

# Kathy's Garden: DEATH AND THE GARDEN

## It is the smallest, most awful question: why?

In matters of life, death & passion it is terrible & unanswerable: why did my dear friend die so young; why don't you love me as I love you; why isn't the Pulitzer Prize committee on my doorstep even as I write? In the mouths of children it takes on poetry & metaphysics: why can't I hold on to what I find in my dreams? Why can't I fly yet? Why am I here?

In the garden it can be all these things, though vegetative passions are usually slower & more soothing than their warm-blooded equivalents. These past weeks have brought a good many whys my way, from novice & experienced gardeners & from my own green paradises.

Many of these garden whys have to do with untimely death: I loved my plant; I cherished it; it is dead; please tell me why. Without seeing the dear departed my responses must be tentative & exploratory. In some cases, as with the lovely morning glories cherished by one friend, the death was untimely only according to the gardener's desires. If your plant is an annual it intends to put forth a great burst of growth & bloom, set seed, and move on to transcendence. If you are very fortunate you will be able to save seed & replant; or you will inherit the children of your plant, little self sown seedlings popping up where once the parent flourished. Biennials like foxgloves have a similar but longer cycle; in approximately two years they flower, set seed and die back. In some cases by cutting the flowers before the seed is set you can frustrate the plant & prolong its life in your garden.

So then do perennials live forever? I wish it were so. They do live a great deal longer than annuals, if their situation suits them; growing bigger & more lovely yearly. With shrubs and trees they shape a garden with at least a pretense of permanence.

In diagnosing sudden plant death you need to consider starvation, drowning, burning, freezing & other dire possibilities. Murder by gopher, mole, or mouse accounts for a number of very dramatic deaths: the plant wilts. Too little water? You check the soil, and the whole, rootless plant falls over. For plant illness you can consult a good garden

book or a canny neighbor. Just as an experience parent can glance at you spotty youngster and declare "chicken pox" so an experienced gardener can diagnose blackspot and mildew and rust and any number of problems. What you do with such things is your choice. In my experience plants grown in good rich soil don't suffer many problems. Sure, my roses get spots. I know I should worry about this, but I don't. The roses grow & bloom nicely year after year. Aphids appear in my garden most years, but then the ladybugs come, and they are great fun to watch.

Some whys have to do with gestation: why don't my seeds come up? Most commonly grown plants don't get you into this—you dutifully plunk your seed in the ground or in pots at the accepted time, & it grows, unless, of course, birds or snails or mice get to it first. For seed that doesn't grow, assuming it is fresh and not eaten, you can consider such things as light, temperature, & time. Some seeds need light to germinate, & if buried too deeply they just despair & refuse to do anything; conversely some need deep darkness & time to consider becoming roses or pumpkins or parsley. Many seeds need warm soil; whilst some need to go through one or more periods of frost to break their dormancy. Some California natives need to be exposed to fire before they will sprout. If you have purchased seed from a reputable source you usually appeal to your supplier for advice & help with difficult species.

The most intriguing "why" in my gardens is that of sports. Not baseball, though many a game is extended into the roses, but the tendency of plants to suddenly change & produce a newly mutated form or a throwback to a previous form. My pink & white striped Rosa Mundi, a June blooming rose that looks like Wizard of Oz poppies, is much admired by visitors. Since it spreads by underground roots sharing cuttings is easy—but every cutting I have given away in the past years has produced the clear pink Apothecary Rose. I have noticed that the few remaining plantings of Rosa Mundi in Garberville have also reverted to the pink form. A mystery, akin to my favorite rose mystery, which is why, in



the early 1700s did mossed versions of various lovely roses suddenly appear throughout Europe. Were they there all along?

Meanwhile the humble oxeye daisy, which has naturalized widely in my lower garden, has in the past two years produced two unusual forms: a sort with variegated leaves, and a few plants whose flowers are like the great Japanese spider chrysanthemums—delicate pinwheels of quilled petals. I have marked the pretty oddities and watching to see if their offspring continue the traits of the parents. But why did these variants arise?

**I think I know—for fun, for whimsy. Why after all should every single daisy in the world be expected to be plain & predictable. Why not a little crazy delight?**

**Kathy Epling**



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