

RETURN TO EDEN

Gardening is more than just a pleasant pastime: it can be a deeply soulful, uplifting experience. Offering the promise of renewal and new life, gardens can nurture us and reconnect us with nature.

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Whether it's a community garden or your very own oasis at home, tending a garden can provide many life lessons.

At one point over the past summer, my garden was flourishing. Cherry tomato vines twisted around stakes and sprouted bright red fruit; parsley sprung out from compost-rich dirt; and pots full of herbs such as thyme, basil and peppermint had thick, luscious leaves, their divine aromas conjuring up thoughts of roasts and cocktails.

"To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow," Audrey Hepburn famously said. I look guiltily at my garden now, which bears evidence of neglect. The tomato vines have dried up and died, the herbs wither and weeds breed in garden beds. I love the idea of gardening – romanticising myself gently pulling out weeds or propagating seeds. The truth is that it's enough work for me to keep the houseplants alive, and yet, tending to one's own garden feels so essential, especially since the pandemic, when our fragile interdependencies on global supply chains were exposed.

GARDENS OF IMAGINATION

I grew up in gardens of the imagination, like Frances Hodges Burnett's *Secret Garden*, the Queen's roses in *Alice in Wonderland*, Mr McGregor's garden full of pesky rabbits in the quaint English countryside and the strange, mystical pools of C.S. Lewis' *The Magician's Nephew*. I would explore the garden growing up; our house had big green lawns, a towering fir tree in the middle of the yard, and orange, lemon and persimmon trees dotted around the place.

Garden beds were host to vegetables climbing, twisting and spreading, and the inevitable host of dead pets buried underneath, giving rich nutrients. I would lose hours inspecting insects, catching lizards and climbing trees. The garden unlocked something in me that I wouldn't have been able to articulate at the time, but now, through the lens of writers and thinkers, I can grasp how and why gardens are so entwined in what it means to be human.

Olivia Laing's book, *The Garden Against Time*, recounts the author's project of restoring an old garden, framed by the literature and philosophies of gardening and gardens throughout time. She reflects on her early life at school in a convent and the vivid images of Eden woven through Catholic symbology: a place

of untouched perfection, a "green and fruitful world, back when it was new and unpolluted," Laing writes. The utopian fantasy, or even "paradise lost", is a common thread running through literature.

"Many people have lost a paradise, and even if they haven't, the story of the lost paradise continues to resonate because nearly all of us have lost or relinquished or else forgotten the paradise of a child's perception when the world is so new and generous in its astonishments, let alone the sweet, fruitful paradise of first love, when the body itself becomes the garden," she writes. "Perhaps this is why literature is so crammed with secular versions of the Eden story: gardens that open unexpectedly and are then locked, a paradise that is stumbled upon and can never be found again."

HUMANITY TRANSFORMING

In its most ideal state, a garden is an idealised version of nature. Damon Young, an Australian philosopher and author of *Philosophy in the Garden*, says, "In the garden, we have these two aspects of existence combined: nature, but transformed, and humanity transforming. That's why gardens are so immensely powerful. Every garden you step into says, 'Here's what we think the cosmos is like!'"

When I was young, my parents would take me to Canberra's Floriade festival every few years, and I was always amazed at the spectrum of colours: row after row of perfectly formed tulips in peach, pink, red, yellow and white tones, as far as the eye could see. Sometimes, it was difficult to believe these colours existed in the natural world; they were more like the decadent outworking of a celestial imagination.

But nature, as we know, is not all utopia, and I experienced the flip side: the dying vines and spreading weeds of my garden, the ever-growing threat of nature overpowering us with death and decay. We witness the darker side of nature protesting against our carelessness in the present climate emergency and its side effects.

Laing recalls an unprecedented drought and subsequent water restrictions plaguing England around the same time COVID-19 plagued the world. "One of the most horrifying aspects of those weeks was seeing the garden become another manifestation of selfishness, a private luxury at a shared cost, rather than a place that



RED CLOVER

Symbolically, red clover represents love, passion and good fortune. Red clover is also known for its health-promoting properties. It is a rich source of isoflavones, which are compounds that act similarly to oestrogen, which can help relieve the symptoms of menopause and help maintain bone density. It has also been shown to improve cardiovascular health.



LAVENDER

In ancient times, Romans used lavender in their baths to purify their bodies and minds. The name 'lavender' is derived from the Latin word 'lavare', meaning 'to wash'. Today, it is known for its health benefits and used in herbal medicine and aromatherapy to promote physical and mental wellbeing, such as aiding sleep, relieving anxiety and soothing headaches.

ran counter to the world's more to drives, a refuge from its priorities, where other forms of life are given more regard," she writes. The garden can sometimes represent privilege: those with the means, even the time to nurture their natural environment or hire others who can do so.

Young points out that the pandemic highlighted the gap between those privileged to have a natural space of their own and those locked up in concrete buildings. It is easy to take a garden for granted until you're reminded that people in poor socioeconomic areas have less access to nature. You don't need to look further than your local golf course and its exorbitant membership fees to see inequality in green spaces.

