hope I can share some of my experiences.

The purpose of this book is to exorcise the complicated and embrace the simple. Gardening is a simple task that our ancestors practiced for many years and did so sometimes more successfully and intrusively than we—with our modern tools—could ever hope. The purpose of this book is to take out all of the extraneous steps and tools that we could not truly depend on if we were starving and relied on our garden for our next meal and did not have all the resources in the world to make that meal.

Sustainable Methods

Most people do not want to be self-sufficient or use sustainable methods. In some ways it is hard. It is much easier to go to the store and buy a bag of fertilizer than to collect

your compost scraps and dump them everyday and then turn the compost. It is much easier to hook a hose to the faucet and dump a few gallons of city water on our plant than to make a rain barrel and haul water by hand.

But is it easier? After all city water has to be bought and the fertilizer isn't free. Every dollar we spent had to be earned. And worse yet, every dollar we earned was taxed and then taxed again when we spent it on the fertilizer. The city water was taxed and the people that helped clean it were taxed. They bought gas that was taxed to put in their cars (more taxes) just to go to work. All this was done just so the government could work and figure out ways to tax us more.

People also resist becoming self-sufficient because they assume that the systems that they depend on will always be in place. So why worry about it?

What would have happened if the recent H1N1 flu pandemic had been something more than a convenient way for the government to sell vaccines? What if the death rate had been more akin to 25% rather than tenths of a percent? Would the trucks keep replenishing the shelves at the supermarket? Would the water and electricity keep flowing once the workers decided to play it safe and stay home? The answer to all of these questions should be quite apparent but unfortunately to the majority of Americans it is not.

In conclusion, true self-sufficiency will almost never be achieved completely. Self-sufficiency is an idea to be aspired to but rarely achieved. However, completely relying upon systems of dependency that can fail and require money is never a good idea. That holds especially true when one is talking about the methods of growing food and sustaining life. A sustainable garden is a goal that can be achieved, and should.

Gimmicks

There is no panacea to the gardening problems that one can encounter. I have a particular disdain for gimmicks and trends in gardening. People tend to overcomplicate simple things. Gardening (at least in the context of this book) is about growing food. It's not about impressing your neighbors. It is certainly not a contest to spend the most money.

Yet there is a large contingent of gardeners eager for the next trick that's going to solve all ills. The fact of the matter is this: The newest trends won't change the necessary requirements or the balance of nature that must exist for a garden to be successful.

Gardening at its base is a balance of two things. The first thing is the constant balance in nature to keep the system going. The second is the constant balance between the numbers. A garden is capable of producing a certain amount of calories or energy. The gardener is the tender of this number game. Allow too much of your energy, nutrients and water to leave your property the more capability you will lose. Lose too much and you will have to spend money (another form of energy) to regain the balance. There are

plenty of people in the world that lose more calories working to make money than that money provides them in purchased food.

That's why we must think of gardening as a process – an inescapable loop from which nothing leaves and ultimately nothing must enter.

Process

The goal of a process is to take a series of inputs and convert it into a series of outputs. The process of gardening is exactly the same. We hope to use certain inputs and a procedure to gain an output or harvest. All three must work together. We must get the right inputs and use the right procedure to achieve the best harvest possible.

A process can diverge in many places. In many cases, multiple inputs will work the same way. Such is the case with procedures. The hope is to use the easiest possible procedure to achieve the best possible output or harvest. The ease of the procedure must be weighed carefully against the output. A lot of time and energy and inputs can be thrown at a procedure but the harvest that results may not be equivalent to the energy and materials invested. For this reason we have to break ourselves of the notion that a bigger harvest must be had at any cost. This is the same notion that has brought us to the brink with petrochemical fertilizers and slashes and burn agriculture. This is the same notion that led to the dust bowl.

Inputs

A process begins with the inputs. Before any action can be taken that directly deals with the process, the inputs must be gathered. What do you need to plant and nourish a garden?

1. Seed/Stock/Bulbs/Tubers
2. Water
3. Sunlight and temperature
4. Growing medium (most commonly nutrient rich soil)
5. Carbon Dioxide

Given some preparation and forethought not one of these five essential ingredients cannot be gathered, created, harvested or captured on your own property.

Seeds/Stock

The garden starts with the selection of seeds, rootstock, bulbs or tubers for planting. Luckily for us, seed catalogs and manufacturers help us by providing plenty of information from which we can use to make an informed decision.

Picking a Variety

Picking what types of food producing plants and which varieties of each is a very personal choice but it must be practical as well.

When you choose a variety of tomato do you pick a variety...?

*that is resistant to blight or one that bears larger fruit?

*that has a short growing season or a long growing season?

*based on taste or acid content for canning?

Every variety has certain characteristics. Even more confusing yet is that some varieties grow well in certain types of soils or certain weather conditions.

These obstacles can be overcome. First of all, know your conditions and pick the appropriate plant varieties for that area. If you live in a cold climate, pick cold climate varieties. If you live in drought stricken areas then choose a variety that uses little water.

The choices we are given are amazing! I can choose to grow short and fat carrots to better work with the high clay content of my soil. I can choose bush beans to help me mulch and to work with my narrow garden. If I chose pole beans I'd have to concern myself with the shadows they cast.

Secondly, seeds should be procured locally if at all possible. If it is not possible to procure the seeds locally then at least find out what varieties are grown locally. Local grown varieties have the advantage of natural selection. You see, if the tomato grew well enough to ripen and produce fruitful seeds then it grew well enough to eat. Therefore you can assume to some degree that local conditions (along with whatever inputs the grower gave) nurtured the plant to the end of a life cycle, thus ensuring survival of the lineage. In other words, the seeds will grow where they originated as they hold the best genetic traits to ensure survival in those unique conditions.

When I talk of procuring seeds, I talk of a one-time activity for most plants. In a further chapter I'll tell you how to save your own seeds with many varieties of plants. This will push natural selection one step further. Seeds saved from your plants will be adapted to your soil and your microclimates and more importantly, your nurturing habits.

It is ok to be somewhat reliant on other people for seeds but if you don't have to be, then why would you?

Open-Pollinated, Heirloom or Hybrid

Open-Pollinated

Open-pollination is a term that is often used incorrectly when one is attempting to describe what they want to accomplish. Open-pollination simply refers to the fact that