
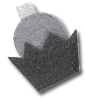


Just Hand Over the
Chocolate
and No One
 Will Get
 Hurt

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Contents

Acknowledgments	9
Introduction	11
1. Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary . . . How Does Your Garden Grow?	15
2. Minivacations Even a Travel Agent Could Love	24
3. A Friend in Need Needs a Friend, Indeed	37
4. Would You Like a Little Cheese with Your Whine?	49
5. Here's the Story of a Man Named Brady . . .	59
6. Sweet Dreams	66
7. Simplify Your Life	78
8. No Trespassing	93
9. The Care and Feeding of a Grudge	102
10. The Doctor Is In	115
11. Tickle Your Inner Child	124
12. It's All in Your Head	133
13. Draw a Line in the Sand	145
14. Love Your Body	156
15. Tend to Your Soul	162

I

Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary . . . How Does Your Garden Grow?

Plants at my house don't have a chance. One day my eleven-year-old daughter announced to one of my friends, "Mom likes fake plants because they're the only ones she can't kill."

"That's not true, Kaitlyn," I objected. "You'd be surprised how many fake plants have died in my care."

The most common cause of death for fake plants at my house is asphyxiation by dust. This is because the thought of dusting 687 individual silk ficus tree leaves ranks right up there with paying taxes or going in for my annual gynecological checkup.

Of course, real plants die interesting deaths at my house too. I once had a ficus tree in my bedroom that suffered a particularly gruesome and prolonged demise. I finally decided to put it out of its misery on a day my parents were due to fly in for a visit. My mom is great with plants—she can grow anything. Not wanting her to learn of my epic horticultural failure, I asked my husband to stash the dead tree in the garage before we drove to the airport to meet my parents' plane.

Several hours later—confident my bedroom was void of incriminating evidence—I invited my folks into the room to

see a new piece of furniture. We were several feet into the room when I stopped in my tracks. In the corner, where the tree had once stood, was a circle of dead leaves. It spoke as eloquently as any chalk outline at a crime scene. I half-expected Columbo to emerge from the closet, fingerprinting kit in hand. A quick dusting of the watering can would convict me for sure: The glaring absence of my fingerprints would give any D.A. more than enough evidence for a quick verdict.

The plant that has lived the longest in my home is a potted plant my husband bought for me nearly three years ago when I was in the hospital giving birth to our youngest child. In other words, this leafy wonder is nothing less than a hortimiracle. It has, indeed, exceeded the expected life span of any plant that has ever had the misfortune of being under my care. Some of the leaves still even look nice. And I think the roots coming through the bottom of the pot and melding into the tabletop add a unique touch. I suspect the ensemble will bring big bucks if I ever decide to sell it at a garage sale.

I think the primary problem here is that plants require water, which is just not something I think about on a daily basis. I tend to water my plants during leap years or on evenings my husband lets me hold the TV remote, whichever comes first.

Which leads me to the subject of evolution. You know what I'm talking about: I'm talking about that ridiculous theory that claims that living things, in the face of a hostile environment, can adapt and evolve and survive against the odds. This is a lie. Oh sure, it might explain the tenacious existence of cockroaches and dinner-hour phone salesmen, but in general, organisms that we try to exterminate do not evolve their way to better living. If that kind of evolution were possible, plants in my home would have learned how to speak by now. Then they could pester me for water the way my kids pester me for things *they* need to survive (like Beanie Babies and compact discs).

No, my plants just sit there, silent, and watch me not water them. So you see, I can't be held entirely to blame for their demise. They never even lift a leaf to help.

But there is an encouraging sign in all of this. The good news is that I even have plants in my home. There were several years in my life when that would have been virtually impossible.

Prozac and Potting Soil

There were a number of years when I lived my life numb and overwhelmed. In the grip of then-undiagnosed clinical depression, it was all I could do to get through my days taking care of the most basic needs of my family. Kaitlyn was a preschooler at the time, and as long as I managed to shepherd her through her day emotionally and physically intact, I considered myself successful. There seemed little room in my life for "luxuries" like friendships or cooking meals or getting out of bed when I didn't have to, much less the acquisition of houseplants or garden blooms that would levy even more demands on my already overwhelmed system.

Who knows? Maybe I did the right thing, stripping my world of everything save the one nonnegotiable responsibility of caring for my daughter. I functioned in this emotional cocoon until crisis brought my marriage and my emotional health to a serious crossroad. Luckily for me, the trail-thin footpath we took at that point led ultimately to healing and wholeness.

