

Starting a new garden

Starting a new garden is big. It fills me with enthusiasm, excitement, and joy. However, this act of optimism has another side. In a time when Facebook highlights only the positive moments and feelings of our lives, let's be honest, the enthusiasm, excitement, and joy we post about is usually accompanied by nervousness, weariness, and fatigue. Starting something new can feel overwhelming.

I moved to Southern California 20 years ago. I was raising kids, adjusting to life 3,000 miles from my former home, and obviously, much younger than I am now. My recollection of starting my garden at that time is that I was full of energy, raring to go. Undoubtedly, this vignette is a bit rose colored, a Facebook-type view of life. Now I am in a totally different phase. Kids are grown, and both my husband and I are readjusting to a time in which work is not the dominant part of our lives. I refuse to use the word retirement since neither of us are ready to let go of the work that has enriched and motivated us for all of our adult lives. But things are certainly changing.

Along with this change in life, we purchased a vacation home in the Pacific Northwest - a sort of "un-LA" kind of place. Here it is quiet, it rains, it is green, and the cacophony of urban living is absent. We cannot pop out at dinner time for an inexpensive Vietnamese pho, or a delicious taco served from a food truck. In LA the dinner choices are endless (as is the traffic we confront getting to them). Here, we drive twenty minutes on quiet, country roads populated with more deer than cars, however, we have been to almost all of the restaurants available to us.

First steps in starting a new garden

So it feels strange here. We are new and will be staying only part of the year. It does not feel like home. Starting a new garden is the best way I know of to make a house a home.

When we arrived in June the small front yard was covered with tall, graceful (and surely nonnative) grasses. This was not a planned or even a surprisingly pleasant meadow, but rather a neglected lawn. Having no tools or lawn mower, we hired someone to keep the place looking occupied. I needed a task, so I told our new gardener to leave the driveway to me. Many mornings, or whenever I need a break, I stroll outside and pull a few weeds from the gravel driveway. I try to identify what I am pulling - poa something-or-other, herb robert, wall lettuce, Canada thistle, dandelions. I take in the scent of the soil, moist and very different than the dry Southern California soil. I trim some rhododendrons and hellebores and think about what a Pacific northwest garden should be. Moss garden? Vegetable garden? Wildflower meadow?

Possibilities

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<http://www.weedingwildsuburbia.com>

Vegetable gardens require enough time each season to progress from planting to harvest. This is not compatible with our current play-it-by-ear schedule. Also, remember the deer I mentioned above? Yes, they far exceed in number the occasional cars, and they eat everything that they can reach. New plants, especially edibles, are haute cuisine to Bambi and his parents. This goes for native plants as well, especially tender, succulent, vitamin-rich herbs that would populate a meadow. Anything young does not stand a chance.

Take it slow

In my book, [Wild Suburbia - Learning to garden with native plants](#) (published by Heyday Books, available August 2016), I suggest a slow approach when starting a new garden. Taking my own advice, I will live here for at least one year so that I can begin to understand the climate, weather, soil, sun, etc. In the meantime I will pull a few weeds while thinking about what I want this garden to be. Will it be a garden that requires my care and attention - therefore giving me something to do while we are here? Will it provide vegetables and herbs? Will it help me learn about island habitats, while giving local native plants a chance to take hold (fenced off from deer)? Will it include a collection of local mosses and mushrooms that I would so love to get to know? What will this garden be?