

Deadheading for the Future

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I was in my garden yesterday morning on a hot, heavy, muggy day quite happily deadheading roses when the miracle of the moment struck me! In whacking off the spent flowers I was not only encouraging growth and future blooms and creating a time for reflection and enjoyment for myself, but the very obvious metaphor between gardening and human growth and evolution was undeniable. Perhaps most importantly, though, there was something distinctly different in my experience of maintaining my garden this time around.

For many of you intrepid gardeners you'll likely wonder what all the fuss is about. Deadheading, weeding, pruning and such assorted duties are an essential element of the gardening process. And you're absolutely right, they are, and I've been doing them for the 30+ years that I've been gardening as an adult. But here's what was absolutely different for me: in the past I've always engaged those activities out of a sense of duty and obligation. Sort of like *'you've had the good times of creating this delightful space, Gwen, now you must pay the price to keep it maintained'*. Of course, like anything else done out of duty and obligation it wasn't a particularly enjoyable aspect of gardening for me. My gardening maintenance was usually spotty, and got worse and worse as the season unfolded. I was typically filled with resentment at the time and energy required to keep my garden beds looking good. Even though I knew that the effort invested would pay great rewards, even though I knew that I had created these garden beds because I loved the process, I was never able to shake off the resentment. ...that is, until yesterday's moment of discovery.

I realize now that in this 'resentment' which I felt as tightness in my back and shoulders accompanied by lots of self-talk about how hard-done-by I was, how hot it was, what a useless activity this was, etc., etc. I had never really noticed that the only reason I was in the garden doing all of these things was that I loved gardening and would have a very difficult time living without it!

Until yesterday morning I hadn't made the connection between my early years as a garden slave and the discontinuity of my own experience of the physical process of garden maintenance. I grew up in a gardening family. We were 10 kids and so the vegetable plot was extensive to say the least. We owned 12 acres of land and very large plots of it were turned over to growing potatoes, corn and the usual stuff of summer eating (to say nothing of canning, preserving and pickling). On top of the family vegetable acreage, my Dad had developed this little business growing gladiolas for sale.

We averaged about 10,000 bulbs (corms, actually, for real enthusiasts) each summer. Work started in late April when we'd all troop down into the basement and begin the process of sorting through bulbs, removing any that were diseased or shriveled up. The 'peanuts' or cormlets had to be gently broken off and set aside to be planted in a special nursery section of the garden so that they would grow into flower-producing bulbs. The papery outer skin had to be removed and then they were sorted by size. Thankfully my father wasn't sufficiently fastidious to try to sort by color.

Once the bulbs were all cleaned and sort and piled into buckets we then had to tackle the garden. We had a small plough and one of my brothers would till the soil with us girls following along behind with our hoes, creating long straight hills for the glads. I don't recall it mattering much how old you were, you

were expected to work, although your production goals were set lower, depending on your age. I don't remember a time when this wasn't an expectation so I would guess that we were each put to work in the garden by the time we were 4 years old. The May 24th weekend was devoted to the back-breaking job of planting: getting the holes just deep enough, putting in just enough fertilizer, placing the bulb in so that it was straight, with the eye pointed upward and then covering it with just the right amount of friable soil and making certain that everything was planted in nice, straight rows. No dips, doodles or arcs allowed in John B's gardens!

We then kept up a keen watch each day, both before heading out to school and upon our return watching for the green tips to sprout. We also then had to turn out attention to getting the vegetable garden planted with the same kind of rigor to our planting technique.

Finally school was out and the real fun began. An hour every morning, rain or shine, weeding and hoeing, staking and trellising. You could be certain that there was always someone around to tell on you if you took too many pauses or were slow in attending to the rows of growing plant life. ...now another lecture, dressing down or paddling with whatever the latest implement of torture my mother was using that day was something we were all keen to avoid! So we learned how to keep our heads down and beaver away, keeping our thoughts to ourselves until we were relieved of our daily duty.

I can only imagine the stories I told myself about how awful life was as I toiled in those hated rows of greenery! And I'm sure that the mental habit of feeling hard done by when maintaining my garden that has been with me all my adult life got its genesis on those long, hot summer mornings.

