

Favourites of a second chance gardener by Kelly Noel for December/06

My early attempts at gardening were neither satisfactory nor satisfying. I had a vegetable garden, but family and job obligations made it a struggle to find time to plant, tend and harvest it. When the solution to a drainage problem required raising the level of the backyard, we buried the garden and sodded over it. I remember feeling relieved!

But 15 years later, I had more free time and planted a few perennials. The following year, I added more plants and bought some reference books. Next thing I knew, I was taking Horticulture courses and spending more and more time in the garden. Now, another ten years later, gardening is my primary hobby.

As it is for so many people, gardening is a source of great enjoyment for me. I concentrate on ornamental plants, staying resolutely away from vegetables, but those who do grow vegetables have just as much fun as I do.

You could ask any ten gardeners what their favourite plants and activities are and you would surely get ten quite different lists. Here are some of mine.

For my favourite garden ritual, I will borrow the term "rounds". Almost every day from April to October, I make a circuit of the garden, usually in the morning. Early on, I watch for emerging shoots, and later I admire the blossoms as they appear. I don't do any heavy maintenance but I do some grooming. Some plants quickly shed dying blooms but many keep them on after they have gone brown. This spoils the look for me, so I pinch off spent blossoms.

I often take my camera with me, to capture bloom combinations that seem particularly photogenic and to record problems like overcrowding or pests that will require my attention later. By the time I am finished, I have decided what garden chores I will do that day.

If you want to know your garden better, I recommend regular visits like this - admiring, deadheading, photographing. You'll always know what's in bloom or about to bloom and what needs some attention.

My eye is always drawn to plants with variegated foliage and I really like fragrant blossoms, but my hands-down favourite perennial is Hemerocallis - the daylily. Even though each lovely blossom lasts for just one day, an established plant can produce a succession of blooms over several weeks.

At last count, I had 39 cultivars in my garden - in colours ranging from vivid red to deep purple, several shades of pink, the brightest to the palest yellows and oranges from peach to cinnamon. Some varieties bloom by mid-June, some in July and August and some in September, so they provide colour all summer.

Whenever anyone asks me to recommend a perennial for their garden, I always think of the daylily first. It is easy-to-grow, comes in a range of sizes, prefers sun but does fine in some shade, and in this climate, is quite free of pests and diseases. Some are fragrant too!

One favourite that would probably show up on many lists is "sharing". Gardeners love to share - design ideas, tool tips, photographs. There is a network of Horticultural Societies and clubs where gardeners meet to enjoy the company of fellow enthusiasts and to learn more through lectures, presentations and demonstrations.

During the season, as I tend my garden, I pot up extra plants. Some of these go to garden exchanges, charitable plant sales and auctions, but there are always several on my work bench. Visitors to my garden are invited to make a selection and it pleases me greatly when they find something they want.

Another favourite treat is to tour someone else's garden, camera in hand. Visiting other gardens is always interesting, especially if the gardener is right there to answer questions, identify an unfamiliar plant and describe techniques used to accomplish pleasing effects.

This may seem like an odd favourite for a gardener, but I like this time of year. During this "off-season", when my garden is protected by a blanket of snow, not only do I have more time for other interests, but I can indulge in a different set of gardening activities. This is when I sort through last season's photos, plan changes and additions to the garden, perhaps take another course.

In February, I will set up my grow-light stand and plant the seeds that I collected from my garden or got at seed exchanges - mostly annuals but a few perennials too. It is great fun to watch these seedlings emerge and grow. It keeps me well supplied with annuals and I usually have lots to give away too.

But the best thing about having a winter is that we also have a spring. How wonderful it is when the days get longer, the snow disappears, the trees green up and the crocuses bloom. By that time, I am more than ready to get back out there and participate again in nature's glorious cycle.

When I buried that vegetable patch long ago, I thought I was a confirmed brown thumb - finished with gardening for good. But bit by bit, it snuck up on me. Each flourishing plant and beautiful blossom hooked me more completely. It certainly is more wonderful the second time around!

How long will I continue? For as long as it is this much fun!