

DIGGING IN

At Troy Community Gardens
Madison, WI

The Zen of Weeding

By Carrie Kilman

Joe and I took down part of our garden tonight--we dug up the potatoes, pulled the last of the carrots, and yanked out two zucchini plants destined for the towering compost pile. We plucked baskets of heirloom tomatoes and okra and tomatillos popping at the seams of their paper-thin cases. I'm not sure how or when the end of the season arrived, but here it is, and here we are on autumn's threshold, days shorter and nights cooler and smelling of fireplaces.

We've been gone the past few days, and the weeds had reached that do-or-die stage of almost choking our spinach patch. To me, the best thing about gardens at the start of fall is squeezing out a final round of food, so I crawled between the rows and pulled the weeds by hand, feeling each root system resist,

then the small satisfaction of tugging it free.

Joe tries telling me the hoe would be faster and more efficient, but I prefer weeding the tool-free way: In doing so, I acquainted myself with each plant, thrusting itself up through cracked earth in a way that must, from the plant's perspective, feel both shockingly brave and remarkable. The last time I paid this spinach any mind, they were seeds, with the look and feel of Grape-Nuts, or all-natural cat litter. And now here they were, very obviously spinach, spreading their waxy leaves in welcome to the wide, blue sky.

I know my vegetables. I know each of them. I know which okra plants need trimming; which tomato plants likes extra water; which leek stems, for some reason, attract more weeds than others.

You spend hours of every week alone in a garden with nothing but plants for company, on your hands and knees so you can inspect each leaf and flower, aware of their existence from the moment they were seeds falling through your fingers, and you will know what it's like to commune with vegetables.

Our garden isn't huge, but it isn't tiny, either--800 square feet, a double plot at a community garden some 6 miles

WORK DAY

SATURDAY
October 24
9 AM -12 NOON

If it is raining on Oct. 24, the work day will be changed to Oct. 25, 9 a.m.

Hnub ua haujlwm pab dawb yog 10/24/09, 9 a.m. txog 12 teev tavsus, yog los nag muab pauv rau 10/25/09 9 a.m.

Día de Trabajo

El Sábado 24 de octubre 9 a.m. -12 medio día
Si llegara a llover el 24 de octubre, el día de trabajo será cambiado para el día 25 de octubre 9 a.m.

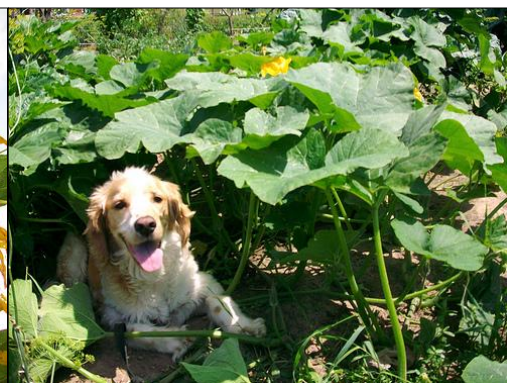


Photo by Carrie Kilman

north of our neighborhood. We drive here a few nights each week, and at least once every weekend. It's not as often as I'd like; this summer, even busier than last year, I felt the urge to buy a house simply for the yard, for the ability to step out of my back door in bare feet and be there, in the thick of green things growing.

This is what I love about the garden: the chance to feel what it means to *be*. To exist in a way that doesn't happen in shopping malls, at the grocery store, in your cubicle, in your car while you're

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Late-season tomatoes; sunflower in the act of fading; Milo the Garden Dog getting some shade. Photos by Carrie Kilman, Troy Gardens, 2009

Zen of Weeding

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driving 45 miles an hour in a 30 mph zone just to get where you are going a few minutes faster.

Being in the garden makes me forget about cell phones. Being here helps me appreciate the world around me in a way that is active and immediate and steeped in an almost cellular attachment to other living things. Being here awakens my own awareness of that necessary connection wrapping itself from person to person like invisible Christmas tree lights, shining bright with hope that better things can happen if we all just dig in a little--and I mean *all* of us, even people we don't think we like very much or understand, even people who think urban farming is a waste of time, even Republicans.

I think of gardening the way some friends describe their runner's high. You reach a place where the world falls

away, and all that remains are you and your thoughts, and the tangy smell of ripening, and the hard sting of dirt packed tight under your fingernails. The highs and lows of your day melt into an evened being, and your breathing does, too, as if your emotional self has been pounded down in a mortar and pestle and all that's left is the essence of *you*--the essence of what you care about and how you wish to live in the world and all that you find beautiful.