Young tells the story of Leonard Woolf, Virginia's other half, who loved and wrote about his garden, even though his view of nature was bleak and pessimistic. Woolf recalls when he was a small boy returning to his beloved garden after a vacation, only to find it withered and dead. He describes the shock and sadness he can still remember as an adult at the sight of it. "For the young Woolf, the universe was a battleground between blind, irrational and ceaseless forces – not a divine miracle, but a vain struggle," writes Young. The darkness of the garden, especially for a child, can be in its dangers, whether thorn bushes or poisonous insects. "There is this sense of encountering a little bit of risk and unpredictability, and that's healthy," says Young.

NEW LIFE

As plants die and weeds spread, new life is never far behind, pushing upwards towards the sun. Spring is celebrated worldwide with such exuberance, like the Indian Holi festival, where colourful chalk is thrown around, painting people in rainbows. Spring symbolises renewal as nature swells with life after what can feel like a long, dark winter.

Laing wonders whether the "gardener is initiated into a different understanding of time" and laments the "agonised now of the news". She describes a more holistic view of time which is circular, cycling between growth and decay, but somewhat more optimistic than Leonard Woolf's version. There is comfort to be found in the philosophy of the cyclical nature of life; no matter how terrible things may be, there is always the

looming hope of renewal. When I surveyed my dead plants with disappointment, I felt I had a choice to wallow in the feeling of failure or to rip everything out and start again, which I did. I ripped through it like a hurricane, pulling weeds and grass out, pulling out dead plants, and raking nutrient-rich soil through it. I researched what I should be planting this season; what has the greatest chance of flourishing?

There is hope for life and sustenance in the garden, and this was also starkly clear during the pandemic

“TO PLANT A GARDEN IS TO BELIEVE IN TOMORROW.”

AUDREY HEPBURN

when supermarket shelves were stripped and global supply chains were disrupted. I had my two babies in 2019 and 2022 and became keenly aware of this primal need to provide for them in a time of upheaval.

I could understand why gardening centres were selling out of the seeds of fruits and vegetables. Gardening was no longer just a hobby to pass the time or derive pleasure from, but had become essential to ensure survival.

But survival is more than access to food; we know that our future and our children's future are wrapped up in our tenuous relationship with nature, which has become starkly apparent in recent times as we battle the effects of climate change. While we look to the future for hope, there is growing evidence that the answer may be found in the ancient cultures that have inhabited and cared for the country long before Europeans arrived.

INDIGENOUS WISDOM

Australasia boasts unique landscapes and ecosystems, and we know our Indigenous peoples have always had a strong relationship with the land and intuitive ways of caring for it. In Australia, bushfires are understood by First Nations people and harnessed to benefit and serve the land, not destroy it. “In light of our recent catastrophic bushfire season, there has been a national shift in consciousness about land management and bushfire prevention,” the Watarkka Foundation says on its website, calling to integrate



ROSEMARY

Rosemary is an ancient symbol of fidelity and remembrance. In the Middle Ages, it was used in wedding ceremonies as a symbol of love and loyalty. The aromatic herb is also believed to improve your memory. In ancient Greece and Rome, students wore rosemary garlands while studying, believing it would enhance their memory and cognitive abilities.

“Aboriginal fire management practices into our national bushfire response”, which is a growing conversation.

The Indigenous understanding of the symbiotic relationship between people and land could greatly benefit our approach to conservation and restoration. “Country is a worldview that encompasses our relationship to the physical, ancestral and spiritual dimensions, and involves the kind of intimacy evident in the oft-quoted expression, ‘The Country is our mother. We belong to the country; it does not belong to us,’” Margo Neale writes in the introduction to the First Knowledges series book, *Country*.

In the following chapter, Bruce Pascoe writes: “The past two years have shaken our assumed ability to control nature. We should reflect on our impact on the world and our attempts to assert dominance and pursue more conservative land management and more modest demands on soil, water and air.”

WHAT YOU CAN DO

We can take personal responsibility at the level of our own garden and develop our understanding of the unique patch of earth and its needs.

There are plenty of resources available for those who want to learn about their local ecosystem. Most councils have information online about which plants most benefit the environment in your area. My local council offers an extensive PDF that includes maps of the landscape and details of beneficial plants and trees as well as descriptions of destructive weeds. They write that using Indigenous plants is beneficial because they “maintain the unique local visual character of the area” and “help the movement of pollinators between remnants of bush vegetation”.

After clearing all the dead plants and weeds, I replant vegetables, flowers and herbs and hope for the best. It's comforting, on some level, to know the garden has a life of its own and can thrive despite my abysmal efforts to care for it or never-ending miserable weather.

I forget about the seeds, buried in dirt, until one day, after weeks of rain, my kids call me out to the garden excitedly. Green sprouts are pushing up through the dirt, reaching for the winter sun. The kids squeal in delight, pointing them out, and in that moment, with my face in the sun, I can almost smell spring in the air. 