

In the garden with Shobha Vanchiswar



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Flowers, flowers everywhere!

I wish I could bottle this moment in the garden.

Spring is almost done and summer is easing in. The last of the alliums and amsonia still greet me but I see that the lilies and hydrangeas have arrived. The roses continue to run riot. My cup overflows with such abundance.

With so much to captivate the heart, the weeds go unnoticed and I give myself permission to sit in the garden and dawdle. You should too or else you'll make me look lazy. If I didn't sit around doing nothing, how else would I notice that the birdhouse on the old cherry tree is now occupied by wrens? Or, the Paul's Himalayan Musk rose scampering all over the ancient apple tree is having its best year to date? Each time a breeze comes through, its perfume is carried to all corners of the garden. Even into the house. And if I weren't sitting idle, would I hear the low, reassuring hum of the bees as they go about their business?

An excellent year for flowers, to spite the winter?

Despite the hard winter and roller coaster weather, this seems to be an excellent year for flowers. All the plants have bloomed exceedingly well. The irises and peonies were breathtaking but alas, just as they peaked, the sudden high temperatures burned the blossoms. In a wink, they were all done. However, there have been plenty of other flowers with which I've consoled myself.

For one thing, one of the pots of agapanthus that had not bloomed in years has put out several stalks bearing fat buds. In my book that is cause for a big celebration. And then there are the roses. All the shrubs and climbers are heavy with flowers but I'm especially thrilled to see the Bianca rose given to me years ago by Henriette Suhr, completely covered in rose pink flowers. A banner year.

How to keep hydrangea clippings from wilting indoors, until you want them to

Now I come to the hydrangeas. I'm quite amazed to see each of them bearing a multitude of flowers.

Even the ones in shade are displaying more than in the past. Never mind that I have no real idea why this is so, but I'm taking full credit. Actually, I do have a theory. The plants have been stressed by the winter and what followed. In the interest of ensuring survival of the species in the face of potential calamity, they have put out more flowers to increase the odds of pollination, thus releasing more fruits and seeds for posterity. I'm still going to take credit. You can too.

Naturally, with so much hydrangea in bloom, there will be many vases filled with them indoors. When I bring in hydrangea, I trim the stems and hold the cut ends in a pot of boiling water for a few seconds. This step helps to keep the flowers from wilting too suddenly as they are sometimes prone to do. The steam/moist heat removes any air bubble in the stem and clears the passage for water uptake.

If I think I'm going to want to dry the hydrangeas, then after the hot water step, I place them in only a couple of inches of water. I set the pitchers holding the flowers where they will be enjoyed but I do nothing further. A few weeks later, the water is all gone and the flowers have begun drying nicely. Simple.

When hydrangeas have finished blooming, it signals to me that it is time to take cuttings to root. This is one of those very easy things that yield impressive results. Come next spring, the new plants make charming gifts. Often, despite their youth, they will bear flowers. Makes for even better looking gifts.

And so, I linger in the garden savoring the season that delights all the senses. Happy summer to all.



Paul's Himalayan Musk rose climbing in an ancient apple tree