



TEND YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO GROW A LIFETIME OF LOVE

By Kelly McQuillan

As I navigate the crowded aisles of the local wholesale warehouse, my phone beeps persistently. Thinking it might be an emergency, I stop to check. It's a text from home: "Onions are in, along with carrots and beets!" I try to quell the rising tide of fury in my chest. The Rogue Gardener, aka my husband, has struck again. I reread the text, recalling how earlier this afternoon I started to dig the compost into the soil and started to level things out, with plans of finishing all of the preparation tomorrow. And now he's gone and planted things already while I'm out grocery

shopping!

My calmer thoughts say, "He's just trying to be helpful, and taking advantage of good weather and his day off," while my pride cuts in line: "Damn it! He's always going off and doing things on his own – and what about The Plan?"

My hackles are raised, and I begin to visualize the argument that will ensue when I get home. I realize I am muttering to myself in the middle of the toilet paper aisle and beginning to attract some worried looks from other shoppers.

I take a few deep breaths, willing my calmer thoughts to kick in once more: "It's not just my garden; we share it. Sharing means compromise."

My ego bristles, but rolls over for this one.

Fast forward several years to last summer. As we stood in the midst of our carefully tended greenery, loudly "discussing" the proper way to water tomatoes, it hit me (and not just the spray from the hose) – neither of us could let go of what we thought was right. We were so passionately entrenched in our opinions that our communication had regressed to that of year-olds, except with less goodwill toward each other. Entertaining for our neighbours, I'm sure, but not so healthy for us. I was ready to wipe my hands of the whole garden.

It was such a departure from the fresh, almost giddy feeling we had four years ago, when we decided to start an organic garden in the back yard. The prospect of growing our own fresh, healthy produce was exciting and seemed to be a great opportunity to do something together. What had gone wrong? Growing a garden is supposed to be therapeutic, not stress-inducing!

On most issues, my husband and I see eye-to-eye, or are willing to compromise without any conflict. We've managed to handle chores around the house, issues with the kids, shopping, and so on with civility and loving words. But when both of us are passionate about a project, the obstinate sparks start to fly.

This winter I thought about it: What was it about gardening together that was bringing out the worst in us? I started to realize that gardens and relationships have a few things in common, and that maybe this was an opportunity instead of a problem.

The Best-Laid Plans...

As wonderful as it would be to imagine the perfect garden or flawless relationship and have that play out in reality, life just doesn't work that way. The best-planned garden or most meticulously attended-to relationship is still subject to the whims of nature, the capriciousness of life. A roaming band of aphids, a cool growing season, or life challenges that appear out of nowhere can turn our plans upside down. The thing is, sometimes surprises can turn out to be gifts – a productive volunteer squash plant or a life circumstance that brings you and your partner closer together than you ever thought possible. It works both ways.

Keep Learning and Adapting

When we first started the garden, I asked people a lot of questions about the "right" way to do things. Most emphasized that gardening is a lot of trial and error. What works one year or in one garden might fall flat in another time or place. A garden is a natural ecosystem and is constantly changing. Relationships

are also in a constant state of evolution, because people are, too. We grow, we learn, we have new experiences, and we change. What is true at the beginning of a relationship might not be true a year or two or forty down the line. Opening ourselves to learning about and adapting to the changes, will surely empower both our gardening and relationship skills.

Grow from a Strong Base

Just as every garden needs nutritious, balanced soil to thrive, a successful relationship requires a solid, deep foundation to hold it steady through all the different phases of life. I married my husband because I love him. He is a good man, with a kind heart and the best of intentions. We might have different ideas about details sometimes (okay, a lot of the time), but if I remember our base, remember the love at the root of everything, then I am more able to differentiate what really matters from what might not even grow.

As we begin this year's growing season, I look forward with optimism, with the knowledge that we have a great foundation of healthy, organic soil. We'll make a loose plan that we both agree on, but I'm not going to worry too much about where we plant the peas and whether or not my husband is causing the tomato leaves to mildew. At least they'll be watered. There are two of us to plant the seeds, to tend and observe them as they take root and grow, and to help them through any difficulties that might arise. This summer, I hope we can sit in the middle of the greenery, glass of wine in hand, and enjoy each other's company and the fruits of our labours with gratitude.

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