

In the garden with Shobha Vanchiswar



At some point, close the books!

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Stop talking about it, and just start gardening!

I'm often asked by aspiring gardeners for the key to making a garden. They have the desire but don't have the confidence. They've seen other gardens and are inspired and intimidated in equal parts. Usually they ask for the "real" secret to gardening. The reality is that there is no secret formula. What I have to say is basic and practical, which can sound too mundane or easy to be the key. Gardening, as I've always espoused, is learned by doing. The best way to garden is to stop talking about it and just begin.

Keep in mind that humans have gardened from ancient times. With no fancy tools, fewer plant selections and less information, they made lovely, productive gardens. So what possible reason is there for you to think you cannot be a decent gardener? Trust me, you can do it. Better yet, trust yourself.

Dos and don'ts of getting started

Start small and do your homework. Know ahead what you truly want in a garden because it should reflect you. Be prepared to make mistakes and be prepared for wonderful surprises. As in all things worthwhile, gardening needs effort and patience.

No true garden is made in a rush. You must make the time. Gardening sporadically does not cut it. So resolve to get up a little early or make time in the evening. Doing this regularly really does prepare the mind to expect the activity. It's just like committing to work out regularly. I believe if something is important enough to us, we always make the time.

Don't try to copy some other garden. Use ideas from places that inspire you, but put your own unique stamp to it. Garden for yourself, not some imagined visitor.

Read about plants, gardens and gardening, but be sure to actually visit as many gardens as you can. Talk to the creators of those gardens. Pick their brains. This is crucial to novice and expert gardeners. The learning never stops. Take photos and carry a notebook to jot down ideas and names of desirable plants. Find out all you can about those plants. As in life, education is valuable and success depends on it.

Even the world's best gardeners have "blunder stories" to share

In recent years, I've been privileged to speak with some world famous gardeners. Every single one of them gardens because of a real passion and each is quite open to new information and understanding. More importantly, they are the first to admit to their errors in the past and laugh about it. They are happy to share all sorts of "blunder stories" just so it teaches others what not to do. The rest of us can follow that example. Like children eager for every new toy, they too show a child-like interest in any plant they have not encountered before. Ultimately, it's all about being willing to try things and expressing our individual visions.

Don't blindly follow trends in gardening. Sift through and pick ideas that actually appeal to your intelligence, personality and sense of aesthetics. Do your research to make sure it is feasible. Then inhale deeply and take the plunge. It's okay, no one has to approve but you. If you love it, others will too. If they don't, that's their problem. This is your piece of paradise so own it.