

GARDEN HANDS

BY LAURIE NILES

If the eyes are the window to the soul, what do our hands reveal of our selves, the pathway of our livelihoods and passions? As the mid-spring season revels after hibernation of winter and reveals her direction for the forthcoming summer, I have felt the life cycles of gardens transfer through my hands. I have realized my home garden allows me to remove myself from what at times seem to be the intensities of life. With morning soil betwixt my hands and toes comes a different focus of detail, creation, and problem solving. . . a sort of therapy, if you will.

Some hire others' skilled hands to lend support or gather



with friends in a playful effort to lighten our laborious load, but we all walk into our garden canvas and create a respite from the whirl of our daily commitments and responsibilities. Naturally, a garden is without exception to the rules of life: neglect is endless and can be felt and seen with pests, overgrowth, weeds, and dryness. The gains I feel from interacting with soil, compost, and flowering blossom and vegetable, the cohesiveness and creation, gratify me, the only critic.

Where else in life can I slip into the abyss of learning at my leisure, no teacher directing my intent? Granted, I may solicit direction and advice about deterring gophers, snails, slugs, or leaf curl. I may read master gardeners' schematic plans or toss gardening ideas about with others. But my only companion planting seems to be my heart's desire to grow roses and grapes near each other or basil and tomatoes as neighbors. As I walk among the leafy greens and budding flowers, a chance glance at the bounty and beauty I have created satiates me. My hands take on a command and strength that seem naturally attuned to what needs to be done. How do they learn this? Perhaps in the same way my hands learned to prune.

It seems that I have forever been in love with the thinning and pruning of trees: the cutting/pinching back to encourage the flourishing of new growth. It is a task I know needs attending to. I have fallen asleep at night with my hands wrapped around an expert's book solely dedicated to pruning. My dreams then filled with ladders I ascended to the highest gangly limbs that had to be removed for the wealth and health of the tree's future. Orchardists often groom a number one pruner, whose hands reflect the orchard owner's farming design. Fruit trees can all look the same when riding past those dizzying, flickering, tree-filtering sun patterns. Yet to walk an orchard and see the nuances and to guess which crew of hands walked and talked the rows. . . well, all can be seen in the pruner's hands.

For a year or two, in the late fall, early winter, I would wake early, gather and dress my druthers to greet the cold, often wet day, and prune away dead peach limbs. I cut the limbs, yet my heart and head were often counting water routes down my arms and nose as I worked in the light mist of rain or dewy morning air. I was doing a task that needed



to be done. I had read volumes of books and heard hours of lectures dedicated to the ways and whys of pruning, yet I stood ladder to ladder next to others, watching and still trying to learn from their cutting decisions, feeling merely mechanical.

Then, one daybreak as I sat atop an orchard ladder, I was washed with the sensations of the forthcoming day, season, and year. Somehow I became a part of all that I was doing. I was cutting away the dead, which no longer aided the tree and actually took energy from its growth. I was directing with my pruning saw and blade the design of how the tree would grow. Pruning seemed to speak volumes about how to live life. Keeping dead scarred wood wounds around us only scratches and tears at us. Rarely can the limbs out of our reach support us. Our vitality begins in our inner core and from there branches out with flowering affection as we are able to lend support and connect with those around us. My love of pruning has become an overwhelming sense of choreography. Which way do I want to shape the tree for **next year's** fruit production? I consider how the summer leafy boughs will bend, where the sun in six months' time will stream through just enough not to burn the fruit but to enhance it, and, of course, how much growth to leave atop the tree as an offering to the birds. All these questions seem at times to have decisive answers in my hands. . . .

As I write this, I consider the gazillion and three "garden projects" I have dancing in my planning mind (mending fences, abating encroaching vines, transplanting, collecting seeds, etc.). I walk out of doors to where my heart flutters with the possibilities of the day, and I consider where my hands will lead me today. They are already stained from a morning passed picking cherries for a summer libation project. What next? Will they belong to the chef gardener and cultivate the salad green area or to the flower girl always ready to present a bouquet?

Childlike pathways weave past the sweet scents and bird splash puddles that enliven where I live. At the end of the day, washing away the cherry stains from my hands, I ready myself for interaction with the outside world, one without ladybugs and compost, a place where two hands embracing trade questions and wonderment about livelihood and passions. 🌱

Laurie Niles has always been in love with providing food to others. Whether she is helping a peach tree bear fruit, caressing the peach in its journey to someone's enjoyment, or designing ever new ways for the peach to be enjoyed, Laurie bonds with the "act of food." Grateful restaurant customers from Café Sandino, Upper Crust, Kramore Inn, and Red Tavern have enjoyed her presence and sincerity. She also co-hosts Two Penny Opera, commutes by bicycle, appreciates music, and enjoys being a good friend.