All of that exists in every tug of weed, every leaf examined. All of that exists, and multiplies and grows, every time we tend to the well-being of something greater than ourselves.

Joe came with me to the garden tonight and aimed the watering hose at the opposite end of our long tract. This is our routine: I weed, he waters, each of us consumed by our own quiet motions. We rarely talk in the garden, except to say things like, "Look! We have

lettuce!" or, "Can you bring me the trowel, please?"

I thought tonight about all the things I think about here, in this small slice of silence where time stills until the sky darkens, and how grateful I am for this regular pause. I happened to look up at that moment, and there was Joe, watering the nearby okra. I recognized the look on his face, the one that says, *I am here, but I am elsewhere, too.*

And so I broke the silence.

"What do you think about while you're watering?" I asked him.

He looked down at me, still on my knees in the dirt. And he smiled.

"Music," he said. "I think about music."

Carrie Kilman, her partner, Joe Kollar, and their dog, Milo, just finished their second season at Troy Garden. This essay originally appeared in Proximity Magazine, at www.ProximityMag.org



Upcoming Events

Community Gardens Work Day / Closing Day*

Sat., Oct. 24, 9 am - 12 noon

*** All gardeners located in plots H1 through H120 (plowed section) must have all non-plant material removed from their gardens, woody plant material chopped up, and compost piles spread out by 9 a.m. on 10/24. If this is not done, you will be considered in bad standing for next season and may not get your plot(s) back.**

For details about this event, please call the Community GroundWorks office at 240-0409.

Aluminum Can Collection

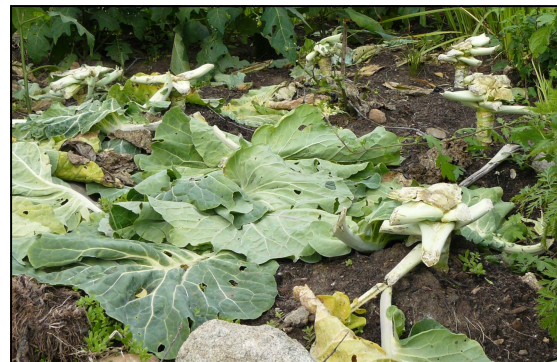


Thanks to everyone who donated their aluminum cans throughout the season. We will collect any remaining cans you have on our last work day, Saturday, October 24. That should push us over the \$250 mark this year. Keep collecting them throughout the winter months, and we'll start again on Opening Day next year.

COMPOSTING WORKSHOP

Over 45 people attended the Composting Workshop held at Troy Community Gardens on September 19, including some folks from as far away as Appleton. Attendees learned about methods employed by one of our Hmong gardeners, Mai Thao, to incorporate garden waste within her plot, helping to nourish the soil for next season. In addition, Joan Laurion, a local composting expert and owner of compostbasics™, taught us the proper way to compost using the bin method. You can use any type of bin, but even something as simple as a mesh wire cage that can be made larger and smaller, makes a great and inexpensive container for your compost. Listed below are some of the lessons we learned from Mai and Joan.

Some types of composting don't involve bins at all. Mai showed us how you can simply dig a shallow trench in the dirt and bury old plants such as dried up bean plants. Chopping them up in pieces helps them break down faster but it isn't necessary. And, they don't need to be dried up. You can bury green material this way too. Live plants, such as greens that have bolted, can be chopped up or left whole and simply laid down on the ground to serve as "carpet mulch." They will eventually dry up and be incorporated into the soil. If you are worried about picking weeds and placing them on the ground as carpet mulch, just make sure you remove as much of the dirt off the root system as possible. The more you chop up things like corn stalks and stems, the faster they will break down, whether they are buried, left lying on the ground or incorporated in a compost pile.



Carpet mulch

Joan stressed that it's desirable to use compost in our gardens because it holds twice the weight in water compared to regular soil, and plants grown with the aid of compost are generally more resistant to pests and diseases because they are stronger. Joan's presentation focused on using a bin to make compost.

