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Finally a Professional

Ellen C. Wells



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When did it start for you, the interest in growing things?

I distinctly remember the first time I attempted to plant something. Mind you, I grew up on a farm. Crops were growing all around me, not to mention the quarter-acre-plus vegetable garden my parents enlisted us kids to help in from time to time. I was surrounded by plant growth. But actually planting something in the garden or in the field when I was a little kid? Not really.

But then one day, I decided I'd give it a try. I must have been 8 that summer when I was exploring a hedgerow and found some bladder campion. It's a pretty little balloonish flower, isn't it? So delicate. Well, being the curious kid that I was, I did not hesitate to bust it open (I was definitely the "poke it and see what happens" kind of kid). Out popped these tiny lentil-brown seeds. Hey, I thought, let's plant them and see what happens. So I burst some other

bladder campion balloons, collected the seeds and poured them into my jean shorts pocket.

I prepared for my planting experience by first asking my mother for some water I could use to plant the seeds. Before the time of ever-present water bottles, Mom filled a small empty child's aspirin container with water. With the container shoved in my other pocket, I hopped on my flower-emblazoned banana seat bicycle and took off down the farm lot road. After a few minutes of pumping the pedals, I hopped off the bike. I dug a small hole with my pocket knife and turned my shorts pocket inside out, spilling the seeds in and out of the hole. I then covered it, tamped the soil down and watered the area with the by now orange-flavored water.

How did my seeds do? Not great. The patch I had chosen to begin my horticultural experience was actually in the hard-packed dirt of the farm lot road. The seeds really had no chance.

I have learned a bit more about growing plants since that first attempt—the phrase "right plant in the right place" comes to mind. And while I've had additional memorable failures, the years and years of everyday successes have buoyed me through any horticultural setbacks. Hey, I even managed to get myself through a horticultural graduate degree.

While writing has been my main professional expression of my horticultural degree, 25 years after getting my master's degree I am finally going to be a hands-in-the-dirt horticulturist. I'm taking on a part-time position as an assistant horticulturist at a small public garden in New Bedford, Massachusetts. And like my part-time experience as a weed-whacking land steward last fall, this job is one that I sought out for its "out of office" aspect. Sixteen hours a

week of flower bed cleaning, shrub pruning, annuals planting, volunteer guiding, public interacting—even some greenhouse propagating (Lord & Burnham, no less!). Will it better inform my writing? You bet. And I imagine I'll have lots to report back here about what public garden goers are actually thinking about the products we're trying to sell them.

So rather than whacking the weeds into smithereens like I did last fall, this summer I will be growing and nurturing all sorts of plants. I may even let the bladder campion near the compost pile go to seed so I can try my hand at propagating it once again. **GP**