Contemplative GARDENING

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Foreword by PETER H. RAVEN

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To my parents and stepparents, who taught me
to love words and gardens, and to strive for justice.
And to John, Annabel, and Kathleen,
with all my love and gratitude.

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Credit: Leslie Scoopmire

The kiss of the sun for pardon, the song of the birds for mirth; one is nearer God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth.

—Dorothy Frances Gurney

INTRODUCTION

FINDING GOD BY DIGGING IN THE DIRT

Credit: iStock.com/cjp

"Nearer God's heart in a garden": The simple rhyme that serves as the epigraph to this book can be seen on signs and placards gracing countless garden beds. While it evokes the innocent charm of an earlier age, it also points to a profound and timeless truth: a garden is precisely where many of us experience the holy, whether we call that holiness "God" or "Creation" or just plain "nature."

This book is for anyone who wants to explore the connection between gardening and the divine. You don't have to be a good gardener, or even have a garden of your own. You don't have to be a person who follows a particular belief system; people of any faith or no professed faith can find spiritual solace and inspiration in a garden, if they're open to it.

It is no coincidence that popular interest in gardening is exploding at a time when people are hungry for hope and connection—to one another, to God, and to the earth. Mindful, spiritual gardening creates these connections and this necessary, life-giving hope. Gardens connect us to the past and to the future, although while we are working in a garden our minds are usually happily settled into the present moment. When you plant a seed and expect it to grow, you are following in the footsteps of countless others who have grown and tended

that same species of plant, probably using many of the same tools and techniques that you will use. You are also exhibiting faith in the future, be it the expectation that you'll have delicious vegetables to eat in a few months or that generations yet unborn will enjoy the shade of the tree you are just now placing in your backyard.

Whether or not Martin Luther actually said it, there is great wisdom in the remark attributed to him: "If I knew the world were going to end tomorrow, today I would plant an apple tree." Our souls, our bodies, and our planet will all benefit from the committed care for creation that happens when gardening becomes a spiritual practice.

Definitions: Gardens and Gardening

Perhaps it sounds silly to define gardens and gardening, but for the sake of this book I want us to think of these terms in the broadest sense possible. As I have been writing, I've often paused to imagine a reader who lives in a small urban apartment. What could this book say to them? I hope it will have a great deal to say.

First, if you do not have access to a garden of your own, a place on land that you own or rent and can cultivate as you see fit, there is no need to despair. Many, perhaps most, towns and cities have community gardens where, for a fee, you get your own plot or raised bed and can grow what you like. If a community garden is out of reach (some do have long waiting lists or are too expensive), you might be able to find an organization that grows food for others and volunteer there. Many schools and faith communities have such gardens, and they usually welcome volunteers, including people from outside

their organizations. These gardens can be a great way to learn from more experienced gardeners in an informal, low-pressure environment. Talking to people who teach gardening, through the Master Gardeners association in your area or a local community college or agricultural extension program, can also help you locate gardens that need volunteers.

If all else fails, you don't actually have to "garden" to reap some of the benefits of gardening that are discussed in this book. Just going out into gardens and parks and exploring them with the eyes of a contemplative gardener might be enough, at least as a start. Since I became a gardener, the character of my neighborhood walks has changed considerably. I now notice what other people are planting, get curious about why somebody is growing something well when my own similar specimen is struggling, and appreciate a well-designed front yard in ways I never did before. My own preference is more for growing fruits and vegetables than flowers, so I'm especially delighted when I see others utilizing edible landscaping in creative and clever ways. I learn a lot just by observing, but mostly it is my appreciation and enjoyment that have changed. Gardening has opened my eyes to the world around me. There is so much beauty and wonder in scenery that would have once struck me as ordinary and forgettable. This might be the greatest gift that gardening bestows—the ability to see the world in a new way, to fall in love with creation all over again.

