

EVIL NAMES, NATURE'S WAYS

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Fern and I are starting a small-scale commercial garden to produce organically raised dried herbs for market. The demand is there, and after our initial outlays we expect to reap both a good harvest and some modest profits. Even before we

begin, however, the plants are teaching us some important spiritual lessons about patience and hope in dark, hard times.

Part of setting up such a garden involves preparing the soil for what will later come. For us, late summer meant putting in a plant with the ugliest of names: Rapeseed. We found it through the catalog of "Gardens Alive," a clever, small company that provides natural alternatives to the chemical Armageddon so many people consider "gardening." For our farm plot, we needed to amend the soil with some "green-manure" crops: plants grown not for harvest, but for turning under later. This process will improve tilth and nitrogen content. While red-top clover is frequently considered a great green-manure crop for fall, we were as drawn to Rapeseed's qualities as we were repelled by its name.

After getting past the name, we put in the crop, which is coming along very well. It promises to add richness to clay-heavy soil, a quality of Rapeseed that led us to buy a lot of it. But the name stuck with us. "Rape" is a word I do not say or write lightly; it calls to mind suffering that lingers long after the physical violence of the act is done. In fact, the word runs contrary to how I feel we should all steward land to improve it; I often refer to wasteful agricultural or other environmentally harmful practices as a "rape of the earth."

Yet from a plant with an ugly name comes much goodness; it calls to mind the Scarab Beetle, sacred to the ancient Egyptians as a symbol of the good that can come from evil. A Scarab sits on my writing desk, not far from my small collection of WWII memorabilia and other tokens of my life-long interest in military history. Each conflict I have studied has likewise resulted in some long-term good, and our current war is no exception. Both history and the plants in my garden have me wondering what goodness might come to us in the years to come.

Things could be darker; I often marvel at the courage of those who, like seeds in a hard winter, wait for the best time to come forth. Without digressing too much, I could cite instances of Germans who stood up to Hitler's Third Reich. From within that terrible government, they passed secrets to the enemies who would defeat it. These days, we could use such courage, and when our spirits sag we would do well to recall the persistence of soil-building plants like Rapeseed.

Whatever name follows "President" after our election--an issue I hope decided by the time this column sees print--its owner will need to carry us forth into light after some old troubles are returned to the soil. Right now, we have enough darkness--fear, hatred,

innuendo, deceit--to fill a royal court in the time of Machiavelli or even Nero. We have external enemies who, truth be told, do wish to see us destroyed and who must be confronted in some manner, if not always at the end of a rifle or laser-guided bomb.

I look at the Scarab and a book about German conspirators, then I glance at the Gardens Alive catalog. I am certain that, however long our current darkness endures, like the coming winter it will pass and something good will grow in its place. Part of that may mean turning things into the soil and waiting, ever patient, for a new spring. I invite you, as Fern and I did when tree-planting after Hurricane Isabel last year, to plant some seeds in your gardens, hearts, and for others. Seeds take time to germinate and can have ugly names like Skunk Cabbage, Poke Weed, or Harry Vetch, but in the end even these sad-sounding things can bring us and Mother Earth's other creatures much goodness.

May you and the land you tend be blessed by the Goddess of the Good Earth and her consort, the Lord of the Wild Hunt, both of whom understand loss and rebirth. May you never lose hope when the light fades.

References:

Gardens Alive. <<http://www.gardensalive.com>> and 513-354-1482.