I wonder, though, what seeds of healing might have been sown had I mustered the energy to plant something.

Something beautiful, like wildflowers.

Something fruitful, like kitchen herbs.

Something ambitious, like morning glories.

Something forgiving, like a cactus!

You see, I know something now that I didn't know then. Back then, I was afraid that fragile growing things would be

“takers” rather than “givers.” I thought they would demand things of me I couldn’t afford, like time and energy. I thought they would prove to be a liability rather than an asset in my sad, bruised world. I never even gave them a chance.

Potting Soil Therapy

Now I know that the relationship we share with our photosynthesizing friends is not a one-sided affair. They need us to take care of them, it’s true. But sometimes in the process, they can nurture us as well. When we are stressed by daily living, overwhelmed by the arrows and wounds that come our way, or perplexed by a slippery problem for which there seems no good answer, the act of caring for our rooty buddies can help us tap into relief, restoration, and even creativity.

There are lots of reasons why gardens and houseplants can make a positive difference in our lives. And I’m not even suggesting that you and I turn into the next Martha Stewart or Neil Sperry. Even a casual interest in a few no-fail plants can reap rewards. What kinds of benefits are ours when we plant something? Let’s look at a few:

Wake-up Call to the Senses

Let’s face it. There’s something about plunging your hands into a mess of potting soil that sort of wakes up the senses, doesn’t it? Now grant it, one of the senses that it awakens for some people is a feeling of “Ugh, gross.” But bear with me for a moment.

Even if you don’t have a green thumb, planting something provides a rich array of sensory experiences. There’s the pungent fragrance of wet earth, the cool massage as you work your hands into the loamy soil, the gritty song of a clay pot when it shifts in its saucer, and the bright colors and fragile beauty of the transplanted bloom. When we exercise our senses, we

feel more alive. Indeed, a handful of pleasant sensory delights is like a gentle massage of the soul.

Sense of Accomplishment and Progress

Do you ever feel like a hamster on a treadmill? Sometimes it seems as though, try as I might, I just can't make any progress. The dishes I washed yesterday are dirty again today. I managed to meet a critical deadline last week, but today there's a new fire to be extinguished. The ten pounds I worked so hard to lose must have my beeper number, because they managed to find me again in no time at all.

Sometimes when I'm feeling blue, one thing that will perk me right up is the glow that comes with accomplishment. The satisfaction that comes with progress. Do you want virtually immediate accomplishment? Visible results in ten minutes or less? Then weed a small flower bed (be sure to water it first and the weeds pull out easily). Or transplant a flower. Or snip some backyard blooms for your kitchen table. Quick tasks, every one—and yet doing them, you'll enjoy a sense of accomplishment.

A Connection with Nature

I planted cherry tomatoes this year. This was actually my first foray into vegetable gardening since childhood. One day, when my plants were about knee-high, I noticed a black and green visitor clamped to a stem. Then I noticed a whole community of them. Caterpillars.

Plucking them willy-nilly from the stems, I ended up with about a dozen pests wriggling in the bottom of a butter tub. Now here's the amazing thing. Guess what I was feeling, emotionally, as I watched the little buggers climbing blindly all over each other.

Disgust?

Try again.

Delight!

I know, it surprises me, too, but there it was. Delight!

After all, when had I last studied the tentative dance of one of God's metamorphosing critters? Not since grade school, I can assure you. And I had forgotten just how fascinating they really are!

I called to my daughters and we spent the next hour playing with our new friends. We progressed from daring each other to touch them, to letting them walk on our hands, to designing caterpillar mazes on Kacie's play table.

In the end, we let them all go free. After all, they had served us well, ushering us into a place of wonder and delight.

A Creative Outlet

Yes, our gardens can make us feel more connected with nature. But they can also provide a creative outlet as we paint a flower bed with textures, shapes, and hues.

As a mom, I also try to incorporate creative, whimsical touches to delight my kids. When two-year-old Kacie, for example, fell in love with a concrete lion statue in my mom's garden, I searched three nurseries until I found a similar cat to prowl beneath a fruit tree in my yard. There is a giant resin toad next to my hydrangeas, and a sundial among the daylilies. I found a bird feeder in the shape of a smiling sun with two hands cupped beneath his chin, and I hung him on a brick wall within view of both the garden and the den window.

Harriet Crosby, in her book *A Place Called Home* (Thomas Nelson, 1997), has written, "A garden soothes troubled hearts, delights the senses, feeds the body, and offers us a second Eden in which to play and rest."