Of course, you don't have to confine yourself to neighborhood walks if you want to engage in this kind of passive gardening, as I like to think of it. A city park, a botanical garden, or other well-landscaped public spaces can be equally inspiring, educational, and filled with delight. If you can get to a botanical garden or arboretum on a regular basis, do it, whether or

not you are actively gardening elsewhere. These places are treasure troves of information and education, are often free or very low cost, and can be used for contemplative purposes as well. Repeated visits are especially useful; visiting during different seasons to observe how a garden or landscape is transformed by the onset of winter or the arrival of spring can help you feel even more in touch with the place, like getting to know a friend in different seasons of life. If this place is near where you live or work, consider just popping in for short visits as well as planning outings when you have more time to slow down and drink it in. When possible, go alone and keep distractions like music to a minimum—the idea is to focus on observation, on noticing both the world around you and your inner world with a bit more care and attention than usual on a walk or run that is primarily for exercise or other purposes.

The more gardens you visit, the more you will learn what appeals to you, and you can even begin to explore why that is. Some people just "click" with certain plants, and seeing that affinity as a gift and a doorway into your soul is a beautiful way to honor it. As I've said, I'm a basic vegetable gardener. I love watching plants grow, and do find aesthetic enjoyment in the different stages of a plant's life, but really in the back of my mind I'm always eager for the payoff, which is food. Harvesting blackberries or grape tomatoes and eating them while still standing out in the garden is a sublime joy to me, as is planning a meal around which veggies I know will be plentiful and ready to eat that day. But for other people, vegetable gardens are boring or too simple. Those people might gravitate to orchids, a great indoor plant, or rosebushes, or find their greatest joy in the design aspects of gardening, the shaping of a landscape over time. There is no right or wrong, no better

Winter vegetables in the author's straw-bale garden.

or worse, when it comes to garden preferences. Whatever you grow, or observe growing, can become a portal into a deeper understanding and appreciation for the divine spark of life that animates us all.

Finally, don't give up on growing things in your own space even if you don't have a lot of it. Houseplants are an option for nearly everyone. If you have any outdoor space at all, you can create a small container garden on a patio, deck, or balcony. It doesn't have to be an expensive endeavor: the internet is awash in great ideas about low-cost containers you can repurpose for growing plants. Good-quality, organic soil can be pricey, but for a small space you won't need that much of it and over time you might find better sources in your local community than the big-box home and garden stores. (Ooh, home and garden stores—yes, potentially full of temptations, but sometimes also great places for inspiration and appreciation.) Starting plants from seed is always less expensive than buying seedlings, although somewhat riskier for the beginning gardener. As you get to know other gardeners, they will often have cuttings or extra seedlings they are willing to share; gardeners are notoriously generous people.

Some of my favorite, unexpected ways to garden are methods I learned about online or from friends. Growing vegetables from scraps can be an amazingly fun project. Celery is the perfect plant for this; if you buy one whole bunch and cut off the end (obviously using the stalks for food), you can set it in water and watch it grow roots and sprout leaves, and soon you have your own new bunch of celery. YouTube is full of tutorials on how to regrow food from kitchen scraps: root vegetables, like potatoes and carrots, as well as onion, garlic, and many herbs can all be grown this way.

I'm also a huge fan of straw-bale gardening. This technique is a lifesaver in a small space or in situations where good soil is not available. When I moved into a new subdivision with no discernible topsoil to be found, I knew that straw-bale gardening would come to my rescue. The basic process is simple: You take a straw bale and prep it by adding organic fertilizer and water and making sure it gets plenty of sunlight. In a couple of weeks, the interior of the bale begins to heat up and decompose, creating a self-contained space for growing vegetables. I've had success with summer and winter crops, from broccoli to beefsteak tomatoes, and have been struck by what a useful option this can be for people with limited outdoor space. A straw bale is small enough to fit on most patios or balconies, or even in a parking space. It is also elevated, making it easier for people with back or knee issues, and tends to be almost completely weed-free (as long as you start with straw and not hay—hay bales will sprout and grow alfalfa or timothy hay or whatever they are made of, essentially becoming a large Chia Pet). The point is, with enough ingenuity and persistence, almost anyone, anywhere, can become a gardener.

Definitions: Spirituality and Spiritual Practices

Since every person you ask is likely to give you a slightly different spin on what spirituality means, I should probably offer my own best attempt at a definition. As a priest in the Episcopal Church, I find it easy to fall into "church-speak," that insider lingo that goes hand in hand with being part of a long-standing institution with its own rituals, routines, and vocabulary. By the way, gardening has its own insider lingo as well, much of it just as archaic and technical-sounding as anything the church goes

in for. I'll try to avoid all that as much as possible in this book, or at least to provide definitions alongside the jargon when it happens that the jargony word really is the best I can do.

