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AN ESSAY

My own worst enemy

A cutworm teaches a fledgling gardener a very hard lesson

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When I was first drawn to try gardening, I was lovesick over the lush photography on seed packets and the prospect of turning my back yard into a display case of purposely solicited flora. I was tired of the kind that stalked over on leafy legs from the neighboring empty lot and strangled everything in sight. I wanted redbud, not tree of heaven. Clematis instead of poison ivy. I imagined butterflies, birds and bees going into paroxysms of delight over the transformation.

I never, all while I pored greedily through catalogs, imagined catastrophe or heartbreak.

I did not realize that the term "new gardener" was roughly synonymous with "giant bumbling murderess."

But longtime gardeners, their knees muddy and their thumbs glowing green, know that the garden is such a perfect microcosm of life that it too teaches lessons the hard way. There is miracle and there is grief. Here, for example, are three important things that I have learned so far:

- 1) What comes out of the barrel after three weeks is not mature compost.
- 2) It is fresh compost.
- 3) Fresh compost kills plants.

The most painful lessons are the ones you remember, such as when the seedlings you nurture with moist eyes and expectant little thud-ups of your heart turn out not to be the snapdragons you sowed but instead common black nightshade. (A cautionary tale, maybe, for the newly married and childless like me.) I, mother duck, have wandered around raising the ugly gosling as my own more times in one season than I care to relate. And weeds don't turn into swans, ever.

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What a healthy, weed-free garden truly represents is a lengthy learning process and triumph over constant adversity, which I didn't fully understand until I made my first Hugely Enormous Mistake as a gardener, the kind of goof that makes mistaking a weed for a flower look like genius.

I planted my first small garden almost entirely from seed, starting the peppers indoors in February and putting the rest in the ground as soon as warm weather would allow: snapdragons, marigolds, cilantro, lettuce and thyme. I added basil and tomatoes after the last frost. The seedlings arose just in time for an unusual spring drought, and they grew slowly despite my cheerleading, their stalks tender and small.

One morning I went outside to find several of my healthiest plants sheared off at the soil. Their lifeless bodies untouched beside their stumps gave away the perpetrator's identity: cutworms, a grubby, faceless enemy that works in darkness and has an insatiable taste for young stems.

I was, of course, irate. Searching for a way to save my remaining plants, I Googled cutworm pictures and seethed at their pasty, curled-up bodies. Most everything I read online called for a different solution, from homemade collars around the plant stems to pesticides, and I spent hours ruminating over the various methods. I finally settled on non-toxic insecticidal soap.

I was nearly out of the soap -- I used it sometimes on my flowers -- so I purchased a refill at the local home store and loaded my sprayer. I carefully misted each plant and recited some impromptu anti-cutworm incantations. I felt exhilarated.

When the sun came up, I could hardly wait to go outside to make sure all my seedlings were still intact. I hurried out onto the deck in my pajamas and peered over the railing.

What lay there nearly stopped my heart. Every plant in my garden, save one row of cilantro, was curled into a tiny, agonized ball. I raced down the stairs, thinking my sleepy eyes might be telling tales, but as I reached the plot I could see that the destruction was nearly complete. My plants were of three camps: dead things, dying things and a few weirdly cheerful cilantro sprigs. I screamed for my husband, whose expression on arrival can hardly be described, nor his words printed.

He knelt down over the sweet peppers and touched them gingerly, and as I fled back upstairs to Google the problem, I heard him call after me, "Karin, these plants are . . . slimy." I couldn't figure it out. I knew that insecticidal soap was safe; I'd used it a hundred times on my petunias. Who could have done this? How could this have happened? I was going to maim. I was going to sue.

I plugged in keywords and scoured the Web for some clue, any clue, and as I clicked through a gardening site I noticed that the directions for debugging a particular plant called for a very small amount of "soap concentrate." Suddenly, what I had done hit me like a ton of fresh compost.

I had not purchased a refill of bug-killing soap. I had purchased concentrate.

My darling plants had marinated in a bath of lethally potent goo for more than 12 hours, and any cutworms that survived were probably rolled up in the dirt laughing so hard they snorted. My hours of toil in the sun, my aching back, my money spent, my misting and turning and pricking and transplanting through the end of the dark winter months, all for nothing.

My husband and I spent the rest of the day turning the garden hose on the whole terrorized lot. Only the cilantro and a handful of other plants, which I had somehow missed with my Spray Gun of Oozy Death, survived unscathed. I cried. I sobbed and sobbed until my eyes swelled up like golf balls. (Although I would eventually revive some of the plants, these would not be the last tears I shed over my garden: see

Lessons 1, 2 and 3 above.)

But then, as gardening imitates both life and "Gone with the Wind," my bout of grief gave way to grim resolution. As God was my witness, the cutworms would not lick me. I would start over. I would swallow my pride and drag out my seeds and come the end of summer, I would eat something grown in my garden by my own hands even if it was the one marigold

I didn't kill. "Well," my husband sighed, "you live, you learn." Ah, yes, the frank education of Mother Nature, the first of many hard knocks that would initiate me as a gardener. In the ashen slime of my dead lettuce lay universal truth and timeless wisdom: Always, but always, read the label.

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