

On Gathering & Planting

Written by Margaret Evans

In his well-worn poem “To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time,” Robert Herrick encourages his readers (especially the virginal ones) to “gather ye rosebuds while ye may.” Anyone who ever took English 101 knows that the poet is urging us to seize the day (carpe diem!) while we’re still young, to revel in life’s sensual pleasures while the reveling’s still good.



Well, I had a lesson in gathering rosebuds just the other day. Actually, they were snapdragons, and I was planting them, not gathering them, but you get my drift...

My mother’s coming to town at the end of February to stay with our daughter while Jeff and I are in Las Vegas on business. (I can see your eyebrow arching, but trust me – it is business, and it’s completely legit.) With Mom’s arrival just around the corner, I’ve been scrambling to get my house in order (literally and figuratively), and one item on my To-Do List was “Plant Window Boxes.” I’m not much of a homemaker, or much of a gardener, but my window boxes have always been a sweet little source of pride... “little” being the operative word. They’re so small, and there are only two of them, so keeping them in decent-looking foliage is a task even I, the domestically-challenged, can handle. Traditionally, I plant impatiens or begonias in the early spring, and if I’m lucky, they make it all the way through the holidays, and sometimes beyond.

This year, I wasn’t lucky. My flowers were already leggier than Claudia Schiffer by mid-fall, and had pretty much petered out by Thanksgiving. Instead of replanting before Christmas, I got all Martha Stewart and decided to do “holiday window boxes,” filling them with gold-and-silver frosted pinecones, holly branches, and a smattering of Spanish Moss for local color. There was no actual planting involved, which was the main draw. The boxes turned out rather well, I thought, and they carried us through the New Year.

But now, it was February. The holidays were a vague memory, and my sparkly, festive window boxes suddenly seemed all wrong.

And my mother was coming.

I was in a quandary. If I planted flowers now, I’d have to go with pansies, or some other wintry breed, and they wouldn’t last long. I’d have to do the unthinkable – replant a month later. (If we didn’t get a frost, which would mean replanting even sooner!) Normally, I’d have just lived with

On Gathering & Planting

Written by Margaret Evans

the sad, frumpy pinecones a bit longer, or dumped 'em altogether, and planted when it warmed up for good. But there was the little issue of *my mom*. I couldn't let her arrive in Beaufort, on the threshold of a Lowcountry spring, to be greeted by my stupid, dated, hopelessly hokey pinecone display (what I thinking?) or, worse yet... empty window boxes.

As I've said, I'm not a gardener. As much as I respect gardeners (and as much as I adore flowers), I just don't have that innate passion for tilling the earth, toiling in the sun, and so on. I also happen to be naturally (biologically?) lazy. As you can imagine, the concept of planting window boxes twice within a four-week period goes against every fiber of my being.

But... I love my mother. So last Saturday, I sucked it up, grabbed my kid, and headed off to the Wal-Mart garden store. (Yes, I know we're all down on Wal-Mart, but they have a decent garden store, I needed some other stuff, and I'm a weak woman...)

When we got there, I found myself searching, as I so often do, for the easiest possible path, the shortest shortcut available. (Which is kinda what Wal-Mart's all about, I guess.) Surely they had something I could plant now that would look great and last forever... or at least for six months or so, until I could muster my energy to plant again. I checked out the pansies first, with their rich hues and pretty velvet faces. I like pansies, but they looked so... January. I was really feeling March. Besides, they'd have shriveled up by the time it got warm, anyway, and... well, you know. A second planting. Shudder.

Where were the impatiens, I wondered? You're not really supposed to plant them until spring, but they're tough little suckers. Maybe I'd just slip 'em in a month or so early and cross my fingers. If my gamble paid off, and they made it through February and early March, I wouldn't have to dirty my hands again 'til... well, maybe never!

Unfortunately, and contrary to popular opinion, Wal-Mart doesn't have everything. There were no impatiens.

Keep in mind, the whole time I was wandering through the garden shop, my six-year-old daughter was badgering me relentlessly. She knew exactly what she wanted to plant in our window boxes. Snapdragons. Her favorite flower.

On Gathering & Planting

Written by Margaret Evans

I kept telling her, “No, Amelia. Snapdragons need more sun. I’m not even sure we can grow them.” This was true. Our boxes stay mostly in the shade. I wasn’t about to buy a bunch of snapdragons – enchanting though they are – without a guarantee. Especially when the little “care stick” thingy poking out of the pots informed me that snapdragons only bloom from spring to early summer. Spring to early summer? What kind of shelf life is that? Can you say Second Planting? Double the dirt. Twice the toil...

I needed something heartier. Less fleeting and fragile. Maybe I’d skip flowers altogether (though, oh-my-gosh were those snapdragons gorgeous!) and go with some nice, sturdy ivy. I tried to sell Amelia on this plan, but she kept dragging me back to the snapdragons, squeezing them open and shut, as one must with snapdragons, leaning into their cool fragrant laciness, sighing over their peaches and pinks and buttery yellows...

Suddenly, my cell phone rang. I assumed it was my husband – pretty much the only person who ever calls on my cell – so when I answered, I was surprised to find it was a girlfriend from college, someone I hadn’t seen in years until my recent 20th reunion in November.

“It’s Wendy,” she said. “I’m just calling to tell you that Virginia had a heart attack last night.”

What?

Wendy went on to say that Virginia was okay, that they’d spoken on the phone, that she was already complaining about the hospital bills (same ol’ V), etc. etc. I barely heard a word she said. Not because I was in Wal-Mart and it was noisy – though I was, and it was – but because I was in shock. Sweet, goofy Virginia, my beloved college roomie, a healthfood nut and exercise fanatic, six months younger than me, HAD HAD A HEART ATTACK. Virginia, with her active life, her lawyer husband, her three young daughters... not much older than my daughter. She was fine – they were giving her a stent – but... it was a heart attack. Something grown-ups have. Not college girls. Virginia could have died.

I knew what I had to do. I scooped up two big flats of snapdragons, paid for them, bundled them into my car, along with my ecstatic child, and headed home. It was late afternoon, and getting

On Gathering & Planting

Written by Margaret Evans

cold, but I didn't care. I got busy planting snapdragons. Not just in my window boxes, but in all my pots, too. I even put in a little ring of flowers around one of our baby oak trees. I planted and planted and planted. I knew these particular flowers might not grow in this particular yard. I also knew it wasn't spring yet, that we could easily have another frost, that even if the plants "took," they might very well be dead by the time my mom hit town.

But I also knew that, for at least a few days, my daughter and I would have snapdragons. It was worth the effort; and as Amelia watched me work, diligent in the chilling twilight, she *learned* about effort. And if I had to replant in a week... well, suddenly planting flowers felt more like a privilege than a chore.

Here's what I think: "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may" is an excellent piece of advice. For someone. But not for me. Not at this point in my life. In fact, I'm not sure I ever needed such cajoling. I was never one to pass up the pleasure of the moment for some greater good... never one to sacrifice ease, or personal gratification, out of duty or obligation... never one to plant twice when I could get away with only planting once. With all due respect to the lusty Mr. Herrick, I've carped plenty of diems in my... diem. I've gathered *plenty* of rosebuds.

No, at this stage in my life, I'm less concerned with gathering than with planting. If I died tomorrow, if I were suddenly and simply... gone... would I leave anything behind?

In other words, what have I planted? In my home? In my community? In the world? What legacy am I sowing in my child? The more I dwell on those questions, the less I like the answers. I've been gathering all my life. I've got some serious planting to do.

So, I've started with snapdragons. They're delicate and short-lived and completely unpredictable. But what isn't?