For me, *spirituality refers to an aspect of our inner lives that is both at the core of our being and that also exists beyond our individual selves, connecting us to God, one another, and all creation.* It's okay if you aren't crazy about the word "God"; you can certainly use terms like "Spirit" or "the Holy" to talk about essentially the same thing. Spirituality cuts across different faiths and belief systems; it's something innate and deeply human, which may or may not find an outlet in formal religious expression (consider the popularity of the label "spiritual but not religious").

A spiritual practice, then, is a discipline or habit that helps us cultivate depth and meaning in our spiritual lives; it is an activity that keeps our spiritual lives fresh, active, and growing. Obvious examples are individual prayer, reading Scripture, and participating in worship services. In the context of today's multifaith environment, practices like yoga, meditation, praying the rosary, and labyrinth walking are increasingly popular among all kinds of believers, and many people are discovering ways to turn simple, everyday activities, like knitting and coloring, into opportunities for contemplation and spiritual renewal and even for more focused, disciplined forms of prayer.[1]

To give an example from my own life, I once led a retreat for women where we talked about the feeding miracles in the Bible and then made bread together, in order to make the shift from a primarily intellectual apprehension of our faith to an intuitive, embodied understanding. With each ingredient we added to make the dough, we paused to tell a story about the spiritual significance of that item: water symbolizing new life,

salt being a reminder of our unique giftedness, flour connecting us to a parable about the kingdom of God and a woman's reckless generosity, and so on. We used the time that it took for the dough to rise to share some of our feelings about how being female had shaped our relationship with God and with food, as well as with traditional notions of housework. We prayed while we kneaded the dough, allowing all our senses to be involved in the task, as the earthy smell of yeast filled us with feelings of hunger and anticipation. When the bread was almost ready, we began to celebrate a Eucharist together, pausing to sing as the freshly baked bread came out of the oven and cooled. One of the little loaves we had baked was blessed and used for communion, while the rest went home with the retreat participants.

Ever since that retreat, I have noticed an element of the sacred whispering around even routine baking and cooking tasks. Maybe it was there all along, and it took time with other women, the sharing of stories and songs and rituals, to bring it to my consciousness. Whatever triggered it, I now bake bread not simply to feed my family's physical hunger but also to feed something inside me that needs to be expressed physically. Baking bread, or really baking anything from scratch, is a whole-body experience, engaging all our senses. It is also a task that can lead to a flow state—if you've baked the same recipe many times, you can get into a kind of groove with it, simultaneously wrapped up in the steps of measuring, mixing, proofing, and so on, and also somehow utterly free and unencumbered.

Clearly, gardening fits into this category of spiritual practices that are based on the practical arts, crafts, or other ordinary activities—something simple and mundane, something people have done since time immemorial that, if performed with a certain level of awareness and intention, can become a

spiritual practice. The goal of this book is to provide guidance along that path. How it actually plays out in practice will be different for every reader and every gardener.

Gardening is one of the most fundamentally human activities; people of all ages, abilities, and belief systems can adopt it as a spiritual practice. In this time of climate crisis, gardening is an important way to put our focus back on the earth, connecting us more deeply to nature's rhythms, the weather, water as a precious resource, and other elemental realities and thus making us better inhabitants of this planet we all share. Working in a garden reminds us that human existence depends on so much that is outside ourselves—we cannot single-handedly create soil, or make it rain, or cause a seed to germinate. Facing this reality is both humbling and uniquely grounding. At the same time, gardening gives us a sense of agency in regard to those outside forces that make our life possible. We can learn skills like composting, pruning, and setting up drip irrigation systems, competencies that are eminently practical and also help us feel like we are co-creating with the Creator, or at least participating in sustaining and nurturing creation. There is much soul satisfaction in these simple accomplishments.

Within my own tradition of Christianity, theologians Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass literally wrote the book on spiritual practices twenty years ago, and I cannot complete this introduction without acknowledging their profound influence on my thinking. They define spiritual practices as "*the human activities in and through which people cooperate with God in addressing the needs of one another and creation*."[2] This definition is helpful in thinking about any kind of spiritual discipline, not only those practiced by Christians. It is something done, not just talked about; it meets one or more of the fundamental

needs of humanity and creation; and it is responsive to God's presence in the world.

