



CONTAINER GARDEN: a metaphor for spiritual life

By Carol Kortsch
May 2008

This week I entered a national contest to build the most beautiful water garden in a container. I knew it would be a challenge but I had no idea that it also would

become a chapter in my soul journey. For me, gardening has consistently been a liminal place where inner and outer worlds blend, where I am mysteriously reminded that most of what we know is often found just below the surface of our lives.

While not an expert in water gardening, I have learned much through trial and error in the building and growing of three garden ponds on our property, so I charged into this contest on the high horse of confidence. For Mother's Day my children gave me a generous gift certificate, so I could buy the gorgeous pot of my choosing and purchase some extra plants to complement ones I already had grown and nurtured through frigid Pennsylvanian winters. I prepared well, searching for hours for a waterproof divider that would separate the marginal plants from the water-lily section that needed more depth. Mud and water needed to be side-by-side and not mix. I engineered what I thought was a level platform to give more height to my creation, so it would tower above the surrounding day lilies. Unfortunately my ceramic container had a drainage hole in it, but after rummaging through the house I found a rubber wine bottle stopper that I carefully bunged up with wads of waterproof glue.

All set to go, early on Saturday, I bounded down to the creek and dug up two loads of mud which oozed delightfully through my fingers as I squished around filling up the huge container. Placing the plants was so much fun; I had seen this in my mind for some days so to behold this bouquet of promise emerging was sheer delight. This is magic for a gardener, those planting moments of pure undiluted joy, where we live in the realm of fantasy and perfection. *I have done it!* It was finished: pictures taken, admiration from family, mud hosed off, clothes changed - it was time to sit and enjoy my magnificence.

Then, out of the corner of my eye I saw a drip ... then another. Ominous drops falling off the stand and into the garden. In denial of what I had seen, I went off to do more work, racing around the property as if on speed, still charged with my supreme skill as a gardener. But the drips persisted. The pot began to list threateningly while the hidden divider glared up at me as the water receded. I refilled it, blithely hoping everything was just settling a bit and drying out, but eventually reality dawned. Somehow I must have dislodged my bunged-up cork. I knew what I had to do - do it over again.



It is not in my nature to do things over. I prefer to blur the boundaries of inner and outer reality and not to own the frustration of my mistakes. *Oh, it'll be good enough. Everything is OK.* Often I notice that the black and white fear of failure lurks behind the open door of seeing, knowing and owning my life. This time though, I faced my pride and stepped up to the pot and began again - complete with another trip to the creek for more mud that was now slickly coating everything in sight. This time though, I was not so happy; gritting my teeth, and grousing under my breath, wondering at the folly of such unnatural creativity. I started to feel quite silly spending all my energy on such a vain project. How embarrassing in fact, to be caught messing with such inconsequential trivia when an earthquake in China just killed 55,000 people.

Hurriedly, I used a bath tub stopper and caulked it into place, wastefully using the entire tube of glue, and imagining the groaning of dying plants around me, I rushed the drying process and refilled the crucible. I fairly raced to the finish line, at the last minute thoughtlessly lining my pretty pot with double garbage bags to contain the water. *Just an extra security blanket, I rationalized. I can tuck them below the surface for the photo-ops. The world will never know of my foibles.* Thankful my ordeal was over and cleaned up once again, I murmured thanks to God for helping me get through this personal trial with a certain decorum, yet I knew I had lost all the joy in my hard work.

Besides - the pot was still dripping, and this time it was more of a flood. The plastic garbage bags cluttered the waterline like flotsam and jetsam in a sewage pond. In resignation, I gave up and slept on it, announcing to my husband I would not do it again, it was going to have to be as it was. I knew this was not a winning entry into the contest, so emotionally withdrew from the competition and let it be.

Three days later, (a good time to lie dead in one's inner darkness), I woke up and saw the parable unfold before my eyes. *This pot story is a parallel process with my inner world. It is forever being refurbished, re-decorated by what life brings to me. My soul, like the solid, beautiful kiln-dried container remains the constant. Life adds the mud and water, and seeds turn into flowers depending on the weather and my capacity and desire to hold all that comes my way. Life adds or takes away nothing from that eternal soul quality.*



I have learned over the decades how to fix the more serious emotional leaks of my life, yet still when change happens too fast or too slowly I become unglued, resorting to quick fixes or living with messy holes rather than go through the painful time-based process of being emptied out and restored. All the plantings of my life keep on growing and dying with the seasons. There is always time to work carefully, creatively and find joy to do the work that I have chosen and revel in the work that has chosen me.

So today after another three more days of preparation, I replanted my container. This time it has the same wine cork, better aquarium glue (hardened for hours), then fully painted with dry lock waterproofing. You see, it wasn't primarily the cork that caused the first leak, it was the porous material of the pot. It was not made to hold water, but to breathe, so plant roots in soil could

find aeration. It was totally natural for the pot to seep water. I, as the gardener was developing a new capacity for my container, a capacity to hold water.

Like any parable, there is no moral to this story; just that life is full of change, the new and unknown. As a gardener of both my inner and outer worlds, when I take the time to pay attention to the story of my life, I can discover new edges of growth. Creative ways to live emerge, bringing energy to make choices to live with joyful abundance, and in scraped-down emptiness. My desire is that I will let all the daily muck and mire and all the beautiful ordinariness of my natural world continue to become fertile space for growth.

I still hope to win the contest, but somehow it seems the container that is me has already won a priceless prize of deep and eternal value.

*“Each morning we must hold out the chalice of our being,
to receive....
to carry....
and give back.”*

-Dag Hammarskjöld



*PS ...
I was thrilled when
my container water-
garden did win first
place in the
“Fine Gardening”
competition that
year.*