

Keeping Mum about Gardening Temptations

Joanna T. Negri

I'm bracing myself for the new season, life renewing itself, buds bursting, birds singing and yard work looming. Another gardening marathon is about to begin, bring it on Mother N. But how does one stay on the wagon of *organic* gardening when weeds wantonly multiply overnight and lawns flaunt a shameless alopecia by the middle of July? Who said being green was easy? It was Kermit the frog. Actually, he said: "it's *not* easy" and he was right. But with a little luck and embarrassingly small effort, my garden will somehow manage to survive without chemical intervention.



I'm as intentionally green as the next person on the inside and generally on the outside too. No toxic materials or pesticides on my watch. But, Oh my! how would my tired old lawn look if it could banquet upon the smorgasbord of chemicals in those multi-step lawn feeds! They are no better than hair dye; I tell myself, simply instant color gratification and you forget to re-apply at your peril.

No bowling-green lawns for me. What I prefer to call my "natural grasslands" are on a permanent diet. Sustained by a rough, lean fodder of home-made compost, (plenty of fiber), and good old nature's rain. My precious few blades of fine fescue are supported by a common cast of thousands: groundcovers such as clover (there's a four-leafed one in there somewhere), speedwell and dandelions all do a fine carpeting job.

So what? I'm developing a meadow and this takes years I'm told. I'm allowing natural plant succession to occur, let the birds drop the seeds of a future flowery swathe. Anyway, dandelions are fine edibles.

On the surface then all is well, but what lies beneath is not so pretty. In the dark netherworld of the grub, these most dreaded adversaries are fattening themselves for their shiny, beetle-shaped debut. And all just to decimate my roses. Each spring I imagine spreading those deliciously deadly control granules, but my thoughts of larval liquidation are quickly overruled by an inner green voice: "*get thee behind me toxins!*" And I suck it up for another season.

I once mixed a "rotten-fruit-and-yeast" remedy for attracting and drowning Japanese beetles – it worked beautifully for

the drowning part. The attracting was best accomplished by my shaking them off my roses to their doom in the cup of goop held below. Nevertheless, Mother Nature occasionally rewards my sacrifices: last summer my roses came into bloom so early that the beetles were caught napping under their earthen blanket and by September's second flush the little buggers had all gone on their merry way, HA!

How does one stop the rain from falling? The same way one stops the weeds from popping up I suppose, although one man's weed is another man's wildflower. I welcome flowering weeds in my own garden when they happen to blend with my color scheme. Native planting is all the rage after all. Plenty of worthy perennials have names ending with the suffix-*weed*; names like butterfly weed and milkweed, so evocative of bright and sunny summer meadows. Sneezeweed however I can do without. (Having ditched all synthetic medications for my hay fever I am, apparently, building up a tolerance to pollen through chronic exposure).

When the rain stays in Spain us gardeners will be saddled with the most infernal of summer chores: constant *watering*. There's a job for the fairies at the bottom of the garden (fairies do exist I'm sure, they keep hiding my best secateurs.) As the professional gardener's equivalent of the shoeless cobbler's child, I try *not* to notice my own parched and drooping specimens at the end of a sweltering day spent beautifying my client's manicured beds. At this point a popular musical song will spring to my mind: "*Tomorrow! tomorrow! Ill water tomorrow! after all It's only a day away!*"

Never, ever, put off 'til tomorrow anything you can possibly do the day after is my

motto. In gardening I find you have to be cruel to be kind and water rationing hardens the plants, promoting survival of the fittest. Natural selection don't you know. I have in fact invested in a water-conserving rain barrel and one day I will run a hose to it, but when I remember to do this it always seems to be raining.

Pruning is a great leveler, but only superwoman can get it all done on cue. I know I ought to do it: "*in very early spring, before growth starts*" – but this is when I myself have yet to emerge from winter dormancy. Or "*immediately after flowering*" (talk about pressure) - this is when I am usually traveling or ill. No matter, my shrubberies will live to flower another year despite my lackadaisical approach, I call it natural shaping, the elements will determine which branches live or die, and the birds which buds fatten or fall. There is always the hedge trimmer for the roses, (especially that lethal-stemmed rugosa that never went to finishing school).

I believe that in its highest form, gardening should appear effortless; as unconscious as the swish and sway of an elegant foxtrot or the colors evoked by the strains of a violin concerto. As soon as you make public your months of hard graft, your litany of back-breaking chores and your various war wounds, the magic is gone. No one wants to know about the blood sweat and tears invested behind that tranquil piece of paradise. Nobody cares –just give them a virtuoso performance and weep quietly behind the potting shed when they've gone.

So when visitors happen by to "ooh" and "aah" over my rustic, natural wonderland and congratulate me on *all that hard work* I just smile mildly under my big English-lady-hat and say "The garden? Oh yes I dabble, occasionally."