

Confessions of a fair-weather gardener

Now is the time of year for growth and rebirth. Armed with packets of seeds, my children and I have begun planting. We will grow green beans, pumpkins, zucchi-

GUEST COMMENTARY

CATHAREN KANN

ni, carrots, and sunflowers in peat moss cups in our sunroom. Later we will plant them outdoors and buy tomato plants, basil, and oregano to fill out our mix. The mint will come up again and the strawberry plants as well. The children label wooden Popsicle sticks in crayon with a name and a picture for each kind of plant.

I start out every spring with high hopes. This is the year we will grow some pumpkins. I can already see their pale orange blossoms, and a small green pumpkin nestled on a bed of warm earth, waiting to turn orange. I weed and spread a mixture of manure mixed with dark

earthy soil. I rake the remnant oak leaves off the flower beds and out of the yard's nooks and crannies. I gaze in wonder at the croci and daffodils, with their succulent shoots and tender skinned blossoms.

I marvel at the brilliant pink and blue of the hyacinths and try to ignore the nagging observations popping up in my mind. Why do they look so scrawny? Isolated blossoms jut out awkwardly from the stem, creating no rounded bouquet.

The truth is not something I want to acknowledge, because hope springs eternal. The truth is, although I love plants, I do not have a green thumb. I sprinkled lime on my newly raked flower beds, and now it looks like nuclear winter. Moss and oak leaves are a sign of acidic soil, I am told. Lime should help. Fresh green shoots coated in eerie white powder stick up in random locations, testimony that I do not have that perennial/annual thing down to a science.

Once I tried to fill in the gaps

Last summer my pumpkin plants boasted several pale orange flowers which stayed strong and alive for weeks. I waited expectantly for the change. There was a change. The leaves turned pale yellow, the flowers crumpled, and the stems rooting the plants to the soil withered away.

by sowing wild flower seeds. That was the year I stopped weeding altogether. Who could tell the difference between a baby weed and a baby wild flower? It is an arbitrary distinction.

I have never grown a pumpkin to fruition, though I have been planting them for six years. One year we had a small green one. Last summer my pumpkin plants boasted several pale orange flowers which stayed strong and alive for weeks. I waited expectantly for the change. There was a change. The leaves turned pale yellow, the flowers crumpled,

and the stems rooting the plants to the soil withered away. No pumpkins, even though I had watered so diligently, perhaps because I had watered so diligently.

I re-pot my indoor rosemary plant and am shocked to discover so many roots crushed and molded into the shape of the pot, that it could stand on its own. I had no idea. But I should have. Over the winter one side of the plant had mysteriously died, as if the grim reaper himself had sliced a sword right down the middle of the plant. Oh well, I console myself, as I finally trim

off the dead branches, accepting at last, that half of it is dead. The other half looks very healthy. I am proud. My husband laughs and says I should not be allowed to buy rosemary plants, ever. I have accidentally killed at least seven rosemary plants. This one has been alive for a record two years, and I am convinced I will have it forever. After all, isn't rosemary the symbol of eternity?

I have lived in or near Boston for many years, but I grew up in the country in a family who kept a second freezer filled with homegrown vegetables from our extensive vegetable garden. We ate our homegrown produce all winter. I thought gardening was so natural that I would absorb the skill from simple immersion even while ignoring it at the same time. Apparently that is not the case. Yet I rationalize, my mother never had to worry about encountering shards of glass or even razor blades when she stuck her hands into the moist soil. Part of the problem is also that as the number of bugs

multiplies, my interest wanes. By July the bugs reign, and it is too hot and sticky to weed.

I have had some small successes. Every September, except last year when the sunflowers bloomed in early August, stunning sunflowers tower against our red fence. Each spring more strawberry plants pop up in the darndest places. They have migrated yards and yards from where they originated. Now, although sprinkled in white lime powder, they populate the lily bed like immigrants determined to start life in a new land. Ahh, the mystery of life.

The mystery of life is awesome. Newness, growth, death, rebirth. I don't want to know the specifics, because that might lessen the wonder of it. On second thought, for my children's sake, this year I am going to crack a book, or at least consult Google, and read up on how to grow pumpkins.

Catharen Kann lives on Warwick Road.

+