

Desert Gardening – Challenges and New “Friends”

By Lyn Pearson, January 2009

While I was writing this article, I was trying to figure out a hook to our Seventh Principle and a traditional hymn came to mind, especially since we just sang it on a recent Sunday. “*There's honey in the rock for all God's children, Feed ev'ry child of God.*” Bear with me and I’ll try to tie this into our principle of respect for the interdependent web of life.

My husband and I moved to Las Cruces after a lifetime on the east coast in Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia. We lived less than 50 miles from one of the largest freshwater bays in the world, the Chesapeake. Noted for its blue crabs, abundant fish, and great sailing, this water body is fed by the Susquehanna River that flows through Harrisburg, PA, where I was born. It is also fed by the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers that flow through the heart of Washington, DC, where we worked for almost our entire careers. The Chesapeake materially influences weather, making the areas around Baltimore, Annapolis and Washington, DC, just plain stinking hot in summer. Walking out of an air-conditioned building in July and August is like stepping into a warm, wet sponge. Humidity levels are nicely maintained by over 40 inches of rain and up to 36 inches of snow a year.

That much water plus marginally decent soil produces lush crops and gardens. This is where we learned to garden, it was what we know.

You can imagine the allure of New Mexico with its perennially sunny skies and exceptionally dry climate. Life without 50 bags of fallen leaves every fall and the need to mow the lawn, sometimes twice a week from April through November, was very attractive indeed. Life without the plague of moles in the lawn, fungi growing on everything and nasty lawn diseases was a dream come true. What we didn’t realize is that the stuff on which our NM house sits, where we hoped to grow a beautiful southwestern garden, is not really soil. Our friend Joel says it’s “unconsolidated.” We’re not sure what exactly isn’t consolidated but we suspect it’s why we don’t have earthworms and why when you put water on it, it’s like pouring it through a sieve.

After more than 30 years in the garden, we know that most soil/sand/clay is improved with liberal amendments. Out came the tiller and many, many bags of cotton seed burrs and liberal amounts of other organic additives. Our favorite is Las Cruces Solid Organic Waste (we call it Las Cruces Poo). It’s free, has an earthy smell (nothing that will embarrass you if it gets wet in the rain), and comes in nice, lidded 5 gallon pails.

Once the sand was on its way to being something that could support a garden, we began planting. Oh, blissful ignorance. We’d done enough research to know that many Mediterranean plants would be happy in Las Cruces. In fact, many things we grew in Maryland would grow here. We found several sources for native plants as well. We merrily bought and planted, watered and waited. I should mention that we planted in the only seasons we knew. In Maryland, you start planting in late April or early May and you can plant throughout the summer, if you know what you’re doing. Fall planting begins in late September and it had better be finished by the middle or end of November. Mmmm, well, in Maryland, winds reach 40 mph only during a hurricane or tropical storm. New Mexico’s spring “zephyrs” change the growing seasons a bit, something we didn’t consider because, well, we were ignorant.

We bought and planted: we watered and waited. And waited. And watched the plants wither and die. We knew it would get hot but we didn’t count on the sun physically hammering plants into the

ground. “Plant in full sun” has a radically different meaning here than in does Maryland. The east coast is where the sun is always tempered by an atmosphere loaded with water vapor; where partly cloudy is the rule and where the UV index might reach 5, but only at the beach. Plant in full sun in Las Cruces actually means dappled or light shade. Is there any point in discussing the windy season? Probably not, but we swear we could hear the wind sucking moisture out of the garden like some obnoxious giant sucking through a big straw.

After two garden seasons, we thought we were halfway knowledgeable about Las Cruces gardening. We had a tiny garden with masses of lavender, native grasses such as Dallas Blue, buddleia (butterfly bushes), roses, a variety of sages and day lilies, and a bizarre plant called Japanese spurge that adds a sort of alien interest to the garden. We even had a little patch of Blue Grama grass that gets mowed about every two weeks during the summer and requires a teaspoon of water every week or so. We don't have to worry about bagging the leaves that drop from our trees; they blow up to Albuquerque during the windy season.

We'd come to an understanding with the soil, sun and water, but we weren't through with our trials by a long shot. At the 3-year mark, we were quite happy with the developing garden a small oasis measuring perhaps 20' x 12'. Things were lush with minimal water and few bugs. There's nothing prettier than a mass of lavender growing around roses. O joy, we don't have black spot or powdery mildew, nor do we have those east coast monsters known as Japanese beetles.

But lurking among the shrubbery was an adorable but voracious critter, an insidious creature that appeared and disappeared between eye blinks, leaped tall walls and for all we know tall buildings. It was an animal that could possibly eat its own weight each day and loved tender plant shoots and most perennial flowers. The bunnies had arrived.

Was it the odor of growing green things? Do bunnies send out advance scouts? How did they find us? Not only did they find our little desert oasis, they decided our yard was the perfect maternity ward. For the past two years, we've had several crops of baby bunnies. Well, they say that Barak Obama should thank Mrs. Clinton for “hardening” him in the the Democratic primary. Using that reasoning, we are thankful (more or less) to our bunnies for hardening our garden planting strategy. We now know all about bunny-proof plants.

Bunny-proof plants include those with blue-green or silvery gray leaves. That covers things like sage, lavender, Artemisia, and lamb's ears (Stachys). They also don't like roses but they'll mow down certain ornamental grasses in a New York minute. However, they won't touch Dallas Blue, which coincidentally, is a very blue native grass. Our planting plans have changed. When the bunnies murder a plant, it gets replaced with a bunny-proof plant. We're not about to fight *that* war for the rest of our lives. Other things bunnies (at least the ones that live with us) don't much like are mums but they're very taken with pansies and oddly, they seem to like watermelon greens.

Our bunnies are able to jump our three-foot rock walls with relative ease. We're certain they were delighted to discover this inborn capability after we wired up our gates and then put stones, rocks, and cement under them. We're learning to live with the bunnies, albeit grudgingly. We even provide them with water and food, outside the wall. We harbor the faint hope that this will keep them outside the wall and away from our tender plants. This brings me full circle. While singing hymns in church, it suddenly occurred to me that bunnies are “children of God,” and as we sang the phrase, “*There's honey in the rock for all God's children, Feed ev'ry child of God,*” I concluded that we're going to be feeding the bunnies for a long, long time.