

Haddam Garden Club

August, 2024

Garden Blog Article

by Terry Twigg



Plan B

I'm caught in a never-ending game of catch-up. Last year I surrendered to the unrelenting heat and neglected my gardens for the last half of the season. I promised myself I'd make it up come spring, but was sick during those critical weeks in which inch-high weeds bolt to a foot and a half and formerly well-behaved perennials sprout long ungainly stems, the kind you want to just cut back by half, but can't, because the only leaves are at the very top.

So now, every morning before it gets too hot, I wade out to do battle with thickets of overgrown plant life. I've never been a morning person, but I've trained myself to get up with the sun, and find I enjoy the early quiet, before lawn mowers and leaf blowers shatter the morning's peace. It's shocking how so much—in fact, nearly all—of the work is attributable to a small number of invasives. Bittersweet, of course; the hillside garden was nearly bare of it a year ago, but already firmly-rooted, long, pencil-thickness stems snake out in every direction. Nightshade is everywhere, with flowers already starting to develop into berries, and when I grasp a stem to try to pull it out, the tiny prickles along the stem go right through my gloves. I know the source of that particular scourge: the guy who brought the fill told me he'd taken it from his own fields, and the nightshade appeared the very next spring. Virginia creeper came from who knows where. A small percentage of people get a poison-ivy-like rash from it. I'm one of them, and since I didn't notice I was grabbing handfuls of it until it was too late, I'm now covered in anti-itch cream. Tomorrow I'll be sure to wear long sleeves AND long gloves.

A brand-new addition to my hate list: mile-a-minute vine. I don't think it hitched a ride in a nursery pot, because I haven't planted anything new in that area, so it must be the gift of a bird, chipmunk, or deer. Maybe that deer I caught pulling green apples off one of the trees in the courtyard: it ignored my scolding from the doorway, moved only a few feet when I walked toward it, and then, insolently, noticed the second apple tree, changed direction and headed toward it! Only my all-out charge changed its mind.

Anyway, mile-a-minute is an all too accurate description of this plant. You can easily pull out huge armfuls of the stuff. Looking at your wheelbarrow heaped high, you have a sense of accomplishment, but it only lasts for a few moments, which, you realize, is about how long it will take to regrow. Some plants protect themselves with

strong stems, difficult to yank, but this plant has adopted the opposite strategy. Its stems are very thin and fragile, and break off somewhere along its length. To get rid of it for good, you have to trace the nearly-invisible stem down to the ground, and dig it out. Riiiiight. I'm hoping a thick layer of cardboard and mulch will put an end to it.

...And right here, my friends, everything changed. I wrote these musings fairly early in July, when I quite reasonably thought that a consistent hour or two every morning, before it gets too hot, would get things well in hand by the end of the summer. But, after years of taking for granted I'd live out my life with all factory-original parts, I'd recently learned I'd need to outsource both hips sometime in the next year. And then I tripped in the courtyard, on the aforementioned cardboard, and suddenly "sometime" was "the day after tomorrow."

I'm two weeks post-op now, walking pretty well, but keeping a cane in hand for uneven surfaces. I've taken a turn or two around the gardens, shocked by just how quickly crabgrass can overrun a space. My nephews pulled Raphael from his pool because he was experiencing technical difficulties; now he waits forlornly, stranded next to the mums. He'll wait indefinitely, since I can't lift his hundred pounds of cast bronze. Just as well, though; the pool is full of tadpoles, and I don't want to disturb them. I can deadhead, though possibly not take away the resultant piles of debris, and I might be able to prune here and there. I can pick the blackberries and however many peaches the critters decide to spare, at least on the lower branches. I tried pulling some errant balsam plants—they're soft-stemmed and easily pulled—but the hip said no. Not yet. Doctor says I have no restrictions, but warns that overdoing it will lead to setbacks. I can sit down to weed...but could I get up again? Cane in one hand, phone in a pocket just in case, I'm suddenly in hostile territory.

Is time catching up with me? Already? Surely it's too soon. I'll spend the rest of the summer testing my limits and trying to do just a bit more every day, but looking for ways to cut back the work without losing the joy. Wish me luck.