

Garden Reflections on 2011: Hard Lessons Learned by Marlys Bell

Mulched Garden

Because of the cold, rainy, late spring, 2011 was a year when I started behind, got further behind and then never caught up. Abundant rains produced record crops of weeds, (some as tall as I am) and virtually all plants increased in size by at least 50%.



When I finally paid attention to my garden, it was overwhelming. In the past, I focused on “plants first”—deadheading, pruning, dividing; then spreading compost and/or mulch on the soil around them. Since I had a major weed problem demanding action, I never got to any of that.

This year, I intend to prevent weeds so that I can focus on “soil first.” Where the soil needs replenishing, there is still time to add compost or mulch. If it has weeds or is bare, it will be covered with something biodegradable—newspapers, leaves, compost. Other areas are completely overtaken by aggressive, spreading plants that I call “thugs.” While still small, I will cover them with newspaper so the thugs decompose back into the soil. (If they are too tall or big, I will cut them to the ground and cover them with newspaper or cardboard.) Areas where the weeds went to seed will need several layers of newspaper to prevent their return next spring. Hopefully taking these steps now will ensure better soil and fewer weeds this coming spring.

A more perplexing priority is how to eliminate weeds in the garden paths. The paths are currently composed of landscape fabric covered by 2-3 inches of road base. Because we are not using pre-emergent or other chemical weed killers, deciding on the most inexpensive, environmentally-friendly way to get this problem under control will be challenging. The weed-infested horseshoe pit is easier; I’ll just cover it with clear plastic and the sun will do the rest.

Last year, the most gratifying garden areas were those devoted to edibles. The perennial edibles (rhubarb, herbs, strawberries, asparagus, olives, grapes, etc) and fruit trees are now producing crops that are manageable for small families. Not only did we enjoy them when in season, we did some freezing and canning.

The annual vegetable garden satisfied my need for development and experimentation. It is fun to try new varieties and to explore various ways to preserve the harvest for year-round use. This holiday season we enjoyed ratatouille, pesto, dried tomatoes, fava beans, eggplant chutney, and the last of the tomatoes and potatoes from our garden. Especially satisfying was asking visiting grandchildren to pick some lettuce, spinach and Swiss chard for dinner. It gave me a perfect opening to mention that we are trying to grow as much of our food as possible because it is healthier, less expensive, good for the environment and tastes better too.

To avoid burnout, I conceded that perfection is not really necessary. I had a priority system for recycling food waste so elaborate that it collapsed when visitors had kitchen duty. There were 5 different possibilities—dogs, llamas, worms, composter, etc. Now it is either “the dogs” or the composter that is conveniently located outside the kitchen door. Sometimes, simpler is better, especially if translated into action.

Last year’s experience helped me recognize that there is a point when “enough is enough.” Because maintenance is my least favorite garden activity, I resolved that any new areas will be dedicated to edibles or plants not requiring supplemental water once established. And I am trying to be more mindful of the maintenance aspects in any and all garden-related activities for the future. For example, for the holidays, I bought myself a pear tree but decided to forgo the partridge, chicken, fowl or anything else that at some point might become a chore instead of a passion. Happy Gardening in the New Year!