

A Gardener's Reflections

By Barbara Brown



An arctic cold front is working its way down the Great Plains with 35-mile-per-hour winds, bringing a chance of sleet and snow tonight. The afternoon sky is heavily overcast closing off the horizon like a gray curtain. As I look out the window, I see the bare branches of the post oak and cottonwood trees shaking as if from fear of the coming storm. But indoors the ominous forecast makes it a perfect day to be sitting by the fireplace planning my spring garden. And to be brutally honest, planning my spring garden will be a lot easier and more fun than dealing with the task that I am avoiding – deciding what to do about my retirement.

My employer is offering a package to those of us with at least 20 years at the company. A good decision financially perhaps and I won't miss spending three hours a day in traffic, but if I stop working I will certainly miss my friends, the sense of accomplishment when I finish a project, and learning all the new technologies that are part of our daily work lives; not to mention the money. I will have to find another job doing something. I do not know what I want to do. I have no answers. I would much rather think about my spring garden. Creating my annual garden plan is an act of faith, an affirmation of my belief that the cold and darkness will not last forever. My plan reminds me that I am in control. I am able to replace the brown and gray landscape with a rainbow of color by the simple acts of spring planting and a little patience.

The secret to successful gardening in the somewhat antagonistic conditions of North Texas is soil preparation. At the end of the gardening season last year, I cleared out the dead and dying plants that had served their purpose. It can be sad to pull up a tired but not yet dead plant. It seems like a betrayal of the effort it continues to make. But I know the plant will not survive winter and that the soil needs to rest in order to support new life next spring. Still, I feel bad jerking it out of the soil and throwing it on the compost heap. The dried leaves that I saved throughout the summer were shredded and tilled into the soil in the fall to provide the breathing space the worms need to aid decomposition and release nutrients. When I finished my soil preparation, the tilled garden of winter sits like a blank canvas waiting to be painted with plants in the spring.

Before I lay out the spring garden, I make a list of the things I need to buy in addition to the seeds and starter plants. I know I will need some soil acidifier, slow release organic fertilizer, and biodegradable twine to string the bamboo poles for the climbing beans to wrap their tendrils around. I need birdseed to entice the birds into the backyard away from the garden. All of these needs mean that I will be scheduling a trip to the feed store in the next couple of weeks.

I love to visit the feed store; it is a trip into halcyon days I heard about but never experienced. Built in 1906, it is a dark red brick building with doors wide enough to drive your wagon in. There are hundreds of little wooden bins inside the store with different kinds of seeds in them. At the old wood and glass counter you are waited on by gentlemen who have probably been at the feed store for 50 years. They wear denim over-alls with checked shirts and neckerchiefs that have a red and white pattern on them. They call me, "Young

lady." When the old timers are not waiting on customers, they sit around and talk – about weather, local politics, the changes to downtown. The tasks of their day are predetermined; they work at the feed store. They laugh a lot. I can't imagine what they would be doing if they weren't there every day. They would probably just die from boredom.

Building my annual garden plan involves looking through seed catalogues, gardening books, and notes from previous years. I make varietal selections and draw little plant pictures on graph paper to make sure I have space for everything I want. I like to work in the back room we somewhat self-consciously call the library. It is a room of warmth, light, and comforts. The room has two sky lights and the entire back wall is filled by six large windows. Above the regular glass windows are four stained glass ones showing a red flower being sipped by a turquoise hummingbird on a field of wavy clear glass. The ceiling is high and domed; it is painted light gold like that walls. The floor has walnut colored wood planking that fits snugly against the black granite fireplace. On one side of the room is a maple work table that used to be in my parent's kitchen. On the other side there are two comfortable chairs and a reading light. In between the work table and the reading chairs are book shelves filled to almost over-flowing and a small writing desk.

