

Kiss My Aster

5/30/2025

Will Altruism Be the End of Aster Gardens?

Amanda Thomsen

To tell the truth, I always knew altruism would be the end of me, just not like this. So here's the story: I signed a five-year lease with great options to stay on past that and I'm almost three years through. The other day my landlord made an appointment to talk to me—he said to ask my opinion about a handful of things. He asks how business is doing and I mention I'm 130% over the previous April and that's mostly because of the courtyard. (Added context: We call our garden sales area "the courtyard," as it's very narrow and stuck between two buildings in a small downtown neighborhood. It houses all our outdoor plant sales, Christmas tree sales, soil, a water trough "pond" and grow dome where we make all kinds of amazing horticultural feats happen.) He then proceeds to tell me he wants to build a building on the courtyard when my lease is over, like he didn't just hear what I said. IN TWO YEARS.

Now here's the part you need to know before we go any farther: I pretty much love my landlord. He is a phenomenal guy. He's been a support and partner to me, a friend and excellent advice-giver. We created rapport quickly upon meeting and it's just built from there. I truly wish for what's best for him and if that's building a two-story building on that narrow lot that doesn't have plumbing or electricity, I mean, he has my blessing. He's ambitious and smart and so very motivated. If anyone could do it, it would be him and that completely sucks for me.

Did I choose this location because of the lot? I did. I then had an illegal door built on the sly, through three layers of brick, out to the courtyard (don't tell anyone). Then had the planet's most expensive fence built to contain it all. Sidebar: It was supposed to be a wayyyyyyy cheaper fence and things got crazy, like they do. It's a nice fence. It'll suck to scrap it if it comes to that.

When people ask me why my rent is so high I tell them it's because I'm literally paying a guy to not build a building there. He's always said he'd like to build on it someday, but when I first came around it was a lot filled with weeds, broken bottles and a broken vinyl fence, and he had 300,000 other fish to fry. The rubble and foundation of a dairy from 100 years ago was poking up through the grass when we put in the compacted asphalt millings that would allow us to be water permeable and still allow tent spikes for parties and events. My courtyard has beautified my block as much as it has the village.

Altruism again—if a new construction building with more businesses and housing is better for the village than my lot? I want that for Lemont, too. I'm all in for this little town's bright future even if it means less of me. Or none of me.

Losing the lot is a deal breaker, but my landlord says he has an idea: What if I scoot all my stuff (perennials, annuals, trees and Christmas trees) to the sidewalk? He doesn't understand why I'm not excited by this. I am thoroughly not excited by this idea. He is thoroughly bummed that I'm not excited.

He said he would need to have a tenant lined up for this new building in order to make it happen and it would have to be a high roller. I think having my shop next to a high roller could be good for us. However, having my illicit side door open into a brick wall will not be good for us.

He dropped this bomb at the end of April, a time in which my heart is already pumping like a baby bunny that was just rescued from the jaws of a seasoned outdoor cat. My goal of soaring through the summer and tearing down interior walls to open more space (and expose gorgeous vintage brick) is on hold or blown to smithereens.

When I talked about all of this to my husband, he seemed shocked by my pragmatic evaluation that this may be the end of Aster Gardens instead of just me moving to a new location or just staying and dealing with the changes. Part of me thinks moving would kill me, but the other half thinks the right space could really ignite me. I can tell you this: I'm too dang busy building my business to think about how to shrink it. **GP**

Amanda Thomsen is a funky, punky garden writer and author now with her own store, Aster Gardens in Lemont, Illinois. Her store info is at [KissMyAster.com](https://www.kissmyaster.com), and you can follow her on Facebook, Twitter, Threads AND Instagram @KissMyAster.