Come August the blossoms would begin and then each day we'd be out for additional time cutting the long stalks at just the right angle, creating bundles of 6 complementary colors, tying them up with butcher's string and placing them in 5-gallon pails of water stored in an old shed out of the sun's hot rays. In the evening the car would be loaded with the buckets and off everyone would go to the ritzier neighborhoods in nearby Ottawa where the flowers were sold door-to-door. It was a coming-of-age event in our family when you were deemed old enough to pile into the old Austin with everyone else and go door-to-door offering "*lovely, fresh picked flowers for only 50 cents per bunch*". I think I was 12 when I was first allowed to go selling. In those pre-seat belt days it was easy to cram 6-8 sweaty kids into that tiny car so that there were lots of little sales people hitting the streets.

All of the money we made from this little business went into a big jar that was emptied at the end of August when the Ottawa Ex came to town and we got to spend whatever we'd made on rides, candy apples, games and cotton candy. The more money we made, the more rides we were able to go on. It was a huge motivator to sell, sell, sell I now realize!

Finally, on the Labor Day weekend, we reversed the May process. All the plants were pulled up and left to lie in the field for a week or two until the green stalks withered and the bulbs ripened. Then before a killing frost occurred, they had to be picked up, the stalks broken off, most of the soil shaken off and the bulbs taken downstairs into the cold, dark basement and spread out on large mesh shelves so that the drying process could be complete and the bulbs went into their long winter rest before the cycle began again the next April.

It is amazing to me that so much personal history which I haven't really thought much about for over 40 years has come rushing back as a result of that momentary realization in my garden. Once again I am reminded of how much our growing up years stays with us, like the background music of our lives, shaping and molding how we experience things large and small with us barely aware that there is any music at all.

When I have these moments of insight and clarity I have learned that they are moments in which my life changes and begins to proceed down a different pathway. And I get curious about what precipitates these moments. For me, I'm sure that there is a connection between the publication of my latest story in the collaborative "*Sekhmet Rising: the restlessness of women's genius*" book that arrived from the printer last week. In that book I let the world know for the first time just how much anger and rage flowed through me for decades and what life has become like for me now that I have metabolized that rage and it no longer haunts me and owns me in the most inappropriate moments.

I believe that the process of going public with what for me was a response that I really didn't want anyone to know about has opened up other pathways of discovery for me. And gently, without any fanfare, I notice that I am different in other areas of my life that I didn't even know were connected. Such are the mysteries of life!

Besides wondering what other habit of mine that irritates and annoys me will be the next thing to fall away, I am left wondering what now becomes possible for me in this apparently small victory? I am curious to discover how many other places in my life I'll begin to notice that life is different because a deep resentment has disappeared. And at a more prosaic level I wonder how much more marvelous my garden will begin to look with all the additional attention it is likely to get!

I am also left with a deep sense of awareness that the metaphor of deadheading is an important one for me to notice. The process involves cutting away not only the spent blossoms, but ensuring that all the associated seed pods and sometimes their shoots are removed so as to stimulate new growth and the creation of new blooms. It makes me aware that my life is like that ...many things from the past which I am over and done with need to be cropped away so that future possibility and potential can begin to flow and I can continue to become ever more than I have been in the past. As a metaphor, spent blossoms and seed pods are like old beliefs that have outlived their usefulness. They aren't going to go away on their own and require that we remain awake to their presence and invest ourselves in a little self-deadheading! Just like our roses, tulips, peonies and marigolds thrive when we make that small, on-going investment in their care and nurturing, so our spirits and lives are invigorated and renewed when we invest in letting go of things from the past that no longer serve and support us. I wonder what future I have already begun to create for myself.

About Gwen McCauley: Coach, educator, writer and veteran of the 'employee to entrepreneur' transformation process. With wit, wisdom and worldly experience, Gwen invites her clients on a journey of self-discovery, gaining clarity of purpose and increasing self-awareness and resourcefulness. Gwen brings a strong background as a corporate executive with extensive management experience to her work. She founded Odysseys Unlimited Inc. (OUI) in 1997 and is a co-founder of the WEL-Systems® Institute. Gwen has an MA in Human Systems Intervention from Concordia University and a successful track record as a coach, program leader

and businesswoman. In addition to being a WEL-Systems Educator™, CODE Model™ Coach and Quantum TLC™ Facilitator, Gwen has studied Open Space Technology, Myers Briggs, Appreciative Inquiry, Generative Leadership and Total Quality Management. Gwen published her first book *“The Alchemy of Energy: Exploring The CODE Model”* in 2004 and co-authored *“Sekhmet Rising: the restlessness of women’s genius”* with 17 other women in 2006. She is currently working on her third book.

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