Four items are needed for bin composting:

1. **Green material** for nitrogen. These items would include any plant material or kitchen scraps, including coffee grounds and dried eggshells (dried to avoid salmonella).
2. **Brown material** for carbon. These items would include paper egg cartons, cereal box type cardboard, non-shiny newspaper (avoid the ads), leaves, hay, and even empty paper towel and toilet paper rolls. Corrugated cardboard shouldn't be used because of the glue in the cardboard. Tearing up or shredding the egg cartons, paper and cardboard aids the process.
3. **Water**
4. **Air**



Add hay for brown layer

Add the green and brown items to your compost bin in layers. For example, when you add kitchen scraps to your bin, throw on a layer of brown such as leaves or hay. In fact, this is the best way to deter critters. Make sure you water your compost bin until a handful of it feels like a sponge that's been wrung out. Never add meat products, oil, bread products, dairy products or manure of any type to your bin. You can turn your pile with a fork periodically (adds air) to speed up the process, but if you do nothing, it will make compost in about a year. An easy way to 'turn' your compost is to remove the bin from around your pile. This is easy to do if you are using a wire cage that is fastened temporarily with a string. Set the empty cage next to your old pile. Use a pitch fork to transfer the top of the old pile to the bottom of the cage. When you get about half way down, you'll start to find finished compost. Continue adding browns, greens and water to the new pile and harvest compost in about a year.

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Composting *continued from page 3*

Troubleshooting:

- *Compost bin smells.* Too much green material. Pick up pile and spread out. Refill bin and layer the green slimy material with brown material.
- *No compost being made.* Add more water and green material.

Special thanks to Pahoua Thao, Janet Parker and Ia Xiong for providing Hmong, Spanish and Lao interpretation. We hope everyone enjoyed the Workshop and now has a better idea of what to do with their garden waste. Perhaps wire bins will be sprouting up this fall next to the still standing Brussels sprouts.

ALL GARDENER MEETING SUMMARY

The All Gardener Meeting was held on Saturday, October 10 - the first day we saw snow flurries and the day after the first frost. For those who could not attend, here is a summary of meeting topics:

Highlights of 2009

- 195 gardeners used 329 plots
- \$1,235 raised at Plant and Equipment Sale in May
- 47 attendees at Composting Workshop on 9/19
- 18 gallons of apple juice made with antique cider press at Harvest Festival on 9/19
- \$1,300 worth of garden tools donated by Fiskars

Last Work Day/Closing Day is 10/24/09 - If you are in the plowed section (plots H1-H120), you must have all the fencing and non-organic material removed from your plot by 9 a.m. on 10/24. You must also chop up large stalks and spread out compost piles to help plant material decompose over the winter.

2009 Volunteer Time - You must complete your hours by 11/30/09 or pay for them (\$10/hour) before we accept your application in 2010. The last organized work day is 10/24, but we are under no obligation to find enough volunteer jobs that day. After 10/24/09, you can contact Christie Ralston at the Community GroundWorks office (240-0409 or christie@troygardens.org) for available volunteer jobs, if any.

New Rules for 2010

- Please only take two wheelbarrows of compost per plot when compost is delivered each time.
- No treated lumber is allowed in plots. Any other lumber can be used.
- You must plant your plot and tend it in earnest by June 1 or you may lose it.

Rototilling Services for 2010 - If your plot is in a no-plow section (any plot other than H1-H120) and you want to have it rototilled, we will have volunteers available to rototill your plot on Opening Day on a first-come, first-served basis. The cost will be \$15 per plot. You will not be able to rent the large rototillers yourself, but the small, Mantis-like rototillers will be available for rent that day at \$10 per plot. If we cannot accommodate all requests for rototilling that day, we may be able to accommodate requests within the next 7 to 10 days but cannot make any guarantees.

Water Surcharge for 2010 - We will be charging \$1 per plot to help defray the cost of water.

Sharing of Plots for 2010 - Because a whole plot may be too much for some gardeners, we are adding a checkbox to the application asking whether the applicant would be interested in sharing the plot. The applicant will still pay for a whole plot, but we may use the information to pair up the applicant with another gardener who is interested in sharing or a person on the waiting list who is interested in sharing.

Time Dollars to Pre-pay 2010 Volunteer Time - If you are a Timebank member, you will have the option of pre-paying 3 Time Dollars per plot instead of putting in 3 hours per plot of volunteer time.

Reminder Regarding Weeds/Waste - Compost weeds and garden waste in your plot or take home.

Spring Registration 2010 - Tentatively scheduled for March 6, 2010, at Lakeview Lutheran Church.

Compost for Sale at Opening Day 2010 - We are working to have Happy Grass compost available for bulk sale at Opening Day.

Need Help on Subcommittees - We could use help on all subcommittees, but especially the Plot Monitoring, Work Day, Water and Equipment Subcommittees. We also welcome gardeners to serve on the Steering/Leadership Committee which meets monthly throughout the season. All time served on these subcommittees or the Steering/Leadership Committee counts toward your volunteer time commitment. See www.troygardens.org/gardsubcommdescriptions.html for a list of subcommittee tasks.