

TAUNTON'S

# *Fine* Gardening

AT HOME IN THE GARDEN

## 10 Strategies for Designing Outdoor Spaces

Great plants for the edges of your beds

The best way to prune shrubs

Clematis: different looks from a classic vine

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It was the first of December and I was still planting bulbs. Winter crusted the ground; ice crystals sprinkled the beds. But the soil was workable, and the tulips and daffodils settled comfortably into their earthy cradles. And more than ever, my garden whispered of tomorrow. It was my birthday. I was 50 years old.

When I finished planting, I sat on a cedar bench where clematis and morning glories scramble through the summer and where a coiled hose, pruners, and trowels waited to be stored. And I thought about the garden—about what was wrong as well as what was right—and about its future.

I'll be cutting down on vegetables, for instance, and adding more flowers. Every year, we try different heirloom tomatoes, but we can't keep up with the yield. We also can't keep the raccoons out of the corn. I've got to replace birch trees lost to borers and to the elements. And the borders around my property need tweaking. We took out a wild bunch of euonymus in the backyard and need to fill in with perennials (we've been using annuals as if they were Band-Aids.). I'm still struggling to find the right rose for the arbors, and I've got to be more conscientious about replenishing the baby's breath on the outer border of the garden fence and the gaura that once graced the inner border.

The garden is at a turning point and so am I. I have come to think of gardens as metaphors for life—in this case, my life. I'm making changes, too. I'm getting serious about pruning myself into shape and weeding the piles of paper that cover my dining-room table as well as the magazines stacked on the floor. In both life and in the garden, I want to make better use of my space.

I need more room to grow. It is part of turning 50 and keeping age from limiting my horizons. To that end, I've left a newspaper, where I've tended my professional life for 24 years. I like to think I'm branching out, like the Japanese cherry tree that turns into a pink cloud next to my patio every spring.

## Room to grow

As in my borders, I've found gaps in my life. That's why I've left a daily job for the freelance world. I want more time for little things: for walks along the beach, for nestling on a couch with a seed catalog, for sitting in the garden with a cup of tea in the morning.

I want more time to get my hands dirty. To deadhead the platycodon and transplant the phlox and divide the daylilies. To plant a shade garden under the river birches in the front yard. To smell the lavender, gather the herbs, and plant the bulbs before winter creeps into the ground.

My garden has been entwined with my life ever since a December night nine years ago. On the eve of my 41st birthday, I felt a lump in my breast. "Maybe it will be gone in the morning," I thought. When I woke, I found a pop-up card of a garden from my husband on my night table. It said that I was the garden in his life. The lump was still there. The bad seed called breast cancer had invaded my body. A week later, I had a lumpectomy.

It helped that my oncologist is a gardener and that we talked about flowers as well as chemotherapy and shared a passion for mandevilla. That spring, when I was undergoing treatment, my husband and I tore up a large part of our front lawn and planted a garden. We call it the "Garden of Health and Joy." It whispers of hope. It whispers of tomorrow. Each year, its message grows stronger. My oncologist checks me every six months. I'm doing just fine. We still talk about gardens.

I'll be better at keeping up with things, but I'm not seeking perfection. Not in the garden, not in life. There's always another weed to pull. There's always a plant that withers, no matter what you do or where you put it. There are no perfect gardeners. There are no perfect people.

All we can do is our best. I've got plenty of time to do it. After all, I'm only 50.

—Irene Virag still writes a garden column for the daily newspaper *Newsday*. Her surname, *Virag*, means "flower" in Hungarian.



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### **Praise for a Last Word**

I normally read your magazine back to front because I love to read the Last Word first. But the June issue had too many wonderful articles to read, so I just started from the front and worked my way through. This was what I was doing in the waiting room at the hospital as my husband was having a port put in to facilitate his chemotherapy. When I finally got to the Last Word by Irene Virag, I read it over and over again. When my husband came back from recovery, I read it to him.

This is our first experience with cancer and all the nasty words and things that are associated with it. Cancer is cancer, whether it is breast cancer or colon cancer. It has affected, changed, and altered everything we know about life. In the middle of all the ugliness, it was comforting to find a beautifully written article about refreshing a broken soul. For the first time, my husband will be helping me with the garden, at least with plant choices, and I will be getting my hands dirty, pulling weeds, evading poison ivy, and planting new and exciting things to brighten this coming summer. Thank you, Irene, for your beautifully written column. It lifted our spirits.

—Sue Behm  
New Lenox, Illinois