

## Plants We've Killed

Yes, it happens to the best of us. In fact, I've heard it said (although I can't remember where or by whom) that a green thumb kills more plants than a black thumb ever attempts to grow. So, to assuage any guilt you may be feeling at the end of this gardening year, here are some of our favorite local Master Gardener "death to plants" stories.

### **Beware of Chemicals....and Water**

Carolyn Abbott, a Sonora Master Gardener, provided this family story. "My Aunt (name deleted to protect the innocent) decided to give me some white rocks to cover the soil for the most beautiful Rubber Tree plant you ever saw. I didn't notice anything wrong at first until I noticed that the white rocks were 'disappearing.' When I finally realized that the white rocks were really rock salt for water softeners, I removed the soil and washed the roots of the plant. Needless to say within a couple of days the plant turned black. It took me a long time before I forgave my aunt."

Marian Chambers, Master Gardener and Deputy Agricultural Commissioner, relates the story of a phone call from someone who used the water from their hot tub to water the garden. The chemicals in the water killed everything!

And speaking of efficient use of water, Vera Strader, a frequent contributor to this column and a long-time, experienced Master Gardener admits to committing "death by drowning" for two baby broccoli seedlings. Turns out she forgot to punch holes in the bottom of the pots! At the completely opposite extreme, Vera tells about three geranium (actually pelargonium) cuttings that she ruthlessly killed. "I just stuck them in a pot. Was I supposed to water them too?"

### **Those Pesky Deer**

Anne Robin, a Master Gardener at around the 4000' elevation in the Twain Harte area, moved here from the Southern California coast where she grew cherry tomato plants as tall as the garage roof. The first year here, she planted her favorite (and familiar) tomato plants directly into the clay soil. She was unprepared for the four-footed browsers that viewed her tomato plants as (quoting Joan Bergsund below) "their private salad bar." Anne says, "Boy was I surprised that they (the tomatoes) all died!"

### **Compost Happens**

And from Roger Francis, a Master Gardener in Sonora, comes this account:

"Off of our back deck, we've planted three red maple (*Acer rubrum*) trees to provide shade. Below the trees we planted rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) thinking it would be a good ground cover and provide some nice color when in bloom. In the fall, I figured that the leaves would fall on the rosemary and eventually sink into the dirt and make a good compost/mulch. It worked—at first.

I then attached three finch food socks to three branches. We enjoyed watching the finches feed and hassle each other trying to eat as much as they could, but we didn't know that a lot of the food would fall to the ground. Initially I thought this would not be a problem and the wasted food could join the leaves on the ground and make an even better mulch. WRONG!

One day I looked down from our deck and saw brown rosemary! The food coupled with the leaves made a mat preventing light from reaching the rosemary plants. What was supposed to be a relatively easy leaf maintenance situation resulted in much more work. Since we still want to watch the birds, I now keep the area cleaned on a more regular basis. (Today I spent over three hours getting rid of the accumulated leaves as well as the food.)

Fortunately, the rest of the rosemary is doing well. Along with the Dutch Iris that I planted, the area is filled with color in the spring when all is in bloom. I must admit, however, that I seem to forget to feed the finches at times. I wonder why. One thing that is nice, though, is that there is a pleasant fragrance when I use my leaf blower."

### **The Lilacs Looked Lousy or Death by Homicide**

Master Gardener Joan Bergsund describes an on-going problem with her lilacs. "Planted at the

northwestern end of the house, they didn't get enough sun to bloom very well, and though I tried to view them as simply a tall green hedge, the deer had other ideas. Considering them their private salad bar, the deer stripped the lower branches and left only a topknot of leaves. What an unsatisfactory mess. After ignoring this problem for 15 years, I finally took the obvious step and dug out the plants. Killed 'em dead. Relief was its own reward," said Joan.

For years Joan has clipped magazine articles describing the formal boxwood hedges seen at Williamsburg in Virginia, and at some of the spectacular ancient gardens in England and France. "With my gardening karma all a-quiver and my Visa card at the ready, I proceeded to buy up all the one-gallon "Green Beauty" boxwoods I could find"—forty-one in all. They will flourish in sun and shade, are ignored by the deer, and are not heavy water users. "They're now located where they can be viewed from above where their symmetry can be appreciated. Stay tuned for later reports," says Joan.

### **A Work in Progress**

Gardeners know that one of the benefits of a garden is that errors can be corrected, mitigated, or simply overlooked, all at the whim of the gardener. A garden is truly a work in progress.

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