

"The Backyard Parables: Lessons on Gardening and Life" by Margaret Roach

In this book, Margaret Roach, former editor at New York Times, fashion and garden editor at Newsday and the first garden editor for Martha Stewart Living magazine, describes her personal foray into the world of horticulture. The author insists we must garden with both our head and heart, or as she expresses it, "with horticulture how-to and woo-woo."

"We Westerners call gardening a hobby, but how can 'hobby' do descriptive justice to the way garden and gardener become one, interlocking pieces of the same puzzle that's bigger than the sum of its parts? I often wonder who's tending whom," she writes.

Margaret states that the garden saved her, not that it has all the answers but most simply put "gardening lifts the spirits." She ventures it is because the gardener feels part of something, a "true connection, clear purpose...Do other activities such as bowling or bridge or knitting invite this depth of communion, or explain so many bigger -than-us mysteries?" She admits that the longer she gardens, the more humility she is endowed with, observing/working in nature, becoming more speck than spectacular.

Especially during winter's dormancy, this is an entertaining book to relax and dream with, anticipating next year's growing season. When work in the garden eases up, I enjoy a book that gives me a giggle and this one did that on nearly every page. I enjoyed the author's humorous tone as she relates reluctantly cutting the pant legs off an old pair of jeans to create her very first pair of gardening shorts in 30 years of gardening, or her exasperating attempts to live trap a woodchuck that was destroying her garden. Margaret does, though, provide a great deal of plant information, using correct botanical terminology, but if you wanted to short circuit your read, you could power through the book, reading only the sidebars and still gain much. We learn she eschews chemicals, buys only seeds from companies that take the Safe Seed Pledge and laments over the "contemporary plant names...invented by marketing people sitting in a room with whiteboards and PowerPoint and boxes of doughnuts and too much coffee" Names like "Potunias" or "Superbenas." I concur with the author, "Why can't we teach taxonomy to gardeners instead of what sounds like the cast of plant superheroes in a botanical cartoon series? Poor Linnaeus. Poor us; no wonder we suffer as a civilization from Nature Deficit Disorder."

Do I ever agree with this woman's opinion on mulch! She declares mulch should not be "something you need swatches or color chips to select." It should not look otherworldly, as if it has been custom-dyed, rather it should be a "deep brown (read: natural, like soil), so it looks good but doesn't show off." Perfectly stated!

Her first garden book, *A Way to Garden*, was organized into a six-phase anthropomorphic gardening calendar, paralleling the six seasons of life. Margaret Roach also has a website of this same name, packed full of articles and podcasts covering topics to satisfy any gardener on a rainy day. awaytogarden.com *The Backyard Parables* is available in hardcover at the Surrey Public Library.

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