

Plants Just Want to Grow

Published 8/6/20 – Picture shows the volunteer elm seedling on the roof of the Hollywood Shop in downtown Pierre.

My wife is really good at repeatedly telling me things such as “You know I was saving that food for the cat” or “Your shirt's on backwards again.” They are very helpful, and I sincerely mean that. But another phrase she's apt to say frequently is “Plants just want to grow.” This is such a true statement and not only comes from her fondness of starting plants from seed but from seeing plants grow where one wouldn't expect them.

We've had one or more volunteer squash come up in the compost pile probably every year we've composted. I don't remember the exact order this happened but we had a pumpkin volunteer outside the compost in our back driveway. We sidestepped the plant for the season, let it bear fruit, and eventually harvested a nice medium sized pumpkin. Later the pumpkin was left outside and eventually discovered by deer, which broke it apart, scattering pumpkin guts around. Well, you guessed it, nearby was a half inch crack in a sidewalk which was found by a seed and the next year our volunteer pumpkin sprouted again. This time the plant was between our back door and the garbage so sidestepping it became more of a chore, but it again bore fruit for us again. But that plant sure wanted to grow!



Downtown the Hollywood Shop has a corrugated metal awning that has 3” deep valleys. Over time organic material collected in one of the valleys creating enough of an environment that apparently met the needs of a wayfaring elm seed. This year is the 3rd year I've seen it there, likely it's been there longer than that, relying on what blows in on the wind and what rain comes from the heavens. That is a true survivor, and that small seed sure wanted to grow!

Bonsai is a popular hobby of growing miniature trees and shrubs. Initially specimens were collected from the wild and transplanted into specialized pots by collectors. Happily, at least in this country, collecting wild plants has been replaced by buying starter plants through retail outlets. Several decades ago in someone's back yard a juniper was found in a pot that had been tipped over to a 45 degree angle. For what we determined was at least 5 years the plant continued to live in that pot, stretching upwards towards the sun despite having lost most of it's soil and receiving little water. That turned into a bonsai for me.

Finally, we're moving and can't take a favorite 20' tall catalpa tree with us, so our thought was to get a seed from that tree and start a new one. But the other day I looked in a porch pot of red impatiens thinking the larger green leaves were sweet potato vine. Turns out a catalpa seed found a home. So not only did that plant want to grow but it also wanted to move with us, thereby providing a direct link to a favored tree! I now have a new favorite tree, even though it's currently only 6” tall.

From these experiences obviously things don't have to be perfect for a plant to grow. Just enough is sometimes all that it takes.

Art Smith is a co-owner of East Pierre Landscape and Garden Center, 5400 SD Hwy 34, Pierre