

The Garden of Yoga by Denise Benitez

Like yoga, gardening is a practice of effort, of beauty, inspiration, cycles and rhythms. It is a practice of becoming familiar with dark and light, of abundance and stillness. I have practiced yoga most of my life, but I only became a gardener about eight years ago. In that time I've observed a few similarities between gardening, yoga, and life.

Creating beauty requires effort and intention. When I was a novice gardener, I would just throw plants into the garden without any plan or intention. Gradually I learned about plant relationships, about the design possibilities in leaf, flower and stem. Similarly, I learned in yoga that when I practiced in a distracted, haphazard way, there was much less coherence in the way I felt during and after a practice. I learned about bringing a powerful bhavana, or heartfelt intention into my practice, and I learned that the structure of intention creates energetic freedom. Once the bones of a garden are established, there is lots of room to play. Once the shape of a yoga asana is fully and honestly inhabited with one's life energy, a profound beauty and sweetness arises, an expansion and lightening.

You cannot force Mother Nature. In my first gardens, I had a complete disregard for the differing needs of plants. I would place shade lovers in full sunlight because that was the plant I was obsessed with having in that spot. In my early years of yoga practice, I blithely ignored the many signals from my body to practice with more focus and care. I didn't think of my body as Nature, i.e., as a miraculous channel for the gift of life; instead, I thought of it as a set of problems to be overcome. I am learning the subtle difference between dominating my body and making a wholehearted enthusiastic effort. I am learning the difference between softening and collapsing. I am learning how to become brighter without being harsh, and how to expand and lengthen without losing my inner solidity.

Nature is abundant and resilient. My first tiny backyard garden was

three years old and beautifully thriving when I decided to get a dog. The dog trainer advised me, actually commanded me, to give up my backyard to the dog. With tears in my eyes, I watched my dog race madly around the yard, trampling my flowers, breaking limbs on my shrubs, turning my beautiful soil to a muddy mess. I resigned myself to this loss and settled in for the winter. The next spring, all these plants enthusiastically pressed themselves through the earth, coming up stronger. The dog and the garden learned to live together. I remembered this resilience of life years later when I herniated a disc in my lower back (in the garden, as it happens!) and was reduced to a very simple and small yoga practice. I had to refine my awareness to an almost microscopic level to feel my way into movement that was not painful; it was as if my practice had gone underground and found a deep river that had previously been unknown to me.

Desire creates growth. Plants would never grow into their beauty and abundance if they didn't have such a strong desire for the sun. Some weeds will crack through concrete to follow this yearning. Watching a tiny seed break open and unfold its leafy arms, and six weeks later, see the gorgeous plant it's become is a deep object of contemplation. If we humans didn't have such a strong desire to evolve beyond our primitive impulses, we wouldn't have turned toward the sun of meditation, body practices, pranayama, community, spirituality, and love. Desire is what gets me on my mat every day, desire is what makes me want to do my best as a person, friend, teacher, student. Desire is what keeps me reading and learning, practicing and experimenting.

There is a season of rest and quiet. As I write this, it is November, and I have been "putting the garden to bed," for the coming winter. I cut back yellow fading leaves, rake up dead flowers, plant bulbs in their secret little beds. The plants pull their senses in, becoming silent and private, putting away their fancy clothes and hats. At this time of year, the days are dark and one's energy is reflective and more internal. Often I will practice yoga in a way that is less striving — I will watch my breath and see how it is not just air, but a consciousness that can be

sensed through my entire body. I will luxuriate in slow, deep asana that lights a simmering fire. Sometimes this fire builds into a more flamboyant practice of physical asana; sometimes this fire beautifully glows into a steady inner delight in the most refined of movements and sensations. The plants teach me that it is wise to rest, to fold into myself, to draw back. I know that the season of sun and exuberance will come again.