

## In the garden with Shobha Vanchiswar



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### Turning Over a New Leaf

Psychologically, it is this time of year that has me full of new resolutions. A spanking new school year is translated to another opportunity to do better in all aspects of life. The garden stands ripe to receive such resolve.

Having been duly subjected all summer long to the idiosyncrasies of the weather and myself, it awaits patiently for some attention. It is with some trepidation that I survey the lay of my land. I keep expecting the worst. I imagine the flower beds completely overrun by weeds, pests of all kinds breeding happily and destroying choice plants, vines gone amok and strangling their neighbors. Although it has never been anywhere near this nightmare, I'm always nervous when I make my first reconnaissance. It must be the guilt I feel for not doing much all season.

There is such relief when I discover that things are mostly well and any damage can be fixed. Even those things that at first alarm morph into doable tasks. It really is about keeping calm and observing objectively. Make a plan and get organized. Putting in time and effort will pay off.

The excess of weeds that appear to obliterate the 'real' plants can be cleared with patience. The visual signs of pests usually provoke a more visceral reaction and it is tempting to counterattack with strong chemicals. But instead, if I take a metaphorical step back and study the situation without emotion getting the better of me, common sense prevails. There are always more gentle but effective organic choices. They just require more time to act and prove their efficacy. In today's climate of instant gratification that can seem hugely inconvenient but in the long run, I know this is what it means to truly care for ourselves and our environment.

Plants lost for one reason or other can be replaced. There is no denying that each loss hurts but one must be practical. Although I think about the monetary loss as well, I approach the matter with pragmatism. I see if I can afford to replace the plant with another just like it or find an alternative that better suits the pocketbook. The wonderful thing about gardening is that a plethora of choices exist. There's something for all tastes and budgets.

It is harder to lose a grand old tree. One can replace it with another young tree but we may or may not be around to see it at full maturity. This is when it helps to handle the matter with vision. Firstly, by all means bemoan the loss of the beloved tree. Then, silently send up thanks for it having served you so well over the years. Next, see if the parts of the tree can be used for other purposes. Don't assume it must be chopped for firewood only. Perhaps a garden bench can be made from the trunk. Discs from trunk or limbs can be used as pavers in the garden. Smaller discs if sanded and buffed can be charming coasters. If the tree was really huge, planks can be cut for floors, doors or table tops. Sturdy limbs make good posts for a rustic fence. Chop up what remains to make mulch that can be spread in the garden beds. In each case, the tree will continue to live on in a different way.

I remember as a child when a friend's mother had a beautiful tree swing made from a fallen giant. The swing seat was wide and long and could hold at least six children all at once. I loved running my hand over the smooth, polished surface. I recall spending several summer afternoons stretched out on that plank reading and snoozing. It hung from another lovely tree that provided delicious shade from the sweltering sun. Today, my friend's children still enjoy that swing.

Having addressed the fallen tree, the decision must be made about the next step. One could simply put in another tree in its place. In this case, I recommend planting with land stewardship in mind. Choose something for future generations to enjoy. An American oak perhaps? In any case, resist the urge to plant anything that is touted as a fast grower. They are usually shallow rooted and the first to come down in a storm.

Another option is to see this as an occasion to make a new garden. The absence of the tree would have opened that area to sunlight. Now would be the time to do something fresh and creative.

Plants damaged by the fall of the tree are not necessarily lost. There's every reason to expect them to make a comeback. So don't dig up the plants in a hurry. Cut them back, wait till spring and then look for signs of new life.

As summer winds down and the fall flowers are yet to bloom, the gaps in plantings are seen clearly. I also take note of plants that are struggling or plainly not right for the location and seize the opportunity to experiment with as yet untried combinations of plants or try out something unfamiliar. Dip into my ever lengthening wish list of plants. With each new effort, I stretch and grow my gardening mind a little.

And so one goes about the task of reparation, restoration and renewal. Just as our children have the chance to make this the best year yet, we too have that same chance with our gardens.

Like so many of Shobha's articles, this week's article is very inspiring. And very timely since it comes only a few weeks after Hurricane Irene. She has captured the one of the three key concepts in the recycling initiative we should all follow. Recycling is really the 3 Rs which are Reduce, Reuse and Recycle. By reusing our natural resources we are helping the earth be a better place not only for our children, but for our children's children. I love sitting on a bench made out of natural wood versus a bench made out of man made materials like plastic or metal. Thank you Shobha!

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