To create the right frame of mind to plan this year's garden, I start a fire in the gas fireplace and then light a stick of pinion scented incense. I prepare a cup of hot chocolate with a hint of mint and pour it into my favorite mug, the one I got with my subscription to Herb Quarterly. It says on the outside, "When the world wearies and ceases to satisfy, there's always the garden." I gather up my books and drawing materials and place them on the work table in neat stacks. With everything in place, I am ready to begin planning.

On the top of the graph paper, I make a list of what I want to plant, constraints on plant location, successful varieties, and previous failures. Then, I draw an outline of the garden with each blue square of graph paper representing $\frac{1}{2}$ square foot of garden space. Next, I color in the permanent herbs; the rosemary, thyme, and lemon balm. I don't bother putting in the mint. Mint spreads everywhere in the garden and has to be removed like a weed in summer because it intrudes on the other plants. You only have to plant mint one time to have mint forever.

I identify an area for the hot weather vegetables: tomatoes, peppers, and beans. These need to be in a different location than they were last year so that the soil is not depleted of the specific nutrients that nourish these plants. The remaining areas are set aside for cool weather crops like lettuce and the annual herbs like cilantro, basil, parsley, and oregano. I always add a few flowers to attract bees and butterflies and a few herbs that discourage bugs or invite predatory insects. Finally, I will select a location for the catnip. This is a special treat for my two felines and must be placed in a location where their chewing and rolling around will not harm the other plants.

I am having such a good time laying out the future garden I wonder about becoming a master gardener in my retirement. I ask myself, "Would planning other people's gardens be as satisfying as planning my own?" Maybe I could raise and sell herbs? Or, I could study herbal medicine? It makes me anxious to think of all the possibilities with no idea how to start deciding. So, I move onto plant variety selection which is something I know how to do.

I begin by perusing the seed catalogues. It is easy to be seduced by the descriptions in the catalogues. They have beautiful pictures and all of their varieties grow vigorously and are insect and disease resistant. Experience has hardened me against their claims however. Your decisions need to be ground-truthed, as we say at work. But even with the limitations dictated by our climate, weather, and soil conditions, there are many good choices among

the hundreds of options offered in the catalogues. So slowly, savoring the process, I select four good tomato varieties: one small cherry, two hybrid tomatoes that produce the medium sized fruit that is best suited for our early summer heat, and one heirloom variety, Brandywine. Heirloom tomatoes are challenging to grow here but if they survive, their fruit is sublime. In gardening one learns that there is always a trade off between what you want and what will work.

As I take a break to refill my hot chocolate, I walk past the work desk with the retirement papers waiting to be signed sitting prominently on top. I can't put the decision off much longer because the closing date of the offer is two weeks away. Those papers just sit there though and laugh at me like a school yard bully. "Scaredy cat! Scaredy cat! What are you gonna do? Huh? Huh? What are you so afraid of?" I want to yell back at the papers, "I am not afraid" which would not be quite true, but it is what I always said to bullies. The truth is I don't know what I want to do with the rest of my life.

I walk away from the desk and head into the kitchen. I refresh the hot chocolate and return to planning my garden. There is about 1/3 of the space remaining for the cool weather crops. One of the frustrations of Texas gardening is the overlap in the growing seasons between when you harvest cool weather crops like spinach and lettuce and when you have to plant hot weather ones. You can't use all of your space all of the time - you have to make some choices. I usually short-change the cool weather crops because the ones in the supermarket are almost as good as the ones I grow. Whereas, there is nothing better than going to the garden in the morning and picking tomatoes for dinner that night. There, I am finished.

I look back at the garden plan. It looks good. I'm proud of it. I gather up my pencils, papers, books, and seed catalogues. I will put the garden plan on the refrigerator door to remind me of what I need to do and inspire me to practice patience a little while longer. As I leave the library, I walk past the retirement papers one more time. Somehow they don't seem quite as scary. Maybe I do not have to plan for the rest of my life. Maybe I can just plan for next year. Maybe tomorrow I should get another piece of graph paper and sharpen the colored pencils.