

Green Days in the Concrete Jungle

by Ted White

Nineteen years ago I moved to San Francisco to be a filmmaker. I went to film school, made some short artsy films and went on to make documentaries about bicycling as a radical political act. Though I loved making them, over the years I realized they were not the kind you make a living from and it became clear that the “day-job” (sometimes a.k.a. “shit-job”) would likely be a fixture in my life.

I survived stints as pretzel vendor, espresso jerk, coat check guy, copy shop clerk and a handful of other odd gigs. Eventually, however, I found the ultimate artist’s side-job: gardening. It allowed me to work in beautiful serenity sequestered in someone’s backyard, away from the bullshit, the pretense, the traffic, the noise—in short, away from people. It allowed my brain to stretch out, relax and sunbathe. Since many of the tasks of the gardener are repetitive, I could get into a nice mindful/mindless groove and do a lot of creative thinking while I worked.

As a livelihood, gardening was rejuvenating, sensuous, and cured what ailed me—pointless unsatisfying work and people-centric attitudes towards our surroundings. Gardening showed me the other San Francisco, the natural one (or fairly natural anyway), a city of unexpected flora and fauna. This other San Francisco offered me a space to witness such sights as a huge barn owl napping in a Monterey Cypress above me, or a skunk popping out of a hole under someone’s porch in broad daylight and then scuffling away. I found and rescued my dear cat Pepita, starving and trapped in the deluge of an automatic sprinkler system. I experienced green days in the concrete jungle, an incredible diversity of life. Just as the city offers itself as a fertile spot for punks, queers, artists, freaks, Chinese, Guatemalans, Iranians and Anglos, it seems as if pretty much any green life form with a will to grow can

thrive in San Francisco. Any and all plant life can give it a go here, from Banana Tree to Princess Flower, Agave to Redwood trees, fig to fern.

One of the great ironies of gardening professionally is that you often work for those too busy to garden themselves or even enjoy their own garden. As you spend much of your day in the most scenic, tranquil places in the city while those you work for slog away, pushing paper and zinging e-mails. In doing so, they make the big money to pay you and the other service-providers: nannies, carpenters, housecleaners, personal coaches. So that you can putter around, snip, clip, whistle, weed, and tidy their little corner of paradise, your clients toil diligently downtown.

There is a tendency to be cynical about your clients. Over the years you might witness them upgrading from BMW to Lexus to LandRover and roll your eyes thinking: What the fuck? But actually, I’ve found that people who value gardens enough to pay someone to maintain theirs are connecting with something pretty deep. They may have

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positioned themselves askew from where their hearts lie, prioritized being in an office in a highrise over a lavender bed as a place to spend most of their time. Still, they possess a sense of nature’s power and glory. Many clients over time become more and more devoted to their gardens. They learn about and begin to really understand their



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plants, witness their growth habits and idiosyncrasies. They become increasingly entranced by the amazing play of sunlight, rainfall and decomposition, and realize how wonderfully simple it really all is.

Only chefs and maybe plumbers get to work with as much organic material in a day as gardeners do. Gardeners enjoy a slightly ruffian exterior and get to wear sexy tough-lookin' clothes: boots, gloves, dirty jeans, raggedy shirts. Gardeners get down and dirty and end the day with leaves and dust in our hair. In these dot-com days there is genuine pride in not making your living with a keyboard and mouse. And don't forget, gardeners are armed. With our pruning shears strapped to our sides in leather holsters we're the gangsta floribunda.

Gardening helps you feel tough and a touch bad-ass but also allows—even requires—gentleness. Gardening is about observing, tending to needs, stepping lightly, nurturing.

People dream of leaving the city and “getting away from it all,” because in the country—“it” seems bigger, deeper, more permanent, more satisfying. After a day in the mountains or at the side of a clear stream, it's hard to go back to the city. You keep thinking of the mountain or the stream, like it was a beautiful person who smiled invitingly at you and now you're wondering why the fuck you just walked away. That's why we need city gardens, to keep those yearnings from getting too unbearable.

Maybe all this is a signal of a great turning. The garden, even a modest one offers a refuge away from techno-consumpto-think to just-sit-and-be. When time begins to sound sexier than money, and green looks more vibrant than gold you know you're feeling good.

