

On 10 years of gardening

I came to gardening after 25 years of nomadic apartment living. Houseplants, yes, but nothing extreme, save for a foray into succulents in 1974. My only outdoor gardening experience had been planting a row of marigolds and the occasional trimming of mom and dad's bridal-wreath spirea when I was in high school. So when I found the perfect house 10 years ago and saw the big yard out back (which was then covered with 8 inches of snow), I knew there would be regular mowing and planting of a few shrubs and annuals (perennials, what are they?).

But when spring came I realized that the topography was going to be tough as I got older—do I really want to mow a four-foot bank once or twice a week when I'm 65? What to do? So I went to the library and proceeded to check out every book I could on gardening, landscaping and plants to see if I could make my future life outdoors an easier one. And then my friend Colleen gave me a membership in the Wisconsin Hardy Plant Society and my life as a gardener really began. To see the great gardens that have been created right here in Madison and have a chance to get to know those gardeners was invaluable in spurring me to do more in my garden. And then came my first WHPS plant sale and the knowledge that I could find the very plants I had admired in other gardens at prices that I could afford—well, the floodgates opened!

And of course I had to make lists: Lists of plants to buy, lists of where to put the plants, lists of things to build to allow for more enjoyment and better display of the plants. And there were winters to review the lists and plan for spring. And then each spring would come and I'd essentially throw out the list when the old grape arbor fell over, or half the honeysuckle tree came down, or I had a chance to buy this or that shrub at such a price that I couldn't resist and now I have to create a bed to put it in. Not to mention my fairy gardening mother calling me to say she is thinning out her shade bed and do I want some seedlings? Absolutely! (Forget the fact that I had very little shade and had to make a bed in the only place possible in one or two nights before the plants took a turn for the worse.)

After 10 years of bed-making and shrub-planting and eliminating a little bit more grass each year, that daunting topography is now my treasure, adding interest and beauty to every morning walk through the garden. And now I have no grass, just paths and beds. And now my garden is "full." But no, it's never full, maybe I can make room for something new by giving away something to a neighbor or a new gardener—or offer it at the plant sale—or reorganize the bed to make room for new finds, as evidenced by the 18 hours spent this last week widening paths and moving things from here to there to make room for those Endless Summer Hydrangeas bought at Home Depot for \$9.99. Or that *Pinus strobus* 'Pendula' and *Acer Griseum* that I had to have, especially since Enchanted Valley Gardens has everything marked 50% off!

So from a fescue lawn with three black locusts, a gazillion-year-old honeysuckle tree, an overgrown privet hedge, two mock oranges informally trained into trees, a red barberry, an old grape arbor, many ostrich ferns and some ageopodium (why oh why did I move that from the nicely contained north side of my house to the bank behind my garage?), I stand before you a gardener through and through, a gardener obsessed, a gardener in love with the very idea of gardening, who—dare I even be so immodest—now considers herself a garden "artist." Oh, not a Jekyll or a Verey or a Lloyd or a Chatto, but someone who feels the need to put plants together and experiences a sweet satisfaction when the chance arises to sit and look at this wonderland in my own backyard.

And reflect on the best 10 years of my life.

(Until I notice that garlic mustard trying to make its way from my neighbor's yard to mine, and how could I have missed that oxalis in among the columbine, and is that bindweed inching up my baptisia?..)

—Stephanie O'Neal