



GROW CURIOUS

CREATIVE ACTIVITIES
TO CULTIVATE JOY,
WONDER, AND DISCOVERY
IN YOUR GARDEN

GAYLA TRAIL

Art and Design: Davin Risk

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LOOK DEEP
INTO NATURE,
AND YOU
WILL UNDERSTAND
EVERYTHING
BETTER

Albert Einstein, theoretical physicist

AS I WORK ON THE GARDEN THE GARDEN WORKS ON ME

In the late '90s, I was a lost 20-something working a day job that was eating me alive from the inside out. Suddenly and mysteriously my body was taken hostage by a little known autoimmune disorder.

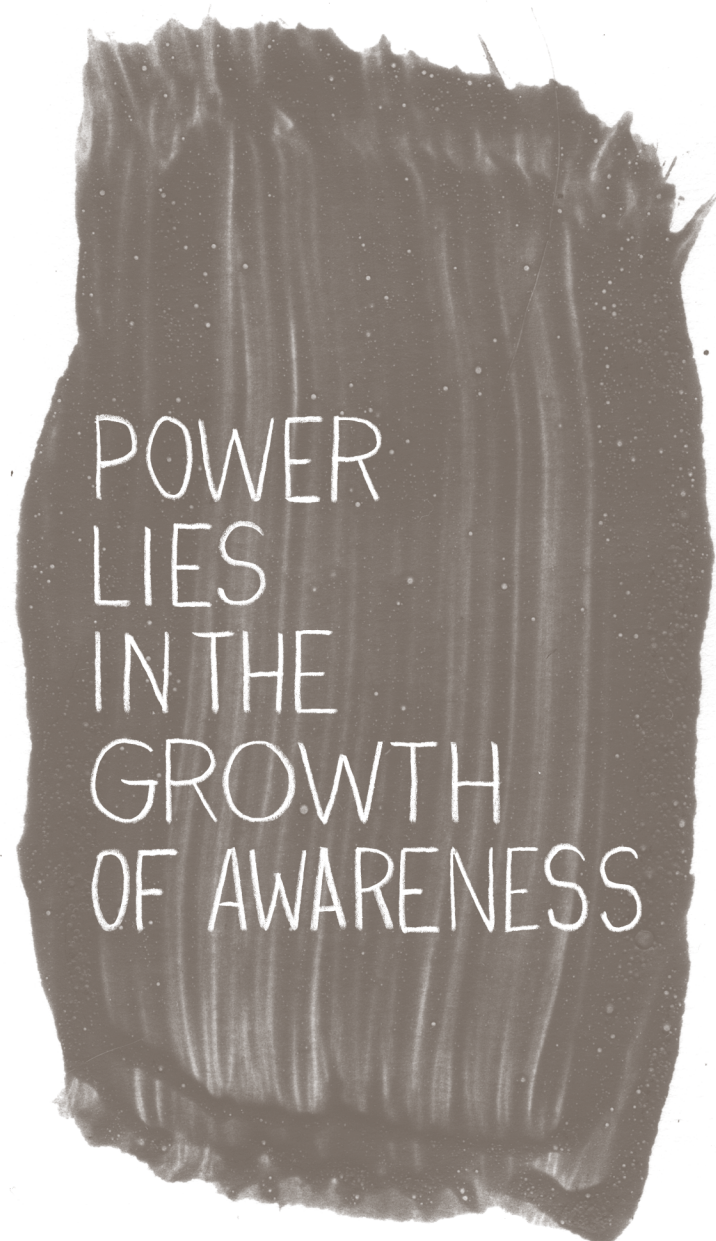
I was already gardening then, tending a hodgepodge of potted plants on the roof of my apartment building and making tentative marks in the soil of a rugged patch of City-owned land on the busy street below. Becoming a gardener wasn't exactly a conscious decision — more like a slow progression of bewildering yet eerily familiar acts. Like a baby giraffe learning to walk for the first time, I put one foot in front of the other and somehow my body already knew what to do.

Cultivating and communing with plants touches something deeply buried inside of us. It harkens back to our ancestral past and is a place to which many of us are inexplicably driven to return. I grew up in an ugly, lifeless low-rent housing subdivision, with no tangible exposure to gardens. As an adult, I moved to the city and lived in places that did not exactly shout, "Put a garden here!" And yet somehow, without knowledge, experience, planning, or even considered thought, that is what I did. Back then, I would not have called what I was doing gardening. It was growing stuff. Messing around with plants. It would be years before I claimed the title "gardener" and years more before I understood how the act of tending green things had been slowly working on me in ways I couldn't begin to understand. I thought I was learning about plants; it turns out I was really learning about myself.

