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# HANDS IN THE DIRT

BY ZACHARY LAZAR



## THE VEGETABLE PATCH

It's the Wednesday after the long Memorial Day weekend, and I'm putting the finishing touches on a vegetable garden in the estate section of Southampton. The

garden, one of several on the property, is large and immaculate, and I have lavished more care on it than I would ever have lavished on my own garden. The design—the hard part—was my boss's work, and on her instructions I have not only planted tomatoes and basil and eggplants and given them neat little labels, but I have planted three rows of marigolds to keep off insects, potted a jasmine bush surrounded by lobelia and ivy, and erected a 12-foot-high teepee of bamboo poles around which I have planted and trained seven purple-flowered vines. This was the fun part, turning a still unfinished space into something distinctive and beautiful. Now that that's done, I'm watering everything down with an organic rooting hormone made of seaweed and decayed fish—a foul brown broth, which cannot be used (at least not by me) without getting plenty of it on my feet and hands. When I'm done with that, I can settle down to the business of weeding the other beds, a job that will end up taking me three hours.

## WHAT I'M DOING HERE

There's a well-known story about the poet, Stanley Kunitz, who back in the forties was told by his colleagues at Harvard that his prospects there were limited: he was Jewish, and it was thought at the time that no Harvard man would suffer to learn English from someone of his non-Aryan background. Disgusted and outraged, Kunitz left his teaching post to become a farmer in Pennsylvania, pulling a plow on his own back like a horse. He did this for several years, then went on to win a Pulitzer Prize and serve as the country's Poet Laureate, and is now almost 100 years old, writing and tending to his extensive flower gardens in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

## THE ROOKIE

*The true story of a novelist's apprenticeship as a gardener on the East End.*

My own story is a very minor-league version of Kunitz's: I'm a novelist who needs to make a living. Having cobbled together an income through all kinds of day jobs—most recently as an

adjunct professor at Hofstra University—I decided this spring to look for some extra work. I had just finished a new book, was shopping it around, and rather than stew quietly in some secretarial job, waiting for the verdict, I thought it would be nice to do something physical outdoors. I hoped to learn something about gardening along the way, joining a crew that along with myself includes every kind of “transplant”: people from Brooklyn, Connecticut, Colorado, Mexico, and even Japan.

## WHAT IT'S LIKE TO WEED

### A VEGETABLE BED FOR THREE HOURS

At its most intense, weeding combines the excitement of late-night flossing with the second-by-second decision-making of washing silverware by hand. I work with a Korean hand plow, a bizarre-looking iron wedge shaped like a twisted ace of spades. It's good for scraping little patches of ground and tearing up the weeds in the process. Weeding would be one thing if you could simply rip out everything that was green, but in early June it can be difficult to know what is a weed and what is a plant. At times, this leads me to obsessional nitpicking, each inch of ground a sprawling jungle of intricately entwined chaos. At other times, it leads to a slow, malingering rhythm, a happy idiot game of plinking out the weeds by hand. Neither of these approaches is much good—the point here is to stay focused and help the crew get the job done. I can see them across the yard, pumping annuals into the ground in neat triangular patterns. I look at how much I have left to do—shockingly much—and notice that the angle of the sun is getting awfully low.

The quality of an experience like this one is usually dictated by whatever song I happen to have stuck in my head at the moment. Sometimes it's good (Elliot Smith), sometimes it's strange (Megadeth), mostly it's terrible (Don Henley, Air Supply). Today, in the vegetable garden, it's an unfortunate medley of Slim Whitman ("Give me forty acres and I'll turn this rig around") and Bread ("If a

**"I'm a novelist who needs to make a living."**

picture paints a thousand words, then why can't I paint you?"). Why can I remember every word of this crap, but can never remember anyone's birthday, what Cinco de Mayo actually commemorates, or how to get past Water Mill on the back roads? How do I expect to write novels with a brain like this?

Get the Korean hand plough in the dirt and move, I tell myself. Sit on your heels. Kneel. Stand up. Move your ass.

#### MY FAVORITE JOB

What I didn't know before starting this spring was how much skill is involved in real gardening. Pruning a tree or bush is sculptural; it requires a good eye and a knowledge of where and how to make the cuts. Even planting has a sculptural component to it—you can't just

The author is just the latest of many newcomers to tend the East End's landscape. British and Dutch settlers replaced the native Algonquins, and were followed, in more recent decades, by Poles, Italians, and Latinos. All of these "transplants" have left their respective marks, from the now-ubiquitous privet brought by the British to the Andean potato varieties planted by Ecuadoreans today. **Below:** A tractor in Sagaponack. **Opposite:** A sign in Bridgehampton.



stick a crepe myrtle into a six-foot hole in the ground, but have to position it with the right "face" forward, at the right angle, at the proper soil level, and in relationship to everything else around it. When you do this correctly, and see that the result is still alive weeks later, you feel a kind of attachment to the plant that maybe even the owners themselves don't feel.

I like the grunt work we do: digging holes, potting big plants, putting bushes and trees into the ground. I also like the more detail-oriented tasks: training vines, pruning roses, shaping boxwoods and forsythias. It's hard to complain about a workplace that consists of blossoming trees and stunning flowers everywhere you look. My favorite job though is edging, which triggers some synapse in my brain connected to a childhood fondness for miniature golf courses. I like cutting into the ground with the sharp-bladed edger, watching the curve develop. A few weeks later, I like clipping the grass with the special edge-clipping tool: two long handles, waist-high, connected to long snippers that look like a toucan's bill, the toucan's eye made by the bolt that joins them. It is the exact opposite of writing a novel: simple, easy to do well, and with immediately pleasing results.

#### THE RAIN

In the week leading up to the Memorial Day weekend, the weather was punitive: temperatures in the forties, constant pouring rain. As you might have guessed, Memorial Day is a big landmark in the landscaper's calendar, the start of the summer season, and we were going to have to work as much as we could. On one of those Scandinavian days, my co-worker Jorge and I were out in the back vegetable garden planting tomatoes and flowers in the freezing mud. Our boss April had just brought us hot drinks and cookies from Starbucks—she's a good boss, the best I've ever had—and the result, at least for me, was a new lease on life. Jorge was out there in nothing but a short-sleeved shirt and jeans, but he was grinning, saying he wasn't cold, the weather was good, it was like the weather back in his village in the mountains above Mexico City. After a 12-hour shift of gardening, Jorge often works a second job washing dishes in a restaurant. He goes to the gym. I've seen him get frustrated sometimes, but on those cold days I never saw him pissy or even in a bad mood. We finished off our coffee and tea and both of us were feeling better, despite the pouring rain, the ground so wet that the plants swelled there in their holes like muffins in a tin. For some reason, we started talking about horses—Jorge's English is almost as bad as my Spanish, but something about the miserable weather had boosted our vocabularies—and now I was learning about the horse races in Mexico City, the *hippodromo* in one of the suburbs, and then we were talking about the Hampton Classic, polo, show horses, then back to Mexico, charros, the Bosque Chapultepec, Vicente Fox. I wasn't exactly sure what we were saying half the time, but it's not a bad job where you hear the word *hippodromo* on a rainy day in May. □

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