Get creative. Have fun. Play a little. You'll be amazed how great it feels.

Lessons about Time and Seasons

There's something healing about the rhythm of nature. In particular, I find a lot of comfort in the ebb and flow of the seasons.

Now, I didn't always know about seasons. Born and raised in southern California, I used to think that West Coast living had the best weather. Then Larry and I married and spent two years in the Midwest, and I discovered this phenomenon called seasons.

When we moved back to California, I realized something was missing. Our first Christmas back home, I hung our outdoor Christmas lights wearing a T-shirt and shorts. The same Saturday I went Christmas shopping, my husband mowed the lawn.

It's not just that California doesn't have a winter; it doesn't have a fall, either, because the weather doesn't get cold enough to change the colors of the leaves.

I'll admit, one autumn I spotted some richly colored leaves. I was in a craft shop and they were selling these plastic bags of fake fall leaves. I bought six bags and sprinkled them on our lawn.

Larry didn't think it was too funny.

The point is, there is something satisfying, rejuvenating, comforting about the seasons of the year. Seasons remind me that there is a time and a season for everything, and that "this too shall pass." They remind me that there is a pulse, a sequence, a journey set into motion by the hand of God himself. The seasons remind me daily of God's timing, of nature, of the ebb and flow of life.

When I'm stressed or going through a tough time, puttering around in the backyard puts me in touch with those seasons like little else can. Preparing the soil . . . planting seeds . . . providing nutrients for growth . . . trimming dead leaves . . . battling weeds . . . enjoying beauty . . . watching something that was beautiful become dormant or even die . . . observing new life and new growth once springtime has come . . .

Preparation. Nurture. Beauty. Struggle. Dormancy and even death. New growth, new hope, and new life.

It's powerful. You know why? Because the cycle is one that is repeated in my own life over and over again.

After all, plants and trees start small, just like we do. They have seasons of fruitfulness. They also have dormant times when they don't seem to be doing anything worthwhile . . . except recovering, resting, and waiting for a new season of growth.

Just like you and me.

And have you ever thought about the place where a seed begins to germinate? It's a dark place, away from light and fresh air, void of colors and empty of happy sounds. I've been in places like that, haven't you? Dark places of the soul where we feel isolated from all things bright and beautiful. And yet, out of the darkness comes new life, new beginnings, new wisdom.

Getting in touch with nature is healing because, indeed, in some fashion it reveals to us the potential of our own tomorrows. After all, if a hydrangea plant that seems so lifeless and dry can blossom into such exquisite life and color . . . if a troubled winter sky, the color of bruises and weeping great drops of rain, can find cause to adorn herself with spring sunshine, fresh scents, and breathtaking rainbows . . . if the earthbound caterpillar can find a way to soar on butterfly wings, a new creature in every fashion . . . then guess what? There's hope for you and me. Whatever our trials, whatever our struggles, tomorrow holds the chance for new growth. A fresh start. A reason to celebrate the wonders of life.


There Is a Master Plan

Finally, what else do I learn from my garden?

How 'bout the fact that there's a Master Gardener, someone who orchestrates the seasons, commands the sun, coaxes the rain. Someone who knows how to pack eighty feet of morning glory vine into a seed smaller than a nail clipping. Someone who enlists the help of birds and bees, ladybugs

and caterpillars, spiders and earthworms to tend to the green things he has set into motion.

Best of all, someone who says, “Look at the field lilies and how well they’re dressed! Hey, if I take such good care of the flowers that are here today and gone tomorrow, don’t you think I can take care of you?”



House and Garden Plants Even Your Teenager Could Grow

Do green, living things shudder at the mention of your name? Have you been known to kill even the sturdiest of silk plants? Based on your personal experience, would you categorize *Better Homes and Gardens* as a work of fiction? Have your most successful gardening efforts to date been confined to growing Chia pets and cultivating mold in your refrigerator?

Take heart. You, too, can experience the joy of gardening. Call a local nursery. Ask for the names of some no-fail plants that thrive in your climate zone. Here's some advice I gleaned from a nursery near me:

<i>E-Z Grow Garden Staples</i>	<i>Neglect-Proof Houseplants</i>
impatiens (shade)	pothos
caladiums (shade)	sansevieria
light leaf begonias (shade)	philodendron
dark leaf begonias (shade or sun)	dracaena
moss rose (sun)	dieffenbachia
purslane (sun)	
periwinkle (sun)	
lantana (sun)	
Mexican heather (sun)	
pansies (sun)	