Let's consider briefly how this definition applies to gardening. To be sure, gardens address some of our fundamental needs. Gardens that grow vegetables and feed people obviously meet the human need for nourishing food, but other kinds of gardens are equally valid and meaningful, including ornamental gardens, medicinal or herbal gardens, memorial gardens, and prayer or meditation gardens. A garden with a purpose other than growing food will have a different impact on its community but can also be a source of profound healing and transformation; it can, for example, feed our human need for beauty, for respite, or for belonging.

Additionally, a garden can address a fundamental need and condition of all creation, not just of humanity, inasmuch as those who tend it choose to practice sustainable and environmentally friendly methods of gardening. Perhaps we gardeners should take the famous oath: First, do no harm. In growing our own food, especially, we can be part of a widespread movement that is seeking to address the myriad environmental and health concerns created by industrial agriculture.[3] We can prioritize care for creation over unrealistic productivity quotas and market competition. The fundamental need for all creation to be treated respectfully and as part of an interconnected web of life can be met by responsible and attentive gardeners. In this way both human needs and the needs of the land can be acknowledged and met by gardening when it is approached as a spiritual practice; we are truly cooperating with God, the one from whom all good things come.

Most of the examples of gardening I give in this book come from my own experience, and much of my gardening experience

is a bit unusual in that it has been done in a community setting, specifically a church garden. There is no doubt in my mind that many people who garden alone in their backyards are gardening in a spiritual, mindful, even contemplative way. Most spiritual practices, though, do have a communal element. People who have a daily practice of centering prayer alone in their own homes, for example, may still meet with a centering prayer group weekly or monthly. I have friends who practice yoga and tai chi that way as well, balancing their individual practice with communal classes or gatherings. The point is, spiritual practices are intended to connect us beyond ourselves, rather than being solely about our unique and isolated relationship with the divine. Craig Dykstra helpfully calls spiritual practices "patterns of communal action that create openings in our lives where the grace, mercy, and presence of God may be made known to us and, through us, to others."[4] I would encourage anyone who wants to find more spiritual depth in their gardening life to consider adding some community gardening time to their routine. Being alone in a garden can be deeply restorative and meaningful as well, of course, but there is an added element to garden work done with others that creates that flow of energy, peace, and goodness that Dykstra is describing.

Finally, I like to remind myself that we use the word "practices" for a reason, and it is not about achieving perfection. Practices, like gardens, hold no guarantee of success. It is the doing of them, more than any measurable outcome, that makes the difference in our lives. In fact, Dykstra and Bass insist that practices are "always done imperfectly."[5] Gardens, too, have their inevitable imperfections and failures, no matter how much research and planning and hard work goes into them. My experience suggests that this is one of the primary lessons that

gardens teach us: we are not in control, and the sooner we stop grasping for control and learn to work alongside creation the more joyful our time in the garden will be. As in so many other areas of life, it is often through our failures that we learn the most about gardening and ourselves, and find ways to be more creative and adaptive as time goes on. Gardens are an act of faith; as such, they teach us both to trust in the process and to hold lightly to the results.

What about Contemplation?

The term "contemplative gardening" is in some ways aspirational. To be clear, I don't mean by it that you will fall into a trance when you garden, achieving a "moment of Zen" so pure and electric that you transcend the normal limits of time and space. Or at least I can't say that anything like that has ever happened to me while gardening. Rather, *contemplative gardening is gardening that puts practice and process over results and accomplishment, focusing one's efforts on being in harmony with nature rather than achieving mastery over it*. Over time, it can and will lead to inner transformation, and that transformation should be felt throughout your life, not just while you are in a garden.

If I sound at all tentative about these claims, in part it is because I think the word "contemplation" is much misunderstood. Contemplation is not the same as ecstasy, which is an experience that takes you outside of yourself and even outside of any sense of being part of the material sphere. (The word "ecstasy" comes from the Greek roots *ek*, "out," and *histanai*, "to place or stand.") Contemplation, in contrast, always carries with it a sense of observation, of careful attention, and thus