

## Columns

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### Red Mulch Regret

*Ellen C. Wells*



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I'll be the first to admit it: I'm judgy. It's horrible, I know. The first thing I look at when someone approaches is her or his shoes. I bet you never noticed me looking at your shoes, but I do. My judgement is a snap "yay" or "nay," and if the latter, I decide which shoes would be more appropriate for your outfit. This takes place over a millisecond in my mind, and I really wish it wouldn't. Because your shoes don't matter\*.

I judge gardens and gardening skills, too. Again, I wish I wouldn't. I'm as likely to give a gardener a mental thumbs down for a hosta in a west-facing bed as I am to someone wearing socks with sandals (See? I bet I offended you. I'm sorry.).

The guy in the plot next to mine in my community garden was a new gardener when he signed up for it three springs ago. He's an Irish guy from South Boston, had a wicked strong Boston accent and, as if the universe was testing whether I'd judge him even further, he mulched his mostly caged tomato plot with red bark mulch. O.M.G. My eyes may have rolled more than your teenage daughter's. Really? Red mulch? Next to my plot?

The nature of community gardens, ironically, is that you garden when you have time. That often means you're working in your plot and either A) are the only person in the garden or B) are so pressed for time you can't afford to chat with the folks around you. In my case, I'm usually both choice A and B. I couldn't remember the newbie's name if I tried, and we were rarely in the garden at the same time. I saw him maybe a half dozen times in 2015. Last year was even fewer times. I got the impression, though, that he was nearly as time-pressed in the garden as I was. Somewhere along the way I learned he was a doctor, which explained his own brief and erratic visits to the garden.

So when the local news in early May reported a middle-aged white male doctor from Southie had been murdered, my first thoughts turned to Mr. Red Mulch. Yep, that photo sure did look like my garden neighbor. How horrible was I to have judged him for something as inconsequential as his mulch color choice? What kind of community member was I to have been so wrapped up with my own goings-on in the garden that I didn't have time to participate in getting to know a new gardener? Not only did the manner of his death disturb me,

but the way in which I treated him myself turned my stomach.

Turns out Mr. Red Mulch is alive and well, thankfully. While this is great news, this incident has brought to the surface a whole patch of thorny thoughts and feelings. I'm judgy. Self-important. And I haven't placed a lot of emphasis on the "community" portion of the community garden.

Thanks to this incident I have a feeling I'll be examining my prejudices and participation for a good long while. How can I be more accepting? What does it take to be a better neighbor? What does it mean to be part of a community? I invite you do the same. So what if someone wants a geranium and dracena combo container? Who cares if someone wants to place caricature-inspired garden art amongst the bushes? The Garden Police won't arrest you for providing things that your customers want. You might find that if you strike up a conversation with the folks buying a trunkful of whirligigs, you just might learn what's making them happy. **GP**

*\*Note: Unless you're wearing toeless high heels at a worksite or are wearing 5-year-old boat shoes pretty much anywhere.*