

Loving the Garden

By [Margaret Roach](#)

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It's a relationship, in my case a long-term one, that has weathered many actual storms. And yet the garden and I find ourselves lately at that stickiest of places that two partners can confront: the moment when one utters to the other, "I thought I knew you."

Taking stock of the fading year, that's what's in my head: I thought I knew you (but you are behaving so unlike yourself).

That feeling has intensified each recent year, as forces oh-so-much bigger than myself with names like "[heat dome](#)" and "[polar vortex](#)" seem determined to erode the familiarity between us.

Once, I could confidently read the garden's signals and be on top of the sowing or watering schedule, but I now find myself slightly out of step in the face of aberrations. In my general area, the latest March was served up practically snowless (and around four degrees above the 30-year average); April featured summery days near 80 degrees, then late May delivered a cold snap. Rain no longer arrives in the familiar cadence, as weeks without are followed by flood warnings. And there is wind, so much more wind.

With an increasingly unfamiliar climate to confront, perhaps the gardener's tool kit should now include key Buddhist writings on impermanence, powerlessness and nonattachment.

I'll need new rules to get my groove back, starting with the overarching mandate to learn to look with fresh eyes; to expect the unexpected.

Alongside the [USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map](#), with its estimate of frost-free dates, and the long-range forecast for the week ahead, I think the gardener's planning tool kit should now include printouts of key Buddhist writings on the topics of impermanence, powerlessness and nonattachment, plus the Serenity Prayer — an instrument of discernment about what we can in fact change, or not.

'Keystone Plants' (and Little Charmers, Too)

Add little doses of pure prettiness to the plant-shopping list, like the bright little faces of pansies and violas, for cheer in pots outside and plucked to place in tiny vases indoors.



Chaos notwithstanding, I try to assert positive influence in ways both large and small, wherever possible, starting with plant choices. I'm seeking two extremes: real ecological powerhouses to do my part to stave off the ravages of changing times, and also some little doses of pure prettiness (as antidotes to personal despair).

This is no time to be without the bright little faces of annual pansies and violas; even a few plucked from the big bowl-shaped planters outside and placed in a tiny vase on the windowsill or dining table cheer me onward. No mere indulgence, they are true food for the soul from early April into June.

More important on an existential scale, though, are “keystone plants,” an expression I didn't even know until about five years ago, that has quickly become a gardener's guidepost. It describes the native species that are disproportionately important to local ecosystems, the sort of mightiest plants of all — the ones (like the keystone in an arch) without which the structure would collapse.

Douglas W. Tallamy, the University of Delaware entomologist, contributed to the term's recent popularization as he taught us about [the power of oaks](#) and the diversity of the food web-sustaining caterpillars they support. There are distinct keystone plants for pollinators, too. It's time to study which ones match our particular eco-region, using [the search tool](#) from Homegrown National Park, the nonprofit that Dr. Tallamy co-founded.

Merely having the right plants does not complete the picture, though, we are increasingly reminded; even the most ecologically focused plantings cannot have their full positive effect if managed carelessly.

The ecological repercussions of “garden cleanup” were quantified in research published in March. Two years of data upended any magical thinking we might have held about identifying one perfect moment for leaf cleanup that could spare the beneficial organisms who live or overwinter in that critical layer. If we timed our raking, blowing and shredding just right, we wanted to believe, perhaps waiting until early spring, the inhabitants would have awakened and emerged, no harm done.

[The study](#), by Max Ferlauto and Karin T. Burghardt, researchers based in Maryland, demonstrated otherwise, offering hard numbers to back up the cleanup 2.0 call to “leave the leaves.” There is no ideal timing for interventions; emergence, it turned out, continues even into summer.

“When you remove the leaves, instead of retaining them,” Dr. Ferlauto said, “you reduce the number of moths by 45 percent, the number of spiders by 56 percent on average, the average number of beetles by 24 percent.”

When the organisms go, so do the ecological services they perform, from feeding birds to aiding in pest control.

There was more guidance: Removing and shredding leaves are equally bad; composting them can kill the tiny creatures, too. Let as many as possible remain where they fall; rake whole leaves that must be moved into mulch-like layers elsewhere. Not too thick, though; a pile of leaves that is too deep can prevent emergence.

Watching With a Careful Eye

The first flowers on a red maple (*Acer rubrum*). Practicing phenology — observing each transition moment or phenophase of plants — makes good agility training for gardeners in an ever-changing world. Credit...Ellen G. Denny, USA-NPN

It's a moment for adjusting maintenance practices, and observational ones, too. [A 2025 interview](#) inspired another method of reorienting myself in how to essentially be here now. The nudge came from a book by Theresa Crimmins, the director of the [USA National Phenology Network](#), based at the University of Arizona, where she is also an associate professor. She had just published “Phenology,” about the timing of recurring seasonal events in plants and animals.



Dr. Crimmins suggests we each become “an everyday phenologist,” and learn to recognize every transition moment on a plant, or phenophase, from the first leaf or flower bud swelling through leaf drop or seed dispersal, and record it in the network’s

database. “I invite you to weave a practice of observing seasonal cycles of plants and animals into your life to contribute to science as well as soothe your soul,” she wrote.

To practice phenology is an exercise in paying close attention. Because the schedule of each phenophase is influenced by environmental factors, it is never quite the same — perfect agility training for gardeners in a world of less year-to-year consistency in general.

A different observation practice, of the garden’s biggest visual moments, can help me strengthen its design if I look carefully at which seasonal focal points may need editing to turn their volume up or down.

The place is punctuated by the deliberate use of generous amounts of what I have come to regard as my signature plants, each showing off in its own time. With the actual seasons feeling upended, I am reassured by each signature showing, like the familiar masses of gold-flowered wood poppy (*Stylophorum diphyllum*) in spring — even if not at the same date as they once peaked.

From July into September, the reddish-purple umbels of Korean angelica (*Angelica gigas*) delight me and an impressive diversity of hungry bee and wasp species; the blooms are abuzz for many weeks.

Another signature is the conscious placement of plants with strong fall color, to scream even when the garden heads toward quiet. And the winner is: Cotinus Grace, a hybrid of American smoke tree (*C. obovatus*) and a variety of smoke bush (*C. coggygria Velvet Cloak*). Its usual fall color is a wild mix of purple, red and orange, but this year numerous leaves took on a startling pink-purple color, too, and who knows why. I was grateful.

Whenever spring arrives, I will watch eagerly for one particular unfolding of leaves: the ones on five massive apple trees that date back more than a century, probably closer to 150 years. As well as I know them, and as many years of applesauce as they have offered, each remains anonymous, its variety name a long-lost secret.

I recently learned that from leaf tissue samples, [the MyFruitTree lab](#) at Washington State University can now analyze apple DNA and compare it with records from thousands of known varieties in hopes of a match.

A Zen Buddhist koan says that “not knowing is most intimate,” but I am thinking that achieving first-name basis with these beloved old souls would feel pretty deliciously intimate indeed.