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Time

## Cultivating My Green Thumb

Judith Matloff, 04.21.09, 6:00 PM ET

A couple years ago I tried to start a vegetable garden. It was awful. I developed allergies. I hate worms. Everything died.

To the relief of my family, I packed away the trowel and the gardening gloves. But now that Michelle Obama is growing organic chard on the White House lawn, I thought that maybe I should give the backyard patch another go. It's getting warmer, and, more important, we could save money.

Ever since my 401(k) evaporated, we are always looking to trim the household budget. What better way than living off the land? My grandparents were Ukrainian, and when my husband and I lived in Moscow in the late 1990s everyone who had a little plot to call their own grew cucumbers and beets (in lieu of pensions). A garden would be a return to my roots.

A quick scan of our weekly grocery bill, however, revealed that we wouldn't be saving all that much money. My son's and husband's idea of greens is pistachio ice cream. I'm the only one in the household who doesn't shun leaves, and my personal romaine lettuce intake totals a mere \$3.24 a week.

That led to some discussion with my husband about what exactly to grow. John suggested tomatoes. Organic tomatoes. "You are not going to poison us with chemicals," he declared. My previous farming experiment involved strong insecticides, and without them I'm in a bind: Slugs like tomatoes; I detest slugs. How was I going to get rid of them?

I also worried about other garden pests. You see, we live in Harlem, which is about as urban as it gets. My last attempt at inner-city agriculture--withered chili peppers and cabbage--attracted rats and something far more terrible.

My husband and I came home one evening to find the kitchen in mayhem. "A burglar!" I gasped. The chairs were knocked over, the crockery smashed and the grocery bags were shredded. "Stand back," John ordered as he went to fetch a big stick. I got ready to dial 911.

Then we noticed the gnawed baguette. And the ripped screen window. What kind of robber would leave half a loaf of French bread? As though on cue, the culprit appeared at the window, brazenly trying to force entry again. "Oh dear God," I murmured weakly. It was ... a squirrel.

Anyone who has encountered such monsters can understand my despair. Once they choose a particular dining area, squirrels re-appear for perpetuity like a bad ex-boyfriend. We pulled shut the glass window and enjoyed watching the creature bang his head against it, but that only kept him from re-raiding the breadbox. He still had our great outdoors to ruin.

Such a grave situation necessitated urgent consultation with the neighbors. We have a strong block association that managed to drive drug dealers from the street--surely they could expel a rodent. The group rose to the occasion, declaring "Not in our backyards!" Someone suggested setting a trap. Another had heard that deer urine scares off squirrels. (But where to buy it in Manhattan?) There was talk of the right to bear arms.

Before we could agree on proper action, the creature slunk away to who knows where. Perhaps my pathetic vegetable plot convinced him to seek sustenance elsewhere.

Which brings me to today. I can't possibly grow anything that would entice the squirrel or his kind back. I was pondering this problem when I chanced upon a farmers market. The guy selling potted herbs assured me they would not attract vermin. I bought a small pot of chives and brought it home. Chanting "Yes We Can," I channeled the first lady and pulled out my old gardening

gloves.

But in order to plant the herbs I would have to confront the earthworms. There's one thing I detest more than slugs, and it's worms. I know worms are good for the soil and all, but they're disgusting and I always seem to slice them in half with the trowel. I thought I could convince my second-grader to help me rake the soil--little boys like playing in the dirt, right? The problem is Anton liked it too much. After scooping up a handful of the invertebrates, he got a notion to adopt them as pets and start a worm farm in his bedroom.

I persuaded the child to leave the things in the ground and called it a day. The chives have remained rooted in their little pot ever since. They look nice on the windowsill, and John suggested I keep them there for the season. I can always transplant them to the yard next year. Or not.

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