Getting Your Hands Dirty

It being nearly spring, here in the mid-Atlantic states, we sailors are thinking about . . . gardens.

by

Gardens? Wait, what about the hum of sanders, the sweet smell of bottom paint, the shredding of shrink-wrap, the sharp tingle of Icy-Hot applied to the lower back that has spent the whole day contorted beneath the boat so that its posture bears, for a few days at least, a distinct resemblance to that of Igor in *Young Frankenstein*? Yes, yes, all of those things, but I can't help it, I'm thinking about my garden.

Specifically, I'm thinking about what I can plant that will grow with such carefree, wild abandon that I will still be able to go sailing every weekend rather than tend to it. For this is the inherent tension within sailors like me, who love both water and dirt. We want so much to commit fully to one or the other, but we just can't.

I'm thinking back to my first really big garden, the one Johnny and I built behind our house on Kent Island. It abutted a soybean field, and man, did stuff grow there. We built raised beds made of two-by-sixes that had washed up on the community beach after a big storm, filled them with soil, and planted enough to feed a small island nation.

Then in June, we went and did the Annapolis-Newport race, followed by Block Island Race Week and a boat delivery back to the Chesapeake. Had a wonderful time. Came home to a scene straight out of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The garden, so lush and productive before we left, had fallen victim to marauding gangs of weeds that grew about a foot a day, thriving on the summer Eastern Shore weather pattern of scorched earth which, of course, killed the vegetables that weren't already choked to death by the weeds. If I'd wanted a crop of mile-a-minute and nutsedge, I'd have been in heaven.

When we moved onto *Osprey* and went sailing full-time, the act of gardening became even more necessary and desperate. Necessary, because much as I love being on the water all the time, I really missed dirt—the smell, the feel, the simple act of digging around in it and watching things grow. Desperate, because in some of the more remote places we lived, I'd have committed crimes for a leafy green vegetable. Mung bean sprouts are thrilling, don't get me wrong, but they don't do squat for a Caesar salad jones. And when you're down to your last carrot, anything can happen.

A pot of decorative blooms decks the cockpit of *Osprey* during the family's cruising odyssey.

My daughter and I tried to grow all kinds of stuff. We learned right away that my inspired plan of hanging baskets off the radar arch aft was not realistic. For one thing, it would be difficult to land a fish or launch a dinghy while being whacked in the head by a hanging tomato plant. For another, one good dash of salt water on a windy, rough day, and the plants were deader than doorstops.

So, we started growing small potted things up by a panel of instruments in the forward part of the cockpit. The dodger protected them from the salt spray, and they wedged in tightly enough not to capsize—although the assemblage of plastic pots, surrounded by an unruly garden of shells, bits of driftwood, and other knickknacks we collected had the tendency to drive Johnny to distraction.

And while we went for months, at times, celebrating our success with this parsley and that romaine, our vegetable hearts always wilted in the end. This is because we did what sailors do—we sailed. And from latitude to latitude, we sailed in and out of growing zones and suffered rapid climate change that would have challenged even the most tenacious of shrubs.

The basil that did voluptuously well all summer long in New England and Nova Scotia commenced its inevitable demise southbound around North Carolina in November; by midwinter in the Bahamas, the insistent sun and dry air had scorched it to twigdom. Oregano and thyme suffered similar fates. Lettuce would grow from seed and, for a brief shining moment, almost make it to edible, and then something would get it—an unusually cold night, a really huge wave that pushed spray right under the dodger and into the pots. . . .

So now, back on land, I am reveling in another honest-to-God garden, although I have traded salt air and climate shifts for squash bugs and leaf blight. And, of course, bottom paint, because it's spring after all, and the water is calling. ⚓

The Secrets She Holds

Helping count spawning horseshoe crabs is cause for wonder at the creatures and the sea that bears them.

We all have our reasons for loving the water. For some of us it's the solitude, the holy stillness of a quiet night anchored in a chalice of creek. For others it's the distance, the separation from the noisy world we seem required to inhabit.

Maybe it's the chance to be with your family. It could be the camaraderie of fishing, or racing, or rafting up. Or perhaps it's just in the blood; it's who you are and who you've always been and who you always will be.

For me, the water has been all of these things. But there's another element that's harder to define, and it struck me again this spring, at high tide on the night of a full moon, on a ribbon of sand lining the southwest shore of the Delaware Bay. I wasn't on a boat—didn't need to be. I was on foot with a small group of students from my daughter's high school, and I was there to witness something rather miraculous.

There, a silent, insistent ritual as old as the ages was taking place. By the tens of thousands, horseshoe crabs were emerging from the water and finding their way to the edge of the high tide line. The females, some more than a foot in diameter and well over 20 years old, were shoveling their way into the malleable sand, while the smaller males clung to their backs and tails, gripping with their boxing-glove claws.

It was a frenzy of spawning, in slow motion. The Delaware Bay's beaches are the largest spawning grounds in the world for horseshoe crabs, and this night was perfect for their efforts. After a spring torn by nor'easters, cold rains and winds, this night was glimmering, tranquil, the waves lapping the sand gently and the silver moonlight pouring across thousands of hummocked carapaces, glittering like a rocky shoreline as far as the eye could see.