Besides the urban vs. rural tug the gardener is immersed in the great struggle of control vs. chaos. Obviously one of the ongoing tasks of the gardener is weed eradication. To the gardener, weeds are the “other,” the enemy. They are the enterprising interlopers who threaten to steal the livelihoods of the established plants. They threaten the very idea of the domesticated garden and mock one's loyalty to it. Yet, as plants they are brilliant players, mad geniuses and rogue warriors. Weeds find a way to do their thing. They zero in on a gap in the grid, throw down a root and grow like hell. Weeds are graffiti in the garden landscape, nature's taggers. They're outrageous, impressive and won't behave.

Gardeners are paid to maintain control. The paradox is that part of you wants to maintain order everywhere (clean pavement, swept driveways...), but you also find the innovative free-wheelin' weeds irresistible. Digging on your hands and knees, yanking or scraping, you start to ask yourself, what makes this particular plant a weed and some other not a weed? Strangely enough, people have imposed a caste system upon many plant species. *Oxalis*, *Euphorbia*, Thistle, all have “good” varieties and “bad” varieties. While you pay good money for some at the nursery your clients are paying you to

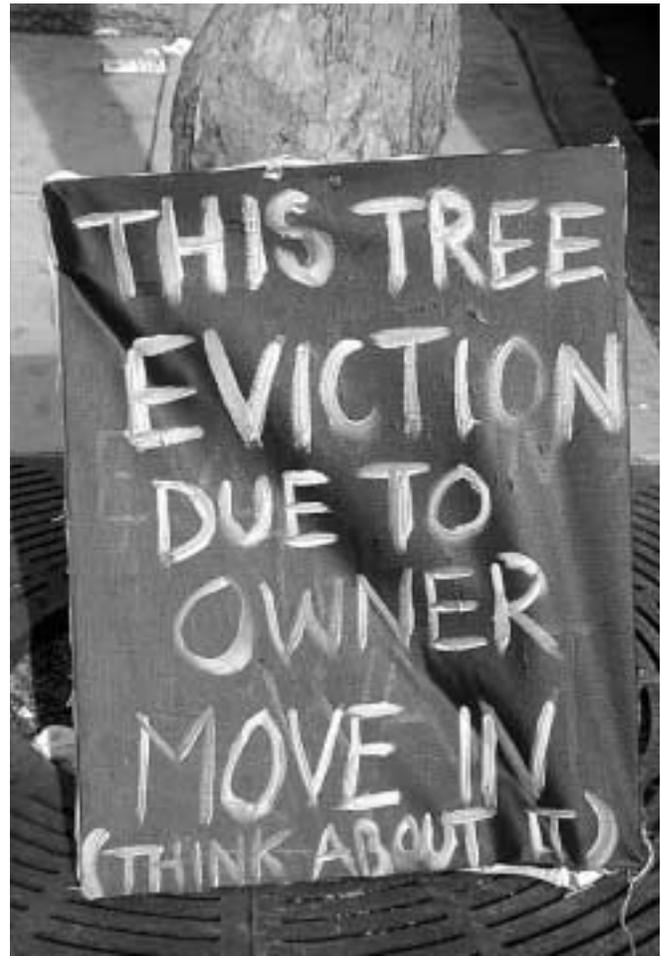


photo by D.S. Black

rip out their evil cousins by the hundreds. It all becomes a little weird, and perplexingly hypocritical.

Personally, when I spy weeds growing through the cracks in the sidewalk I have two reactions: first, “Wow! You go, little green thing, kick ass!” The other, frighteningly knee-jerk, is: “Shit! Look at this chaos, what are these scruffy, “homeless” plants doing loitering here? There goes the neighborhood!” As a gardener, one is supposed to keep order. Nevertheless, we cheer the wild individual achievements within the plant world.

On the best days, gardening barely seems like a “job.” In many ways it is the antithesis of what modernity is about. Since I don't use a mower, blower or other motorized stuff, for me it's a slow choreography of quiet handwork, which still requires age-old tools. Rake, shears, shovel, broom: tools which won't soon become obsolete. The yields of gardening are satisfying yet often intangible. You can help the plants, but can't force them to perform to your liking. Aside from, perhaps, flowers or fruits, there is no bottom line. The point of a garden is simple—to create room for natural beauty and calmness. While so many current occupations seem to be about creating complexity and drumming up urgency, gardening gifts us with patience, non-immediate gratification and most importantly, a sense of wonder.