

GARDENING FOR SILVANUS

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During a recent workshop at the Aquarian about sacred gardening, I ended with advice for all those wishing to add a spiritual, and ecologically sound, dimension to their work in yard or field: leave something wild there, and in ourselves, as we turn

the soil. This column describes in a bit more detail the philosophy and practice for this aspect of sacred gardening.

The English-style garden, with its herbs running into pathways and roses blooming in great drooping clusters, has become a dominant style in America. Thank the Maker for that bit of aesthetic good sense, something all too rare in other aspects of American life! I'm not overly fond, in my own space at least, of planting with the geometrical regularity of the gardens of, say, French or Spanish palaces. Those gardens are lovely, in their majestic way, but such gardens leave no corner alone to do as it would.

For another model of gardening, one that admits into the cultivated space a bit of Nature's order, one needs only travel few miles from us, at the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg. In this series of gardens, clipped boxwoods planted in oh-so-controlled beds coexist with rustic vegetable patches and wild spots left for whatever decides to grow. The fences of some plots are made of rough-cut branches of trees, not white

pickets; this led me to create a "rustic" garden gate that invites the spirit of wild places and ancient times into my garden. Too often new gardeners, wild with the joy of turning the soil, forget wildness itself. They cultivate every scrap of space to the extent that the soil will bear. This is particularly so for those working with the limited confines of an urban or suburban yard, where the space outside the garden is overly engineered, even ruined, by "development." In the countryside, of course, most larger properties will include some untamed places where rabbits, birds, and other "game" find shelter.

The trick, for most of us, is to remember to leave some space "wild," not just for animals or the ecosystem, but for ourselves. In Magical Gardens Patricia Monaghan calls upon us not to eradicate every weed, to teach us that chaos is a part of life, too. We cannot live on herbicide, and thus the wild corner of a garden reminds us of the non-rational, intuitive wildness we need to cultivate in ourselves if we are to meet the Maker on Her terms in ritual or in the garden.

In every garden I've planted, I try to include an area that I dedicate to Silvanus, a Roman god of the wild woods and fields. In my current abode creating Silvanus' garden consists of a shade garden under the trees on half of the property, trees that have grown up in the 50 years since the piece of land was part of a farm. In this small patch of earth, measuring no more than 65 by 20 feet, my spouse and I have planted a mix of native shade-loving plants and graceful foreigners such as ferns, hostas, and astilbe. When these lovely plants fade in the fall, we heap, then grind the fall leaves and add them to the pile of thick humus that has accumulated over the last several years. Soon this mulched and shady spot drew nesting chipmunks and squirrels, critters that became the bane of my nearby tomatoes, at least until I strung the vines with hot peppers whose color matched

the ripening tomatoes. Not long after this entertainment, chipmunks moved into Silvanus' garden, and a rabbit and its young began browsing on the clover nearby. Tending Silvanus' Garden has meant raking the path, keeping the plants evenly watered, since the trees drink so deeply, but little else. I weed a bit by hand, but the weeds come back for a few years. At another house it only took me three winters to keep the grass out of my shade garden this way, but other plants soon crowded grass and weeds out. I found that mosses, Solomon's Seal, ferns, and other plants came in vigorously to fill the landscape.

As the height of the planting season approaches, keep in mind the need to tread lightly on the land. Even if our region escapes another year of drought, reduce water use by mulching, restrict lawn size or let it go "natural" instead of reseeding and dumping weed killer on the grass, use drip-hoses and other water-saving techniques, and plant herbs and drought-resistant ornamentals so as to save water for vegetables and roses, if you have them in the landscape you tend.

Most of all, keep in mind to leave one spot wild--in your garden and your heart. Blessed Be during this year in the garden.

Further Reading:

Dalmrosch, Barbara. The Gardening Primer. New York: Workman, 1988.

Monaghan, Patricia. Magical Gardens. St. Paul: Lewellen, 1997.