

Laura Welsh Berg's NEWBIE Gardening Tips

1. ADD DIRT

Experienced gardeners will laugh, but for those of us new to the game, it appears that a yard already has dirt in it. I broke up the dirt, planted bulbs and all my little Home Depot flowers, and watered it, only to discover they were not thriving. Jeff Herrmann, our former production manager, and truly the Godfather of my garden, asked me if I had added dirt. To add dirt to dirt seemed a little redundant to me, but I dutifully trudged back to the store and bought both 'dirt' and something called 'black kow' (which apparently has enough manure in it to be useful, but not enough to make your yard smell like a dairy farm, and I would know, my cousins have a dairy farm) and went about adding dirt to my dirt. It seemed helpful. Apparently this should be done every year. Check back in with me next summer for 'Tips for Newbie Gardeners Volume 2.'

2. FIND A PLACE TO SHOP THAT WILL HELP YOU

After trying several stores for a variety of reasons, I wandered into a locally owned gardening shop. I was greeted by a cat. This is the first sign that you have entered a quality establishment, as cats are notoriously snobby about where and who they hang out with. As I wandered through the perennials, my new friend at my heels, vacantly staring at tags and comparing prices, a man approached me and asked if I needed help. I am a little shy to talk about gardening. I have a masters degree, I teach at a university, but when it comes to talking plants, well... I had already murdered at least 10, and I was less than a month into my adventure. However this man seemed kind, and relatively non-judgmental, and half my face was hidden by my mask anyway, so I started to tell him of my struggles. It turns out that in spite of the random label 'full sun' that is attached to Irish Moss, it has a very shallow root system, so planting it on the slope in my front yard where the water is running off, and it is in sun for approximately 90% of the day means I was going to KEEP killing plants. He steered me in the direction of Creeping Thyme, which has miraculously survived, and in the process, secured a new regular customer. Now I take leaves in that look sick and Kevin tells me what the problem is, and gives me multiple solutions. They are infinitely patient with me, and it became a bit of a haven during the darker times of quarantine, when that cute little center and the grocery store were the only places I got to see.

3. AND THEN THERE WERE NONE...Garden Edition

I live in Gordon Square. Pretty urban part of Cleveland. I planted flowers, herbs, and tomatoes. The people who sold us the house planted some hostas. It took only a couple weeks for every morning to become a triage exercise on a new plant. I couldn't understand how so much could go wrong so quickly. It took several weeks, and a Bob Taylor visit, but I finally learned that living in a city is NOT PROTECTION AGAINST WILDLIFE. Quite the contrary. There was a whole world in my yard that I knew NOTHING about. Let's start with the obvious ones: skunks. We have a skunk. This skunk is so comfortable with his ownership of our property, that he (no joke) stopped by our socially distant firepit, which company member Jessie Cope Miller and her daughter Marlowe can attest to. It turns out that my irises were NOT committing suicide to protest my inexperience: the skunk (according to google)

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was digging them up for grubs. Okay. Alright. Not much to do there but keep replanting them... and hope for the best. About a week later, Amy Essick and Brian Chismar came over for another backyard visit. It was at this time we discovered a mother raccoon and her three babies. They were adorable. We watched them all waddle after the mom, down the street, and up a tree. It was Amy, I believe who suggested those little adorable furballs might be the reason that I woke up every morning to half eaten tomatoes all over my yard. WHAT!?!?!?! So up went the chicken wire (I am happy to report that Lynn and I have actually been able to harvest and eat a few now, instead of me shaking my fist at the sky in rage every other morning). Last, but certainly not least. For those of you unaware: Bob Taylor is a gardening guru. He is my Yoda. I go to him for the deep, unfathomable mysteries of the universe. It was Bob who told me that the reason my hostas looked as though they were living in London during the Blitz was actually: slugs. SLUGS. And the occasional earwig. He sent me off to get slug bait, and my hostas and basil lived to fight another day. Thank goodness. The hostas I can live without, but if you've seen how much pasta my husband cooks: the basil is an essential worker in this household.

4. IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Now for the sappy part of this post. Quarantine was lonely. I don't think I am alone in that. It was lonely and difficult, and even as we start to emerge, uncertainty abounds, and hugs are still not possible. But the amount of people who reached out about this new gardening adventure of mine was incredible. I am a storyteller. I believe in the power of sharing our stories with each other: in them I find solace when sad, guidance when lost, education when ignorant, and friendship when lonely. I bought many plants early on: most of them are dead. The plants that now inhabit my garden, are actual gifts from people, and they come with their own stories. Diana Stromberg gave me a whole herd of lilies that I have planted all over our backyard. They relax in the shade with the Solomon's Seal, which came to me (via a different garden) from Scott Plate's former yard. Jeff and Bob, when they heard that I was attempting the impossible filled Jeff's truck with plants from their own yard and brought them over. Bob walked me through what they all were, and where they needed to be planted. I worked tirelessly for 24 hours, and I am happy to say that I only lost two: one to the skunk, and one to my own ineptitude, but the rest are thriving. They include Irises from the garden of my former dance teacher, who we lost to cancer almost 8 years ago now.

When I sit in my garden now, I am surrounded by the stories of people I love, grown with my own sweat and tears and care and hard work. It has been my solace during this time when our communal storytelling is not possible. And it carries with it lessons of patience, hope, and resurrection that have been invaluable as I continue to stumble through the professional uncertainty of these times. In the dead of winter, all bulbs must feel some fear. But time marches on, and spring does inevitably return, bringing life back with it. *May we all rest in that hope, until we can meet again.*