Did gardening heal my broken body? Not directly. People often assume that because I eat and live in a close relationship with my garden that I must be in perfect health. They are surprised to find that more than one health crisis has visited me in my adult life. But the way I see it, I don't know where I would be had I not found my way to this connection with the earth. In all probability, I may have circumvented something far worse. Gardens are sanctuaries — places of healing and health — but they cannot make everything that is bad in life magically disappear. Instead, they reveal that life is a cycle of darkness and light, and since all of the tragedy, loss, and difficulty that is in the world exists there, too, they act as a living demonstration in how to ride the waves between both.

The garden isn't responsible for taking away my pain and suffering. What it has given me is a sense of purpose and a place in the world. It has helped me work through past traumas and provided peace in the midst of the fear and terror that illness can bring. It has inspired an empathy and sympathy for life that I have been able to give back to myself. It has revealed wondrous beauty and small joys. It has given me a place to safely and comfortably enact a deep need to nurture and, in unearthing my tenderness, it has nurtured me back. I think I am its mother, but in truth it is mine.

Through the years, there has been a trail of gardens, and each in its own way has acted as a guide essential to my personal growth at that particular point in time, providing lessons in patience, self-care, vulnerability, and letting go. The garden has always taught me what I needed to learn, exactly when I needed to learn it. You may need to learn about hope, trust, belonging, love, or something else entirely. I don't know how it does it. All I know is that if you pay attention, and sometimes even if you don't, eventually the garden will get you where you need to go.



POWER
LIES
IN THE
GROWTH
OF AWARENESS

Herbert deSouza, Brazilian activist

USING THIS BOOK

This book is an invitation to play. To engage in curious and creative concentration. To spend time in the garden without a goal or an adult sense of purpose. Nothing about this book is a demand. However, there is one activity that I would prefer you start with. I have handily titled it “Begin Here.” Please do.

Beyond that, feel free to tackle this book in any way that moves you. The gardening year flows in tandem with the cycles and rhythms of life as we move from birth (spring) through to stasis (winter). I have followed that pattern, with activities each given a season. However, many of them are universal and can be carried out year-round. If you find one in winter that you would really like to do in the spring, go for it.

Some people like to follow books chronologically. Others, like me, do not. Once you have completed the “Begin Here” activity (page 18) feel free to jump around and choose your own adventure. There are activities to engage you on multiple levels — to create and gather, to inspire exploration and experimentation, and to challenge the way you think about and see your garden. Flip through until you come upon a project that calls you to action. However you go about it, what matters most is the doing!

There are several creative activities in this book that ask you to sketch, draw, or take photos of what you see. These projects are open to *all* skill levels and are not just meant for “creative types.” Even if drawing or photography is not your thing, I hope you will give them (and yourself) a chance. Use crayons or markers if a pencil or pen is intimidating. Spend 20 seconds on a drawing or hours. How far you take it is up to you.

Regardless of size, style, or location, to the tender the garden is a place of transformation and wonder. Something exciting is always happening there. All you have to do is look for it. I can’t lead you down a specific path, but I hope I can help you to find your own meandering, imaginative, wild direction.

YOUR TIME

In the world of adults, there are kids to feed, jobs to go to, dogs to walk, bills to pay, life to live ... Some days there isn’t enough time to take care of the garden let alone cultivate joy, wonder, and discovery there. My hope is that this book will be a help to you, not a hindrance. Make as much time as you can given your circumstances. One minute. Ten. An hour. Thirty seconds. This is not meant to be yet *another* chore that you wanted to get to but didn’t and now you feel bad about it.

I’ve included quick and easy projects as well as long-term assignments so that you can choose what works for your schedule. Some projects continue beyond their original scope and will allow you to go deeper, depending on your time, interest, and what you feel you can handle. Many of the observational-type activities can be made while you are undertaking garden chores, harvesting the carrots or watering the tomatoes. Make mental notes if you don’t have the tools on hand to make physical ones. Take five extra seconds while you’re working to explore the terrain of a single leaf, smell the air, taste a flower. Stop. Take it all in.

And then continue on with your day feeling just a little bit lighter and more aware.

How much time do you need to devote to this? As much or as little time as you like. Projects can be done and completed on your own schedule, without pressure. Put the book down and pick it back up again as many times as you need. Come back to it next week, next season, next year. There is no shame in taking breaks, going slow, or skipping activities that push you in directions you don’t want to or can’t go. We all have limitations. Feel free to adjust projects to your abilities or skip them altogether. After all, this is a book about embracing who you are, where you are now. Start there.

WHAT YOU NEED

Most of the activities in this book call for simple materials you probably have on hand — a notebook or paper and a favourite writing implement.

Occasionally you may need something extra such as string, a ruler, coloured markers, or tape. Keep this book and the first two items on hand — in your bag, in the garden, in a shed, by the door, or somewhere within easy reach.

