



At Year's End

In the run-up to Thanksgiving I didn't spend much time in the garden, so it's now a race to finish the essentials before frozen ground, and Tuesday's suggestion of snow, make further work impossible. A handful of plants I bought earlier in the year, still in their pots, still reproaching me, must at least be heeled in. Most of the first cord of firewood has been moved to the stack in the back yard, one wheelbarrow-full at a time. (When I first saw this property, I thought "The house is set back so far from the street. How nice!" I have been reminded of that with every bag of groceries, load of mulch, and stick of wood I've had to carry in. Potential homebuyers, take note.)

Raphael's pool has been emptied and its ten resident frogs ferried via bucket to Someday Pond, where they can spend the winter safely dug into the mud. It seems improbable that a pool only about six feet in diameter could support that many amphibians, but the census has been pretty consistent over the years. And while a great blue heron occasionally cruises Someday Pond, I've yet to see it near the pool, so maybe I should give the frogs more credit for strategic thinking.

The gardens look ragged, with brown leaves and dead stalks everywhere, but I have the conservationists' blessing to leave the mess until spring, so insects and small critters have food and shelter. I'm happy to leave everything except the forest of mugwort. I didn't get it cut down before it went to seed—a mortal error—but if it's cut to the ground this month, then smothered with cardboard and mulch next spring before new growth gets going, I may stand half a chance of getting it under control. Miserable, wretched invasive!

But the biggest accomplishment isn't botanical but structural: the columns are back! After they went down in a big windstorm last spring, after I spent most of this spring and summer repairing the damaged ones and replacing the shattered ones, after one carpenter failed to show up, they are finally restored. It seems like karma that my Greek-ish columns had their comeback right after I returned from a trip to see the real thing. Column trivia: I never could keep straight the differences between Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian column styles, until a travel guidebook simplified it: the fancier the style, the longer the name. Mine are Doric, like the Parthenon.

Oh, they're not quite finished. Pressure-treated replacement parts can't be painted until spring. More critically, as I learned the hard way, a single line of columns is inherently unstable, and needs perpendicular bracing of some sort. How to do that and make it make sense? With the advice of architect friends, I'm planning to add a small crosswise pergola at the center. It will straddle a set of steps at one end and provide a setting for a bench next to Raphael's pool at the other, so even though it wasn't part of the original concept, it will look like it belongs. I hope.

But that won't happen until spring. Meanwhile, the structure remains vulnerable. My very knowledgeable neighbor Brad advised driving stakes into the ground and tying everything down. Okay, I thought, a bit daunted by the prospect, but set out on Black Friday to give it my best shot. I called Brad with one follow-up question—"What was the name of that knot you recommended?" and five minutes later he showed up with ropes, a sledgehammer, and a generous heart. I watched as he drove stakes and made knots I've never seen before, and even though Thanksgiving was over I was so grateful to have such a kind neighbor. We ran out of rope with one more to do, so I'll be climbing a ladder and doing my best to copy Brad's knots just as soon as this article is finished. No, of course I'm not procrastinating.

As soon as the columns were up I was struck, again, by the way they changed my perception of the land. Column-less, the area was just random space, but their presence defined a courtyard. Without them, my front yard was just an assortment of elements—garage, house, retaining wall—but now they all relate to each other in a seamless whole. Garden designers call this the "genius loci," or spirit of the place. It's a concept that's hard to define, but you know it when you see it. I'm so glad to have it back.

As another year ends, I've reached a personal milestone: with this article I begin my seventh year of writing for the garden club. For myself, I resolve to come up with twelve new topics in 2026. For all of you, I hope that all your dreams and resolutions are realized in the New Year.