

Dear everyone, greetings.

During my vacation, I have had the joy of working in our garden. For the purposes of clarification, in British English the word “garden” just means a lawn and some shrubbery and non-edible plants such as carrots, cabbage, spinach and other such rabbit-feed. Our garden is large, and requires much attention each summer. My wife and I divide the tasks according to the equipment and intelligence required. Anything that requires a chainsaw, pick axe, weed whacker, lawn tractor or the application of brute force with minimal brain input is in my realm. Anything that requires delicate attention, careful planning, an eye for detail, a trowel or trimming equipment, or a functional intelligence, is in my wife’s domain.

However, while gardening I have had the privilege of learning some of the similarities between growing a garden and God’s care for us and our lives. Some of the lessons I have learned are laid out below:

- 1) No garden starts beautiful. In fact, for a garden to be beautiful requires a lot of work. Likewise in our lives, although we are redeemed and thus belong to God, in the same way that the garden belongs to me, I also need a lot of work at the hands of God before I can become what He, my owner, wants me to be.
- 2) Every garden has a fallen nature. The default nature of a garden is to fall into disrepair, for weeds to flourish, for the good flowers to be overwhelmed by the climbing vines and ivy, for the lawn to degrade into a mix of crab grass, dandelions, mole hills and thistles. Likewise, we also have fallen natures, and our default trajectory is, *ceteris paribus*, downwards.
- 3) Every garden needs a gardener. For a garden to overcome its fallen nature, it needs a gardener who has a vision for what the garden can become. Likewise, our Heavenly Father knows what He wants us to become - to have the likeness of Christ in our characters, and He does not cease in the good work that He has begun in us to help us grow into that beautiful vision He has for us.
- 4) Gardens can be hurt, but they can recover. I once was asked by my pastor, while I was a student, to give his garden a good haircut. It had not been touched for some years, so I and a cousin conscientiously razed it to the ground. Everything went – roses, chrysanthemums, hibiscus, pansies, daffodils, creeping vines and even the evergreen trees at the end of the garden. We discovered a path the pastor didn’t know existed due to the overgrown ivy. By the time we had finished, the garden looked like the mud of Passchendaele, and there was no danger of anything growing for another 5 years. In our minds, it was therefore a thing of beauty. We were never invited back, hopefully because we were not needed rather than not wanted! However, after some years, I met up with the pastor again and he explained how the garden had recovered over the years to a thing of beauty.
- 5) No garden can become beautiful overnight. Rather, for a garden to flourish it needs a daily touch from the gardener. A trim here, a watering there, a cutting here, a moving around, weeds to be pulled, seeds to be planted, mulch to be shoveled, boughs lopped off etc. This cannot be done in a day. As a garden is a living thing, the gardener must attend daily with individual touches akin to gently guiding a galloping horse. So in our lives, we need the daily and loving touch of the Master Gardener for us to grow into people of beauty, i.e. after the likeness of Jesus. It is better to cooperate with the Master Gardener for those daily touches to be brief, to the point, and effective.
- 6) Every garden has a host of distractions. This summer I have observed foxes, coyotes, red tail hawks, chickens, possums, rabbits, ground hogs, raccoons, chipmunks, weasels, blue herons, mosquitoes, yellow jackets, Japanese Koi, a variety of snakes and snapping turtles moving in and around the garden. A gardener needs the gift of discernment to know what can be avoided and

what must be dealt with. Likewise, in our lives there are many distractions, and we need to be careful to know what must be dealt with, and which must be avoided (most of the above).