"You could do this for years and not see as many," said Wes, a young environmental scientist who was overseeing this evening's count out of St. Jones Reserve, part of the Delaware National Estuarine Research Reserve. One of the oldest creatures known—often called a living fossil—horseshoe crabs have survived for about 350 million years. They've been climbing these beaches for a long, long time.

counting horseshoe crabs.

Each female crab would, on this single night, lay several clusters of about 4,000 eggs each; over the course of several nights during the full and new moons of spring, she could lay up to 100,000. Within about a month, on the high tide, the larvae will emerge from the sand and head for the water to grow until they reach sexual maturity a decade later. Most, however, will never get that far; these eggs are a vital food source for migrating shorebirds, in particular the endangered red knots traveling from Brazil to the Arctic. These beaches are the birds' final stop before the last leg of their epic journey north, and they depend upon horseshoe crab eggs to fuel up enough to make the trip.

My daughter and the other student volunteers were here to count crabs in order to help wildlife and fisheries managers continue gathering the data they need to ensure a healthy horseshoe crab population. Using one-meter-square quadrants made of thin PVC pipe, the students paced the water's edge in proscribed formation, laying the quadrants down on top of the struggling mounds of crabs and counting as best they could the males and females within each area.

While they focused on their task, headlamps bobbing and slashing, I trailed along behind in the dark, turning over stranded and stuck crabs that had already been tallied. In this gigantic scrum, crabs were constantly flipping over. Most of them managed to use their bayonet of a tail (telson, in the proper parlance) to lever themselves upright. But there was plenty of destruction—crabs whose telsons were torn off, crabs whose telsons were rendered useless by plastic trash, crabs who just seemed too worn out to try.

I would never think, in 350 million years, that they needed me to survive. But still, it felt extremely satisfying to help where I could. And as I walked along, I found some words for that intangible reason why I can never let go of the water. Maybe the word is mystery, or otherness, or just wonder at all the secrets the water keeps that I can't ever really know or understand, as bitter-sweet and beautiful as moonlight. ⚓

Lost and Found

Trimming the jib on a little boat in a little race, one can find reassurance in what hasn't been lost.

A couple of nights ago, I stepped slightly back into time and set foot aboard a small one-design racing boat in Annapolis. My sister-in-law and about a half-dozen other sailors meet once a week on Wednesday nights to duke it out across the harbor and back for line honors, gentle bragging rights, and the thrill of victory.

Cindy handed me the jib sheet, and we set off into the creek. When I first came to Annapolis as a twenty-something, I lived for these high summer evenings of sailing into twilight. I didn't care what kind of boat I was in—a Snipe, E-Scow, J/24—all I wanted was to be sailing, feeling that moist southerly riffling up the Severn River, flying out into the Bay, and returning to the sun setting over the Statehouse on the hill. It's a helluva sight, and how glorious to see and feel it with all of your senses, hiked out on the rail of any boat powered purely by the wind.

But racing dropped pretty far off my radar once my kids came along; instead, our focus turned to cruising, first on the Chesapeake and then, for four years, far away, to places where sailing wasn't so much a recreation as a required means of transportation. Trimming the jib—something whose nuances I'd learned a great deal about as a racing sailor—became more like a necessity than a craft when we were on long ocean passages.

It had been a long time since I'd lived for the flicker of the telltales. But then Cindy handed me that jib sheet.

There were five boats racing, the breeze was barely there, and I wasn't even wearing a watch to help with the countdown to the start (a little out of practice, are we?). Cindy has been sailing this boat for several years now and knows it well; still, we were fourth over the line, and as we struggled to gain boatspeed in the fluky air, the three boats that had crossed ahead of us began stretching their lead in better breeze as we sailed across the harbor.

The author intently working the jib.

I settled down on the leeward side, tucked in perfect comfort forward by the mast where I could hold the jib sheet with one hand and clearly see the telltales. At times, the breeze was so light I was holding the sheet between two fingers.

The boat has a tiny jib and a huge main, so I was fooling myself if I thought I was making a big difference with my tweaking. But in this light and shifty air, I figured every little bit mattered. And as I slid back into that groove, trying to predict the lifts and headers, adjusting to the shifts, watching for every twitch of the nylon ribbons, I realized something deeply gratifying: I was still very good at this, and I still loved it.

"You have a little up if you need it," I would say to Cindy, and she'd tell me yes or no, and I'd trim accordingly. Slowly but surely, under her steady hand and quiet but fierce competitive streak, she began working her way up through the group, picking off one boat at a time.

Who knew I could still be so thrilled by the chase, even a chase as sedate as this? We kept our voices low as we rounded the single mark of the course out in the river, taking advantage of the moment to steal past the second-place boat. Now we were after the leader, but to weather of him. As we came on, he started taking us up and up and up, but by the time we broke it off we dipped beneath his transom and had enough speed to pass to leeward. (Speed being relative—we were probably moving at about three knots. Felt like flying.)

Then it was back into the shiftiness of the harbor breeze, avoiding the dreaded Chart House lull, as well as the bigger boats overtaking us and every now and then stealing whatever scant wind we had, leaving the jib little more than a hanky on a line.

It was tricky sailing, delicate and fun. And when we got the horn for line honors, I was ridiculously pleased, and oddly comforted. I guess when it comes to doing something you love, maybe you *can* go home again. ⚓