

What my garden has taught me.

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From a very early age gardens have captivated me. I use the term 'garden' very loosely though. Not always have I had the luxury of a proper garden. Sometimes it was just a dream, sometimes it was a word in my current address, like West Jalinga Tea Garden, Lake Gardens or Eden Garden and most times, just a few pots of straggly looking saplings. Often it was an audacious attempt on my part to harness the infinite beauty of nature in miniature.

But whatever incarnation of a garden it might have been, they have been my salvation and finally I am sitting down to put my thoughts to paper and to pay my respects where it is due, for I regard my gardens, each and every one of them, as my teachers.

Early on, when I was an only child and a mere waif of a girl maybe six or seven years old, I was growing up totally isolated in a Tea plantation's Burra Bungalow on a hilltop. There wasn't a decent school in the vicinity, and with no siblings and no local children allowed to mingle with the Burra Sahib's offspring, my time was filled with whatever I could rustle up to entertain myself. One of my favorite pastimes was wandering in our huge flower and veggie garden. The old 'mali' appreciated my interest and treated me like an apprentice rather than a pocket sized-princess which all the other hired help in the Bungalow did.



One day as I was sifting through some soil, I found a rusty looking old coin with tinges of green in it. I ran to my mum who was horrified at the dirty thing and immediately asked me to get rid of the germ infested rubbish, so I ran to my dad who looked at it with wide eyes and asked

me what I thought it was? Could it be a silver coin from a long lost kingdom? Maybe it was even older than that? There was no stopping me now and I remember digging up in quite a few garden beds hoping to multiply my khazana.

After all these years, I can't remember what I did with that old coin, but what I distinctively remember is the knowledge that even a dirty old coin can give you the same exultation of finding precious mintage if you look at it with the right eyes. In other words: **Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder**. It is not the intrinsic value of something that makes it valuable; it is the possibility it holds that matters.

In all my feeble attempts at gardening, I've learnt **never to lose faith or give up hope**. It is amazing how resilient a plant can be. Never assume you cannot revive something unless you've tried your best. More often than none, you will be pleasantly surprised to find the brown stalks of a withered plant showing a miniscule bit of green that magically turns out to be a lovely wreath in time.

The steps which lead to my steep backyard garden have been the subject of many a heated conversation every time my darling husband calls me to give him a hand at yanking up the lawn mower, but it is also from this vantage point, with a cup of my favorite black coffee in hand that I gaze adoringly at my latest garden. It is not the perfect garden with a pristine emerald lawn, neither is it designed by a genius landscape artist like Jamie Durie, but whatever it is, it is mine, and I LOVE it!

Surrounding the oddly shaped lawn is my collection of flowering plants and colorful edibles like Nasturtiums and mint and Strawberries, cherry tomatoes and a myriad collection of chilli peppers of varying shapes, colors and spiciness. I know where to find a lone basil which eagerly waits to yield its bounty of fragrant foliage and I know where a certain blue-tongue lizard likes to bask in the sun when my inquisitive little puppy dog is indoors. Then there is the cackle of cockatoos that sneak up to feed greedily on my Gravellias. How I love watching them and leaving a snack of choice bird-feed for them as well. I am also equally disappointed when due to some other mundane diversion; I miss out on

our regular tete a tete. What has this taught me? Just as there is pleasure in anticipation, there is sorrow in being deprived of the presence of a loved one. So **don't get too attached to anything.**

When my citrus tree became the unwilling breeding ground of some obnoxious insects that caused its limbs to become awfully swollen and contorted, I had no choice but to prune the infected branches in order to save the tree. You sometimes have to **be cruel to be kind.** Tough love can be the only answer in times like these.

At the moment, my organic, luscious strawberries are being devoured by slugs, but I don't want to compromise my integrity and sprinkle some deadly slug bait. Why? Because I believe that these slimy creatures have every bit of right on my garden's produce as I do. I need to **be patient and vigilant** if I want my share. If not, I must learn to **lose graciously.** So live and let live because harmonious cohabitation brings more rewards than aggravated confrontation.

The other day I noticed some tiny seedlings pushing their feeble torsos up in a very rocky, unfriendly part of my garden and realized that they must have germinated from self sowing seeds of flowering plants in another part of my garden. As a result, my barren, rocky patch has received a complete makeover and now holds its own pride of place. **Beauty cannot always be planned.** I've also found out that every speck of seed holds a potency within them, waiting to be properly nurtured by the right conditions.

My green beans on the other hand, have a stunted growth with the weather cooling down. I should have planted these a bit earlier on. The lesson: You cannot rush things and some forces like Mother Nature cannot be tweaked to suit your routine. **The time has to be just right for certain things to happen.**

As I allow my gaze to drift from the bright green round leaves of the Nasturtiums to the wispy bluish-grey arrow heads of an unknown variety of grass flower, I could find examples of many more lessons my gardens have imparted, but I won't. I will end with the most profound

message I have learnt from my garden: **Your family is just like a garden.** Different characters and personalities can live harmoniously creating a lovely tapestry and each contributing their own beauty to the greater picture. Nurture it (your family) and give it your time and you



will be rewarded with a beautiful bounty. On the contrary, deprived of your love and attention, noxious weeds will creep in, eventually smothering and destroying your garden/family.

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