

GARDENING WARFARE

By Joni M. Fisher

The Zen garden of sand and a few aesthetically placed rocks encourages peacefulness, serenity and restoration of the soul. In my yard, gardening is WAR.

I enjoy gardening, not just the resulting blooms or neat hedge, but the act of gardening, the fight itself. The tug-of-war that uproots an errant orange tree seedling is the kind of reward that brings me back week after screaming week. The battle field of my yard yields regular skirmishes. Hefting a three-gallon sprayer can make or break me on a windless evening when the temperature reaches a scorching 90 degrees Fahrenheit, but I soldier on. Okay, so once I braved on until heatstroke amplified the feel of the rotation of the earth and I planted my face on my verdant St. Augustine grass.

My husband, my ally, often wages the larger battles with me, but his regular field of warfare takes place inside the house involving carpentry, electrical work, plumbing and the usual repairs demanded by home ownership. Separate weapons; separate war.

Just hearing the name of sedge grass raises my battle cry. This yard is mine and you can't take it you weed, you. Back, back, I shout spraying it with diluted poison. I have to laugh when I read that the 'natural look' is in for residential gardens. The natural state of a yard in Florida would include chaos, weeds, root-rot, fungus, ant colonies, erosion, cinch bugs, armadillo burrows, snake infestation, yellow-jacket hives and other assorted pests, diseases and such

undesirables unfit to mention in polite company. This natural look must be similar to the natural look touted by Bobby Brown® makeup. It almost takes more effort to make the effect look effortless.

I joined a Garden Club on the misunderstanding that these dear ladies gathered monthly to share gardening tips and techniques. In four years I've gained 60 new friends, some terrific salad recipes, but less knowledge of gardening than anticipated. In fact, some of the ladies brazenly hire mercenaries to battle for them so, in effect, my garden club pals serve as generals, planning the war and directing it from a clean, safe distance. These dear souls cluck their tongues when they drop by the house and catch me with soil under my broken nails and twigs in my hair, but I know deep down they either admire my effort or excuse it as youthfulness.

The enemies of a beautiful native Florida yard and garden are legion—and mostly natives themselves. Has anyone grown Oleanders without the attendant poisonous orange and black caterpillars? I've sprayed and found that I have to nearly double the prescribed dosage of insecticide to kill them, or go the low-tech route and bash the nasties one by one. Where can one develop a lush lawn of St. Augustine grass without crabgrass, Bahia, dollar-weed, sedge, dollar weed or clover? And let's not overlook cinch bugs, fungus, armadillos, fire ants, termites and root-rot—all robustly reproducing natives.

Perhaps the Zen garden is peaceful because it contains only rock and sand. It is the ultimate low-maintenance garden. Grab a bamboo rake and draw circles in the sand for meditation. No weeding, hedging, fertilizing, exterminating, bleeding, replanting, watering, mowing, grading or irrigating. It simply won't

work in Florida. If I prepared a Zen garden in my yard, this thing of beauty would become either the community litter box for neighborhood cats or the ants would construct a mega-colony in it.

A local physician Rob and his wife Pat, planted a stunning water garden in their entranceway. Nestled between a wall by their driveway and the house, this expensive recycling in-ground pool served as an oasis greeting visitors as they passed by on the walkway to the front door. It had a silent pump to re-circulate the water and another device to aerate the water for the \$50-a-piece Koi they purchased to inhabit the pool. It had water lilies, bamboo, floating oxygenating grasses and a scavenger fish to eat algae. It was lovely. On the third day my doctor friend and his wife settled into a sofa with their drinks to look at the pond through their living room window. Their Koi pond was attractive, so attractive, in fact that a native bird spotted it and flew in, settling on the imported rock edge of the pond. Before my friends could run outside, this native Great Blue Heron had gorged on \$200 worth of Koi and flew off. They know what I mean when I say gardening is war; they simply never considered the possibility of an air attack.

I'll continue my garden war for the blooms, for the butterflies and for the battle. Give me the cathartic release of wrestling my small patch of nature into bloom. Keep your Zen gardens; I'm waging a war.

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