

In the garden with Shobha Vanchiswar



Amaryllis buds
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Simplifying some tried and true methods, experimenting with others

In general, I'm not one to create upheavals in the garden. Unless something is dreadfully wrong, I won't redo entire flowerbeds, uproot shrubs, remove walls, etc., I prefer to make slow but sure changes. Dig up temperamental inhabitants to relocate them elsewhere. Tweak a design to create something fresh. I like working with what is there and making it different and better. The big projects have been undertaken only with much consideration and research, like when we replaced the existing, albeit humdrum hedge with the Belgian espalier of fruit trees.

I am, however, open to new ideas and methods. Science and technology have introduced us to many novel tools and plants. They have certainly made easy numerous tasks. However, in a rush to be modern, many simple but wise methods have been cast aside. In the myriad tools in my possession, only a select few are my constant companions. They feel as familiar as old friends and fit perfectly in my hand. They do the job best. None are new designs, but the materials of which they are made are improvements on the old. It is brilliant when the wheel itself is not reinvented, just made into a better wheel.

Cutting out some coddling of amaryllis bulbs

Today, when chemicals and such are eschewed and natural, organic practices revived, it is worth re-examining some of the old ways. In my garden, organic has been the credo for as far back as I can remember. But over the years, I find myself questioning some methods and trying out things that make better sense.

An absurdly simple case in point is how the old amaryllis bulbs got treated. In the past, I followed the advice of those wiser and more experienced. Once the amaryllis had finished blooming indoors, it was cared for like any other indoor plant. Given light and water, it thrived. In summer it was brought outdoors to continue growing. In late fall, they were taken into the unheated basement where they were encouraged to go dormant. The leaves dried up and were cut away. The pots were then laid on their sides for a couple of months. After that time, the amaryllis were re-potted and once again coaxed to grow and bloom.

A couple of years ago, I decided the basement process seemed like a lot of fuss and babying. In nature, these bulbs go through their growth cycle just like other plants. So I stopped taking them into the basement. Instead, in late fall when the leaves start looking ragged, they are clipped off, the pots are taken indoors and kept where they get light, water and a very occasional dose of organic fertilizer. They grow, put out fresh leaves towards spring, are brought outside as soon as it feels right and eventually they bloom. This is more true to their nature and I'm perfectly content to have it be so.

The difference compost makes to the good health of the garden is immeasurable

Composting used to be an imperative part of gardening. Then we all got away from it, bought our compost at high prices, sometimes paid instead for chemical fertilizers and now, here we are back to doing what we should never have stopped doing. Getting rid of all the non-dairy and non-animal waste from the kitchen to the compost bin has not only reduced the garbage we create, but the difference the compost makes to the good health of the garden is immeasurable. And for no added impact to the pocket book. Even if you don't really have flower or vegetable beds, it makes sense to compost. Trees and shrubs will benefit from compost added to their base.

What has been most remarkable is how much our lawn has improved. Instead of other organic fertilizer, we have been applying a good layer of compost. From how well the new grass grows to keeping weeds down, it has definitely been something to cheer about. And before you wonder, a well-balanced compost pile does not attract any more critters than those that already exist around us. The material is after all only leaves, stalks, peels, seeds and eggshells. In my compost, the natural egg cartons are torn up and added as well.

Experimenting with sowing some perennial and annual seeds before the ground freezes

So at this time, I'm considering another old planting method. I'm planning to mimic what happens in nature and try sowing certain perennial and winter hardy annual seeds directly in the ground just before the earth freezes. Many perennial seeds need "cold stratification," which means they need to be subjected to cold and moisture before germination can occur. You will notice seed packets suggesting you store the seeds in the refrigerator for a few months.

However, in the normal course of things, these plants scatter their seeds at the end of their season. The seeds land in various places, get covered by falling leaves and such, endure the winter by first being protected by the frost and snow and then get moisture from snow melt. Eventually, they start growing in time for the next growing season. Think about those plants that pop up each spring and you know you never planted any of them! Several types of herbs can also be successfully propagated by direct sowing.

It's true that in nature the plants put out a huge number of seeds to ensure that there is a good percent that survives and germinates. When humans try it, the numbers are smaller. And so, we cold stratify indoors. But I'm curious to see how this will work for me. We have forgotten that in the past seeds were planted outside in the fall quite routinely, typically in late October.

Because it has been unusually mild this fall, I've put off the sowing until mid-November. I'm going to conduct this experiment with seeds of monkshood, phlox, hellebores and coneflower. I'm also going to try hardy winter annuals, including sweet peas, pansy and sweet alyssum, as well as biennials foxgloves and hollyhocks. If this works, it'll be terrific to have truly hardy plants and my load of spring chores will be that much lighter.

If you love Cornell Cooperative Extension, write your state and local representative now!

It has just come to my attention that due to state and local budget cuts, Westchester County is in danger of losing the Cornell Cooperative Extension. As we all know the CCE is very important in the role it plays. CCE provides yearlong services to Westchester residents, including nutrition services, 4H, and environmental and horticultural information. In many ways, we have come to take their efforts on our behalf for granted.

In my opinion, it would be a travesty to lose CCE. I urge everyone to contact his or her local and state representatives to emphasize the need to support this organization. Please do whatever you can. For more information about all the services provided by CCE, go to <http://counties.cce.cornell.edu/westchester/>.