

The Garden Plot, June 2008

By Robin Mittenthal, University Apartments Community Gardens Committee

Every January, gyms across the US fill up with people who have made unrealistic New Year's resolutions ("I'm going to lose half of my body weight in the next month," or "By next week, I will have abdominal muscles hard enough to wash clothes on"). By February, many of those people have given up and stopped going to the gym. Maybe exercising has turned out to be harder than they were expecting, maybe the results are less than miraculous, or perhaps the whole experience is just not what they thought fitness would be like.

A community garden in June is like a gym in February. In late winter, people apply for garden plots with visions of ordered rows of huge, tasty vegetables just popping up out of the ground. By June, however, some ugly truths have become clear. It's easier to grow weeds than anything else, and getting those tidy rows to come up and keep growing requires work and knowledge as well as the purchase of seeds, plants, fertilizer, and tools. Many new gardeners give up on gardening entirely at this point or start to treat their garden like a relative they know they "should" visit but don't really like – the longer they stay away, the worse they feel, so they stay away even longer.

If you are a person whose gardening experience is not going well, I encourage you to try gardening just a little longer, paying careful attention to how you feel about it. Some people (including me) never really like the gym but keep going because they appreciate benefits of fitness such as better sleep, fewer injuries, and the ability to tear telephone books in half with their bare hands. I think that gardening is different from fitness in this way -- you *might* be able to make yourself do the work of gardening just to get the vegetables, but I doubt it. I think you really need to enjoy the process of growing things at some level or you can't keep doing it.

If you want to increase your chances of having a good time in the garden, several changes may be in order. One change may involve having more realistic expectations for how many crops you can grow and how tidy your garden will look. What do you *really* want out of your garden? Tomatoes? Salad greens? Flowers? Do you perhaps not care at all what you grow, but just like having something to do outside that feels vaguely productive? Whatever it is that you like, or think you might like, try to make that one thing happen. Try not to compare yourself to neighbors who have beautiful, perfect gardens. I try to keep in mind some words of the philosopher Max Ehrmann, who wrote that "If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself."

You might also want to change how you work in the gardens. Like aerobic exercise, where three or four 20-30 minute workouts per week can do a lot to improve your health, several short sessions in the garden may be both easier to schedule and more pleasant to complete than one or two longer sessions.

A plan for each session is important, too. Approach the garden on a given day with just one or two tasks in mind that you want to complete and stand a realistic chance of completing in the available time. Without this sort of plan, it's easy to fill up your time pulling a weed here and tidying a bit there, leaving essential tasks undone. Ideally, the process of gardening would be its own reward, but there's a lot to be said for the feeling of accomplishment you get when you have weeded thoroughly, prepared a new bed for planting, or covered a bed with mulch, and can stand back and admire it (though if you've decided that just messing around is what you like about gardening, then go ahead!).

Like going to the gym, gardening can become a habit that gets both easier and more pleasant over time. After a while, you will find that you know how to perform basic tasks in the garden without consulting a book, trying to find a more experienced gardener, or puzzling over the tiny writing on seed packets. If you are thorough about weeding, weed problems also get less bad every year (though they never go away completely).

Keep in mind that shoveling beds, moving mulch, and other garden tasks can make for a great workout. If you get excited about gardening and start to do it on a large scale, you may not need to go to the gym at all.

As always, old Garden Plot columns and a manual for beginning gardeners are available at <http://www.eagleheightsgardens.org/tips/monthlyadvice.shtml>.