- 7) A garden may appear to be a thing of beauty to the casual observer, but the gardener tends to see what still needs to be done. As the garden grows and flourishes, passers-by tend to remark on its beauty. The gardener however sees that trees need to be trimmed, what grass needs to be cut, what flowers need to be transplanted, and what holes have to be filled. Likewise, as the disciple grows into Christlikeness, observers may see His beauty starting to shine through in us, and the disciple tends to see the character shortcomings and failures. Both perspectives are accurate, but the danger for the disciple is to be overwhelmed by the perceived lack of progress. In such circumstances, living in a community of disciples is so important, for it allows other disciples to affirm the beautiful work of the Master Gardener in the garden of each particular disciple.
- 8) Sin can take hold so quickly if not dealt with immediately. Over my vacation, I have spent some days hewing down large trees, 80-100 feet high, at my brother's house. Each tree was then cleared of branches and chopped into logs for my winter wood supply. Last Sunday, we moved the logs to the back of my home. By about 5pm, the wood pile was high and finished. After a shower and meal, I sat down to read a discourse on Daniel 11 in my office at 7pm. As I looked out of my back window, lo and behold, a large groundhog silently moved out from under a log of the newly constructed wood pile, just feet from my stunned eyes. Unbelievable! That wood pile had been there for less than 2 hours! Sin, like this groundhog, has the tendency to move in given half a chance, when we least expect it, to multiply, and to burrow down into our lives, causing inestimable damage and possibly the collapse of the household of faith. Sin therefore must be rooted out as soon as the Spirit convicts us before it can multiply and overwhelm our spiritual lives. In this particular circumstance, I followed the counsel of Col. 3.5.
- 9) For a garden to become a thing of beauty, there may be pain, often for the gardener. While clearing out some undergrowth one morning, and without any gloves on, in shorts and hiking boots, I pulled out many clumps of poison ivy, unbeknownst to me. However, by that evening, while my wife was admiring the cleared patch, I was suffering. Likewise in our lives, as sins are dealt with, the process of turning the garden of our lives into a thing of beauty can be painful. With hindsight, I am glad the poison ivy is gone, even if it did cause 3 weeks of severe discomfort and regular doses of calamine lotion ☺. In our spiritual lives, we may echo the words of John Newton, the slaver become pastor, who wrote, "I am not the man I want to be, not what I wish to be, nor what I hope to be, but by the grace of God, I am not the man I used to be."
- 10) Every garden has a gardener! Yes, every garden has a gardener, who sees into the future, and knows what a thing of beauty any garden can become. The gardener is intimately acquainted with the past of the garden, and with the particular struggles every garden has, be they moles or crabgrass or destructive raccoons or lack of shade etc. Yet, the gardener still gardens, never giving up hope that every struggle can be overcome, and the garden can become, and remain a source of beauty and pride to the gardener and to all who come into contact with the garden.
- 11) Every gardener seeks a harvest in every season. In spring it may be daffodils and other spring flowers. In summer it may be a harvest of vegetables, berries and the beautiful smell of honeysuckles. In fall it may be a harvest of corn or apples or the juice of freshly picked grapes. In winter the harvest for the eyes may be evergreens, towering above the deep snow that waters and fertilizes the ground beneath. Likewise, as we allow the Master Gardener to be active in the garden of our lives every day, so we are seeking a harvest of beauty in every season of our lives: hope in times of grief; patience in times of strife; faith in times of trouble; gratitude in times of plenty; and at all times, the aroma of Christ and His matchless love in all we do and say.

I am sure there are other lessons to be learned from gardening, but here are some that I have learned during this summer. May the Master Gardener continue pruning, weeding, nurturing and watering in all of our own lives, and may we cooperate fully with Him, that the following Scripture may come true in all of our lives:

The wilderness and the wasteland shall be glad for them, And the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the
rose;

² It shall blossom abundantly and rejoice, Even with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, The excellence of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, The excellency of our God.

³ Strengthen the weak hands, And make firm the feeble knees.

⁴ Say to those who are fearful-hearted, "Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, With the recompense of God; He will come and save you."

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.

⁶ Then the lame shall leap like a deer, And the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, And streams in the desert.

⁷ The parched ground shall become a pool, And the thirsty land springs of water; In the habitation of jackals, where each lay, There shall be grass with reeds and rushes.

⁸ A highway shall be there, and a road, And it shall be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean shall not pass over it, But it shall be for others. Whoever walks the road, although a fool, Shall not go astray.

⁹ No lion shall be there, Nor shall any ravenous beast go up on it; It shall not be found there. But the redeemed shall walk there,

¹⁰ And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, And come to Zion with singing, With everlasting joy on their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness, And sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Isaiah 35:1-10

Have a blessed and bountiful week and Sabbath!

Conrad.