

Grateful Dead-Heading: A Gardener's Revelation

Chris Bolgiano

Pinch. Snip. Snap. Severed, spent flowers drop into the compost bucket like guillotined heads into a basket. I pretend they're my bad habits, bad temper, bad hair. If only it were so easy.

In the dusk of my life, I go out on my deck of a summer's twilight to groom my kitchen herb garden. Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme, basil, tarragon and oregano, plus a scattering of spring onions, live in four large planters on coasters and in one stationary, soil-filled horse-watering trough. Mixed through all the pots are flowers. First come the early season, self-seeding volunteer annuals like violas and little native poppies. Later come the verbenas, petunias, calendulas, marigolds, and other hummingbird and insect-attracting annuals available every spring from the local greenhouse.

Sure, we have the big vegetable garden, with four long beds that supply most of our meals, either fresh, from the root cellar, or in the jars I can, or the bags I freeze. Growing your own food was basic to the "Back to the Land" movement, and we were your basic back-to-the-landers. By the first Earth Day in 1970, the husband and I were looking for land on which to become post-industrial homesteaders. We were convinced that our generation could change the world by eating low on the food chain, low as in on your knees bent over in the garden growing vegetables.

Everywhere we looked in our early twenties, we saw a war-centered world. A life lived close to nature seemed the surest way to inner peace. So we told our parents that the lifestyle they had worked all their lives to achieve was meaningless to us, and moved from safe and conventional suburbia to the backwoods of rural America. We took flower power seriously, and sought out old traditions of making herbal medicines, storing food, and aging venison. I'm using the royal "we" on that last one.

Forty-five years later, though, the phrase, "Going Back to the Land" has taken on a darker meaning — a more personal recycling kind of meaning. The flower power that once seemed so gentle has revealed itself as the relentless force pushing up daisies in Nature's perennial garden. For years I've called myself an aging hippie, but what looks back at me in the mirror is an aged hippie. It's the "hippie" part that matters, I tell myself: peace, love, and folk rock and roll, the music that sang our youthful idealism.

It's while I'm dead-heading on the deck, in our tiny clearing in the midst of forest, that I muse over those old ideals and measure how far I still have to go. It's while dead-heading that I admit to myself I haven't gone the distance yet. Growing old happens to everyone who lives long enough, though I did think it'd take a lot longer than it actually has. No one ever seems quite ready for it, despite its universality.

Dead-heading has become a ritual of mindful mindlessness, the opposite of going to confession for a Catholic — which I was at an age too young to protest, but recovered from early on. No white-bearded white guy behind a cloud is going to tell me what to do. Not even the Goddess, who has far more clout, has driven me to worship anything less solid than the mountain I live on. The closest I've come to religion since childhood is being a bad Buddhist, with a

mind too peripatetic ever to be empty, and compassion that needs a good yoga stretch. The endless cycles of life, death, and weeding the garden are divine enough for me.

Sometimes as I'm dead-heading it's hard to tell a flower that's finished from a young bud, and I end up plucking off promises for the future. Sometimes when I go away, the flowers go to seed and even removing every dead-head doesn't bring back a bloom. No matter. I pour time like water onto the plants, moving my fingers tenderly through them, giving and taking nurture. Dead-heading is my meditation on the now: Every decision I've made, every path I've chosen, has led me here, to this deck, these plants, this forest, on this dwindling summer's day. Light slowly fades as cool air flows down the mountain over my arms. Everything around me is beautiful, perfect, even the dead leaves and withered flowers I pick off, because they form part of the endless, sacred cycle. I vow once again to be worthy of this deck, these plants, this forest that together give me this time of grace. Here is where I contemplate, not just what a long, strange trip it's been, but how grateful I am to have arrived, even with a bad hip.