I have always felt that gardening should not have to be costly, and I have extended that sense of economy and accessibility to the contents of this book. The most expensive item you may need is a camera. Some projects require one; any camera will do, whether it is a cellphone, disposable, point-and-shoot, digital, or film.

Tools

- Field notebook or journal: There's no need to spend money or get fancy, so any old notebook you have lying around will do. You can also just fold a stack of letter-sized (8.5 x 11") paper in half to make your own booklet. (See instructions on the next page.) Make multiple so that you have a new one for each growing season.
- A pen or pencil that you like to write and draw with
- Camera: digital, film, cellphone, etc.
- Coloured markers, pens, pencils, pastels, crayons, paint
- Small ruler (or use the ruler in this book on page 33)
- Piece of string cut 12" long
- Small envelopes (the sort that are used for money or in this case seeds)
- Tape (masking, washi, cello, etc.)
- Magnifying glass — a cheap kid's one will do (optional)

DIY FIELD NOTEBOOK

Make your own field notebook using “waste paper” scraps from old books, misprints, junk mail, packaging, maps, cut-up envelopes, offcuts, and assorted ephemera. These homemade journals are cost effective and a great way to get another life out of paper headed for the recycling bin.

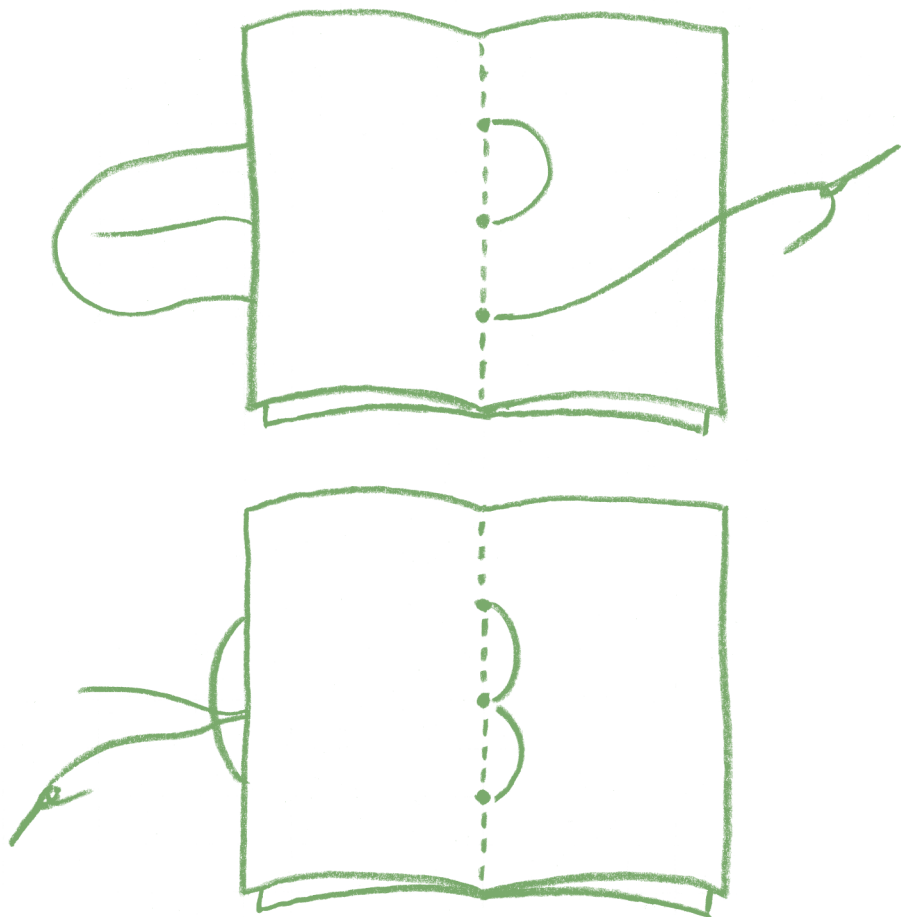
This simple bookbinding technique works best on small quantities of paper (about 10 sheets or less, depending on weight), so you may need to make a few — perhaps one for every season.

Materials

- 5–10 sheets of scrap paper of various types, sizes, and weights (roughly 8.5 x 11")
- 1 cover sheet. Use heavier paper or card stock (roughly 8.5 x 11")
- Bone folder, wooden spoon, or butter knife
- 2 bull clips or clothespins
- Awl, heavy-gauge needle, thin nail, or safety pin
- Heavy-gauge needle (upholstery, embroidery, or bookbinding)
- Heavy-duty thread (quilting or embroidery), string, cotton twine, or waxed linen (bookbinding), roughly three times the length of your book
- Scissors

To begin, fold each of your paper scraps and the cover sheet in half. Run the bone folder, wooden spoon, or the blunt end of a butter knife along the folded edges. This extra step will result in a book that sits flat.

