

## GARDENS

## Where Love's Labor's Not Lost

**W**elcome as it was, the rain had kept me out of the garden during the week and the accompanying chill hadn't helped, either. But now the sun danced down, glistening on spring-fresh foliage and sprinkling warmth across the back of my neck. It was a perfect Sunday — a Sunday in May — and I was getting dirt under my fingernails. What more could I ask?



Irene Virag

My husband and I were planting lettuce. Crazy weather and the pressure of work had prevented us from sowing seeds in March, and so we were putting seedlings from my well-stocked local nursery in the ground. Three kinds of lettuce — Buttercrunch and romaine and a flavorful loose-leaf variety called Red Sails. And some mesclun and arugula, too.

It was not our first venture into the vegetable quadrants.

We had prepared the beds and put in peas at the end of March — the vines were already making a brave start on their journey up the teepee. But the perfection of the day made us feel as if our prior efforts had been mere rehearsals, and this was the official opening of the season.

And there was the satisfaction of the planting itself. It is far more than just a matter of digging holes and sticking in baby plants. I had made a rough sketch of the placement of the seedlings in the four quadrants that surround an herb circle, and I was thinking ahead to the location of the corn and the tomatoes and the beans and squash and radishes and carrots and beets.

I watched my husband and smiled as he set the young plants in place — he filled in the holes gently and patted the earth down tenderly. I thought that he looks that way when he writes. I knew he was stopping every now and then to watch me. Job pressures were for the moment in hiding, and it occurred to me that I was not just writing about gardens. I suspected that I was also writing about marriage — at least about how deeply entwined our marriage had become with our garden.

After getting our salads-to-be established in their new home, we took on separate chores. I set my husband to work deadheading daffodils. I admit this is cosmetic but I am partial to daffodils and there's something so sad about the faded blooms. I warned him as I always do not to cut the foliage, which has to die naturally so that the plant nourishes the bulbs for next year. He knows this, of course, but I tell him anyway. I can't help myself — I love daffodils so. I also asked him to dig up the hyacinths that were in their second season — they came up loose and scraggly. It's what happens to hyacinths after the first year. The highly hybridized flowers revert to their natural state. Maybe there's a lesson in there somewhere. Perfection can never be permanent.

While my husband deadheaded, I was busy helping others. I carried plants that had overwintered in the garage back into the light of day. Most of them were in good shape, but I could tell they were grateful. They included a fig tree, two brugmansias, an agapanthus, a couple of elephant ears and several scented geraniums. My garage is supposed to be a



Newsday Illustration / Ned Levine

one-and-a-half-car garage, but I've never seen a half-car. We don't have a basement, and the garage is so crowded, we can barely fit in there. But wintering plants seem to like it — or at least to feel secure.

The only casualties were a pair of cannas that wore a blanket of aphids. But I think the cannas will be OK. I gave them a good cleaning with the hose. The idea of a water treatment appealed to me. We try to be organic.

Later, as daylight trembled on the edge of dusk, we took stock of our labor and walked about the yard. Our newly planted greens seemed settled in their beds, the former garage inhabitants were taking to the outdoors, and the daffodils seemed resigned to their new look.

As for my husband and me, the differences in our characters became manifest as we surveyed

our corner of the world. He tends to only see what's beautiful. He doesn't see what needs to be done. He thinks I'm a pessimist — or at least negative in outlook. The truth is somewhat different. He's an optimist and I'm a realist.

"Boy that lavender azalea is gorgeous," he says. "The hellebores are taking over the shade garden," I say.

"This is the best the irises have ever been."

"This fall, we absolutely have to divide the daylilies."

"I can hardly wait for the rhododendrons to bloom."

"That mugo pine is going to swallow the mailbox. The lilacs are a disaster."

We strolled around the yard holding hands. Differences are important, too. It was a good day in the garden. •