

Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens

organized by SAVAC, summer 2020

[Chapter Two (Look Closely) - June - Christina Battle]

best viewed on a handheld device, while with your plants

Since I started working on this chapter, it feels like things have completely kicked off. I hope you're all hanging in and taking care and that watching your plants grow is providing some solace. Things are feeling pretty intense right now, and growing things helps me feel more grounded, connected, and thinking toward the future.

Look Closely Look Closely Look Closely Look Closely

I find it progressively harder to predict what needs to be done in my garden at certain parts of the summer in a way that is consistent and reliable.

And since we're all living in different climates, growing under different conditions, in different scenarios, and under the backdrop of crisis, I'm going to stay away from the typical garden "what to do in mid-summer" update.

Who knows what to expect these days.

Nothing is predictable.

Listen to what your plants are telling you

Hopefully, you've started to see some growth in your plants:

maybe you've already had a chance to harvest some early season crops like greens and radishes; maybe you've had flowers start to bloom.

If your plants don't look like they're starting to stabilize, consider what the problem might be. It's rarely too late to make changes. Common issues are related to light, water, or temperature. It can be tricky

to isolate since, for many plants, the repercussions look the same (browning leaves could mean too much water, too little water, or too much direct light). If you can, try shifting conditions for a few days and see how your plant responds.

In most cases, make sure your plants aren't too crowded - make sure they have room to spread both above and below ground (often plants can be much closer to one another than what might be suggested on seed packs - try to think ahead to what your plant might need and plant or thin your crops accordingly).

Paying attention is an ongoing act of reciprocity, the gift that keeps on giving, in which attention generates wonder, which generates more attention —and more joy.*

Pollination is a critical part of most plants' ability to produce and helping the process along can be necessary for urban gardens. One of the easiest ways to encourage pollinators (like insects and bees) to engage with your plants is to plant flowers they like nearby (some examples in my region: milkweed; aster; coneflower; and sunflowers).

A few things you can do:

* use plants local to your region;

* plant flowers of a variety of colours, shapes and species to attract a variety of pollinators;

* plant flowers in clusters.

Lots of herbs provide flowers for pollinators: basil, fennel, dill, lavender, hyssop, and chives all have beautiful, fragrant blooms.

If you're still concerned, you can help the process along by hand pollinating your plants (like an insect would).

Gardening is an intergenerational activity.**

Paying attention to other beings—recognizing their incredible gifts of photosynthesis, nitrogen fixation, migration, metamorphosis, and communication across miles—is humbling and leads inescapably to the understanding that we are surrounded by intelligences other than our own: beings who evolved here long before we did, and who have adapted innovative, remarkable ways of being that we might emulate, through intellectual biomimicry, for sustainability.*

As the climate warms, hardiness zone borders are shifting at an alarming rate. A recent study out of Yale University found that "Plant Hardiness Zones are moving north in the U.S. at 13 miles [20 km] per decade."

That means, in 10 years, my garden here in Edmonton is predicted to look more like one in southern Alberta, with its warm, dry conditions.

The health of the economy of a community and the health and wellbeing of its residents are inseparable.**

I think a lot about how to approach saving seeds in order to prepare for future climates.

Since the expectations of how quickly the climate will shift in the future are surpassing our own predictions, the decisions about which seeds to prioritize now has become less clear.

Generally, seeds are saved from plants that produce well over a season: those that grow healthy fruits and vegetables; those that you want to hold onto and grow again in future years.

But, as weather patterns become less predictable, it's hard to know if those plants that do well this season will continue to do well in future ones. With increased storms and extreme weather patterns, the plants that do well this year might not be the ones you expect.

Last year, here in Edmonton, we had so much rain. The rainiest, they say, since 1996. At first, when it started, the rain arrived to great relief because of the wild fires raging out of control further north.

When it rains here it usually also cools down, so plants that rely on long hot days (like tomatoes and peppers) didn't do so great last year. My carrots, though, did amazing! Since they prefer growing at the cooler ends of the season, they loved all the water along with the cool nights.

I held some carrots back last year to grow into seeds over the coming summer and to save this fall (carrots are biennial and flower during their second year). I'm thinking about it as a preparatory measure in a way, if the coming summers mimic last year, at least I know these plants will do well.

What's one thing you've noticed about your plants? That you're either amazed and/or perplexed by? Document it to share.

Weeds are just plants you didn't plant yourself. If they're not causing your plants any trouble, consider the benefits they might offer your growing space.

Over the next week: Take note of the weeds you find and read up about them. If you're not sure what the plant is - try a plant identification tool online (many are available for free); or check and see if your library, city, or local plant society have resources. Take notes to share at our next gathering.

If you're thinking about saving seeds from your garden for next year, you might start to take steps now to make the process a bit easier in the fall:

* make sure to plant more than you plan to harvest in order to let some go to seed.

* technically, it's best to leave space between varieties to avoid cross-pollination. That's not so easy in urban gardens though, and I generally don't worry too much about it. Still, you might avoid planting a pumpkin directly beside a butternut squash!

* you'll have to leave most fruits and vegetables on the vine longer than normal in order to save seeds so, if you were planning to use succession gardening with some crops (like lettuce or radish) make sure to leave a few mature plants growing before you change over.

* read up on how to collect seeds for specific plants beforehand so you don't miss critical moments. Dry fruited crops are generally quite simple: let seed pods dry out before you collect them (ex: lettuces, radish, beans, peas); wet fruited seeds need to be picked when mature and then extracted from the pulp of the fruit (ex: tomatoes).

* store your collected seeds in a cool, dark, and dry place.

Something for us to do together:

For this year's Summer Solstice, on June 20th, (or 21st, depending on where you are), pick one flower from your garden or neighbourhood, place it between two pieces of heavy paper, and press inside a heavy book for at least a month.

Before you press your flower, write down a few thoughts about it: where you found it, what it reminds you of, what you recall from the day you cut it, what was growing nearby...

More than ever, I've been thinking about the value of the community we're developing as part of Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens. Because of its decentred nature, it operates differently than a typical community garden.

If our garden network had a manifesto, what would it include?

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*quotes from Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Returning the Gift*.
**quotes from Malik Yakini, Detroit Black Community, Food Security Network - video for the Ecology Centre of Ann Arbor.