Now, assemble all of the sheets together with the folded spines nestled neatly into each other. Place the card stock on the outside. Hold everything in place with the bull clips or clothespins.



Three-Hole Pamphlet Stitch

Using the awl, poke a hole in the centre of the fold, piercing all the sheets of paper as well as the cover stock. If using a safety pin, nail, or needle, you may have to take this step slowly and push through one sheet of paper at a time. Punch two more holes, one on either side of the centre hole. Aim for a spot roughly equal distance between the centre hole and the edge of the sheet.

Thread a needle with your chosen piece of string, twine, or thread. Make sure that the thread is about as thick as the object you used to make your holes, otherwise the binding will be loose.

Starting from the outside, push the needle through the centre hole and pull the string through, leaving a 2" tail. While stitching, be sure to always hold the tail taut with one hand, while stitching with the other. This will create tighter stitches and a more secure book.

Working from the inside of the book's spine, push the needle through the top hole and out. Now, following along the outer spine, skip the centre hole and push the needle through the final hole at the bottom of the book.

Push the needle back through the centre hole to the outside of the spine. Pull the thread to tighten up the stitches and knot the two tail ends together tightly to secure the binding.

Snip the excess string or thread with a pair of scissors. If your book doesn't stay closed, weigh it down overnight underneath a stack of heavy books.

Trimming Your Book

Using scrappy paper of varying sizes usually results in pages that do not match neatly. I like the uneven look, but if you prefer, you can cut the top, bottom, and sides down using scissors or an X-acto knife and ruler.

BEGIN HERE

Explore

We gardeners rarely give ourselves the time and space to experience our gardens without working toward a goal: prune the raspberries, sow the carrots, deadhead the roses. We are always doing. Sometimes doing can get in the way of being. The garden easily becomes a place with a giant to-do list affixed to it rather than a place to appreciate and enjoy for what it is, a slice of nature in our midst.

Carve out 10–20 minutes (or more if you can) to walk around and quietly observe your garden. Refrain from all chores, even the little ones, no matter how tempting. Do nothing! Shutting off the impulse to putter will be extremely difficult for some of you. I know it is for me!

As you come upon things to do, try not to tuck them away in your mind for later. Allow yourself to explore without judgment and find out what comes up in the process.

Note: If your garden is a small balcony, fire escape, or somewhere else that is small enough that you are laughing at the suggestion of “walking around,” don’t worry, this can work for you, too. Pull up a stool, sit on the ground, or stand in a spot that gives you visual access to the entire garden. Use your eyes rather than your limbs, to do the walking.

Afterward, write down your observations in your field notebook. This can be as simple as a list of the plants, birds, and insects you saw, or as complex as a short story about the experience.

How did it feel to let go and do nothing during that block of time? Did you feel the need to get to work directly afterward? Was letting go difficult or easy?

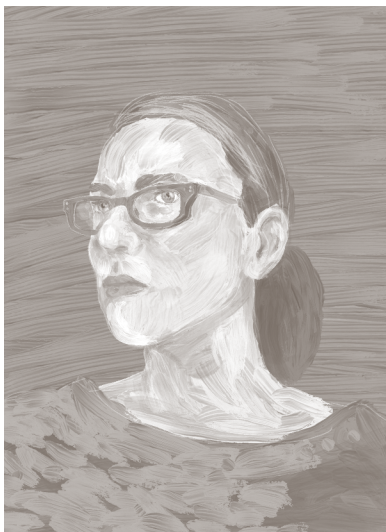
- If it was difficult: What activities did you want to do most?
- If it was easy: Why do you think that is?

GO FURTHER

Try to repeat this exercise weekly for the duration of the growing season.

- Did letting go get easier with time?
- Did this exercise change your relationship to your garden in any small or big way?
- Do you think you will continue this activity in the future?

Repeat this exercise daily rather than weekly. Try shortening the amount of time to five minutes if that makes it more accessible to you.



Gayla Trail is a writer and photographer with a background in the Fine Arts, cultural criticism, and ecology. She is the author, photographer, and designer of four books on gardening and growing food in small and difficult urban spaces.



Davin Risk is an artist and designer. Narrative, culture, curiosity, and community drive his work. For over twenty years, he has worked on an eclectic list of art and design projects: websites, magazines, books, television, apps, apparel, and more.

Visit YouGrowGirl.com for more about gardening, food, and homemade living.

Books by Gayla Trail

- *You Grow Girl: The Groundbreaking Guide to Gardening*
- *Grow Great Grub: Organic Food from Small Spaces*
- *Easy Growing: Organic Herbs and Edible Flowers from Small Spaces*
- *Drinking the Summer Garden: Homegrown Thirst Quenchers, Concoctions, Sips, and Nibbles*